

Online Backlash Against “Identity Politics”: Discursive
Constructions of Social Movement Activism in “Alt-Right” and
“Dirtbag Left” YouTube Videos

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Abstract

This thesis analyses constructions of anti-racism, feminism, and LGBTQ+ rights activism in YouTube videos associated with the “alt-right” and “alt-lite”, and in YouTube videos which exhibit a “dirtbag Left” sensibility. It examines hostile constructions of such activism as forms of so-called “identity politics”. The alt-right/-lite is a loose confederation of white nationalists, anti-feminists, trolls, conspiracy theorists, and public intellectuals who share a belief that feminist, anti-racist, and LGBTQ+ rights activists are very powerful in developed Western countries, and work to secure preferential treatment for women, non-white people, and LGBTQ+ people at the expense of straight white men. Online content-creators and communities labelled “dirtbag Left” adopt a similar aesthetic to the alt-right/-lite and appear to court a similar demographic, but believe that high-profile strains of feminism, anti-racism, and LGBTQ+ rights activism have capitulated to neoliberalism and now serve the interests of economic elites at the expense of working-class people.

In response to gaps in the literature concerned with these phenomena, this thesis examines characterisations of social movement activism uploaded to YouTube by members of each cohort. It subjects claims made therein to critical analysis. This thesis examines the extent to which the hostility of online content-creators towards identity politics reflects real problems within contemporary social movements. It also examines the extent to which the dirtbag Left imports the alt-right/-lite’s prejudices when courting its audience. This thesis meets these aims through two case studies, which analyse online discourse produced by the British reactionary Carl Benjamin – a.k.a. “Sargon of Akkad” – and the Australian social democrat Jordan Shanks – a.k.a. “friendlyjordies”.

Three key themes are found to comprise Benjamin’s negative portrayal of social movement activism: activists for “identity” movements are illiberal, unscientific, and uncool. However, this thesis argues that Benjamin misrepresents both his opponents and himself to achieve these constructions. His aversion cannot be considered a response to the real prevalence of these traits. His attempts at principled critique often rationalise the privilege of historically dominant groups. This thesis next analyses the critique of “identity” activism which the left-wing Shanks pitches at people otherwise targeted by alt-right/-lite discourse, and analyses the techniques he employs to reach them. Shanks

highlights some instances in which neoliberal actors and institutions engage with feminist, anti-racist, and LGBTQ+ rights activism in ways which further their economic ends. However, Shanks also trivialises issues of race, gender, and sexuality in general. His complaints about identity politics involve many of the same narratives identified in Benjamin's discourse and similarly rationalise the privilege of historically dominant groups. In some cases, Shanks picks up these narratives when he engages with the alt-right/-lite's discourse in an effort to make his own content more attractive to its audience.

Overall, this thesis demonstrates that ostensibly principled critiques of anti-racism, feminism, and LGBTQ+ rights activism from a prominent member of the alt-right/-lite on YouTube are based on inaccurate depictions of these movements, and serve to defend the relative privilege of dominant groups. It finds that critiques of "identity" movements from a prominent member of the dirtbag Left on YouTube, despite their occasional merit, dismiss feminism, anti-racism, and LGBTQ+ rights activism in general, and contain prejudices imported from the alt-right/-lite.

Declaration

I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in my name, in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission in my name, for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint award of this degree.

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Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Research questions.....	3
Background information	7
The alt-right/-lite.....	8
Trump and the international spotlight.....	8
White nationalism	9
Memes, trolls, and the alt-right.....	12
The alt-right versus the alt-lite.....	16
The manosphere	20
Conspiracy theorists.....	24
The Intellectual Dark Web.....	28
Gamergate.....	31
The alt-right and -lite’s common enemy.....	34
YouTube	36
The dirtbag Left	39
Prominent proponents	39
Laudable satire or an “alt-left”	44
Conclusion	47
Literature, theory, and methods	49
Gaps in the existing literature	52
Researchers vs. “social justice warriors”	52
Research into YouTube	59
Literature on the dirtbag Left.....	63
Theoretical framework.....	64
An eclectic mix	64
Progressive neoliberalism	65
Divisiveness and abstraction.....	71
Class reductionism.....	73
Aggrieved entitlement (and similar concepts)	75
Methodology.....	79
Research questions.....	79

Discourse analysis.....	79
Case study research.....	86
Selection of case studies	88
Text selection.....	92
Conclusion	94
Carl Benjamin vs. illiberal activists.....	96
Benjamin's place in the alt-right/-lite	96
Biography and income	96
White nationalism	99
Immigration and Islam.....	102
Memes and trolls.....	104
The manosphere	106
Conspiracy theories.....	107
The Intellectual Dark Web.....	110
Gamergate.....	111
Campaign for European Parliament.....	113
A reluctant critic	115
Liberalism and authoritarianism	116
Collectivist and illiberal activism	116
Oppression as a thing of the past	119
Jumping at shadows	124
Benjamin's own illiberal views	128
Benjamin and critiques of liberal individualism.....	133
Cultural imperialism	133
"Race-conscious" anti-racism.....	134
Radical feminism	136
Gay liberation	139
Conclusion	143
Carl Benjamin vs. unscientific activists.....	145
Unscientific activism	145
Facts and reason vs. tricks and emotion	145
"Speaking as a ..."	148
Pesky postmodernism	149
Activism as religion	151
Benjamin's bad science	152

Dismissals of evidence.....	152
Misuse of science.....	155
Sociobiology and evolutionary psychology.....	159
Religiosity invented.....	163
Caricatures of activist epistemologies.....	164
Standpoint theory.....	164
Postmodern critiques of knowledge.....	169
Scientism, atheism, and the preservation of privilege.....	172
Scientism.....	172
New Atheism.....	173
Science and sexism.....	177
Conclusion.....	179
Carl Benjamin vs. uncool activists.....	181
Uncool activism.....	181
Earnestness and “cringe”.....	181
Sanctimony and anger.....	183
Lame media and progressive killjoys.....	186
Hypocrisy and double standards.....	189
The importance of being earnest.....	189
Evil activists and anger.....	191
Effeminate men and masculine women.....	194
Hegemonic masculinity.....	194
Unmanly activists.....	200
Emphasised femininity.....	203
Unwomanly activists.....	204
Progressive killjoys and geek masculinity.....	212
Conclusion.....	220
Jordan Shanks: political content and style.....	222
Shanks and Australian politics.....	222
Biography and income.....	222
Criticism of the Liberal-National Coalition and corporations.....	223
Support for the Labor Party and trade unions.....	228
Identity issues in the media.....	230
The propaganda model.....	230
Identity politics as propaganda.....	232

Keeping up with the (Alex) Joneses	236
Audience composition	236
Vulgar and politically incorrect comedy	240
Alt-right/-lite slang and references	243
Self-help.....	249
Podcast co-hosts.....	251
Conclusion	255
Jordan Shanks: attitudes towards social movements and far-Right narratives	257
Relevant critiques of identity politics in the media	257
Corporate owners and advertisers.....	257
Accusations of prejudice as “flak”.....	262
Dismissal of identity activism in general.....	267
A media conspiracy theory	267
Trivialising sexism, racism, homophobia and transphobia.....	270
Singing from the alt-right/-lite’s song sheet	275
Cultural imperialism	275
Scientism.....	278
Hegemonic masculinity and emphasised femininity	282
Conclusion	288
Conclusion	290
Bibliography	302

List of Figures

Figure 1. Graphs referencing no dataset, which Benjamin flashes on-screen as evidence that men are more intelligent than women.....	159
Figure 2. Hypermasculine fan artworks which Benjamin uses to represent himself....	198
Figure 3. Images and caricatures of Binx which Benjamin uses as stand-ins for all feminists.....	207
Figure 4. Thumbnails and video titles in which Shanks assumes familiarity with alt-right/-lite figures.....	248

Introduction

Hostility towards feminist, anti-racist, and LGBTQ+ rights movements and activists is an unmissable theme in online discourse. In popular memes, podcasts, videos, and online discussions, feminism, anti-racism, and LGBTQ+ rights activism are portrayed as contemptible forms of so-called “identity politics”. Narratives forged in this online discourse have spilled over, sometimes with violent consequences, into mainstream media and the offline world. In two case studies aimed at better understanding such discourse, I analyse content produced by two YouTube personalities hostile to identity politics – the British reactionary Carl Benjamin (a.k.a. “Sargon of Akkad”) and the Australian social democrat Jordan Shanks (a.k.a. “friendlyjordies”). Each is associated with a distinct strand of online political discourse. In this brief introduction, I outline the structure of this thesis and preview the issues discussed (and substantiated) in each chapter.

In Chapter One, I contextualise Benjamin and Shanks within broader online phenomena. I analyse Benjamin as a member of a cohort labelled the “alt-right” or (when less extreme) the “alt-lite”. These content-creators and communities maintain that social movement activists in Western countries hold powerful positions in government, academia, and the media, which they use to secure preferential treatment for women, non-white people, and LGBTQ+ people at the expense of straight white men. I analyse Shanks as a proponent of a sensibility dubbed the “dirtbag Left”. Content-creators and communities who take this approach maintain that problems faced by straight white men are caused by neoliberal economic policies, but also criticise prominent forms of anti-racist, feminist, and LGBTQ+ rights activism as tools used by the rich and powerful to prop up the economic status quo. Both cohorts adopt a “politically incorrect” style and produce content designed to resonate with a shared demographic – disaffected young men who spend a lot of time online. I describe the alt-right/-lite’s main factions and preoccupations, as well as YouTube’s importance as its online platform of choice. A “radicalisation pipeline” exists on YouTube, channelling some viewers from more “moderate” content towards racist extremism. I then describe the political and aesthetic sensibilities of the dirtbag Left, as well as the diverse reactions this cohort have elicited in the popular press.

In Chapter Two, I describe the gaps in knowledge which I address and the theoretical debates to which I contribute. I then detail the methods employed in this thesis. Research into these online phenomena has predominantly been conducted in fields other than political science, despite their relevance to issues (such as the recent rise of populism) central to the discipline. I help to address this gap within political science. Moreover, I take an issue-oriented, interdisciplinary approach and identify gaps in our broader understanding of these issues. First, a number of scholars (such as Angela Nagle) accept claims from members of the alt-right/-lite who insist that flaws in contemporary social movements drive them to reject identity politics. These authors effectively endorse the alt-right/-lite's own origin story. However, they often take such claims at face value. I identify a need for research which both draws out the alt-right/-lite's complaints about social movements, and subjects them to critical analysis. Second, there is a need for further research into content-creators at the "moderate" end of YouTube's radicalisation pipeline. This understudied cohort claims to be non-racist, non-sexist, and non-homophobic, and reaches wide audiences with attacks on feminism, anti-racism, and LGBTQ+ rights. Third, there is a lack of research into dirtbag Left media. In the popular press, some observers praise the dirtbag Left's ability to reach young men otherwise courted by the online far Right with politically incorrect attacks on shallow versions of anti-racism, feminism, and LGBTQ+ rights which deserve criticism. Other observers denounce the dirtbag Left as dismissive of all "identity" activism, and similar to the alt-right/-lite in substance as well as style. I identify a need for research which illuminates the dirtbag Left's critique of identity politics and its overtures to potential members of the alt-right/-lite.

I then outline my use of conceptual and theoretical work to highlight and explain different elements of the discourse under consideration. I make a case for eclecticism on the grounds that diverse theoretical perspectives can best explain different aspects of the discourse. I note that many important concepts (such as "cultural imperialism" or "scientism") are described more fully in later chapters as they become relevant. I then outline, in more detail, how this study can be fruitfully contextualised within intra-Left debates about the merit of contemporary social movements. Works from these debates are relevant to all five substantive chapters and play a distinct role in this thesis. Some scholars (such as Nancy Fraser) maintain that broader aversion to identity politics reflects real flaws in social movements, related to their complicity with neoliberalism. Others

(such as Todd Gitlin) blame this aversion on the divisiveness and insularity of social movements. Concepts from these critiques help me to both draw out the substance of complaints about identity politics in anarchic YouTube discourse and identify instances in which I should “hear out” accusations which are reminiscent of those also levelled by serious academics on the Left. On the other hand, authors who defend the affirmation and mobilisation of group identities (such as Iris Marion Young) accuse their intra-Left opponents of marginalising issues which affect women and minorities in favour of a single-minded focus on economic inequality. Some members of this camp (such as Michael Kimmel) theorise dislike of identity politics as a reaction to the decline of traditional hierarchies of privilege. Concepts from this literature help me to weigh the merit of narratives critical of identity politics in YouTube discourse and consider the extent to which they reinforce the privilege of historically dominant groups.

Research questions

The discussion to this point of Chapter Two allows me to formulate the key research questions which animate this thesis. These questions address these gaps in knowledge and engage with these theoretical concerns:

- How are social movement activists constructed in alt-right/-lite and dirtbag Left discourse on YouTube?
- To what extent do constructions of social movement activists in alt-right/-lite and dirtbag Left discourse overlap with one another?
- To what extent do alt-right/-lite and dirtbag Left personalities adequately substantiate the claims which make up these constructions?

I then detail the methods used to shed light on these questions. I select two popular, prolific YouTubers for in-depth, discursive textual analysis . Benjamin features in multiple studies of YouTube’s radicalisation pipeline, but positions himself as a principled, non-prejudiced opponent of problematic social movements. He engages with all factions of the alt-right/-lite. Benjamin is well-placed to articulate the alt-right/-lite’s substantive critiques of anti-racism, feminism, and LGBTQ+ rights activism, if these exist. Meanwhile, Shanks divides opinion in Australian public life with his politically incorrect style. Some observers praise his ability to reach disaffected young men more

typically subject to the alt-right/-lite's overtures, but others denounce his commentary as racist, sexist, homo- and transphobic. Shanks therefore embodies the confusion over the dirtbag Left which I aim to illuminate. In these case studies, I combine insights from several traditions of discourse analysis. I take inspiration from Foucauldian, Critical, and Political discourse analysis to identify, evaluate, and explain the ways in which Benjamin and Shanks use language to construct feminism, anti-racism, and LGBTQ+ rights activism as contemptible "identity politics".

Chapter Three is the first of three chapters in which I analyse major themes in Benjamin's hostile construction of anti-racism, feminism, and LGBTQ+ rights. I first provide further detail about Benjamin's views on politics and culture, and his prominent position within the alt-right/-lite. I then analyse Benjamin's claim that feminism, anti-racism, and LGBTQ+ rights are "collectivist" and "illiberal", and that he opposes them as a defender of liberal individualism. I demonstrate that Benjamin often misrepresents the innocuous behaviour of social movement activists as an effort to violate the rights and freedoms of white people, heterosexuals, and men. He also shows disdain for the rights and freedoms of women and political opponents. I contend that his apparent defence of liberal individualism is an instance of "cultural imperialism" – disregard for the ways in which biased (i.e. androcentric, Eurocentric, and heteronormative) norms constitute barriers to equality for marginalised people. I argue that this element of his discourse does not prove the real prevalence of illiberal tendencies within social movements.

In Chapter Four, I analyse Benjamin's claim that feminism, anti-racism, and LGBTQ+ rights are irrational, and that he opposes them as a defender of reason. I demonstrate that Benjamin often fails to handle evidence accurately, both when he engages with research which supports feminist, anti-racist, or LGBTQ+ rights positions and when he constructs his own positions as "scientific". I argue that Benjamin attacks caricatures of worthwhile epistemological perspectives which inform social movement activism. I contend that his apparent defence of reason is an instance of "scientism" – the invocation of "science" as a rhetorical device to make ill-founded positions seem respectable. Benjamin misuses science to depict inequalities which benefit white people, heterosexuals, and men as "natural". I argue that this element of his discourse does not prove the real prevalence of unscientific tendencies in social movements.

In Chapter Five, I analyse Benjamin's claim (and frequent intimation) that feminist, anti-racist, and LGBTQ+ rights activists are uncool and can therefore be dismissed. I demonstrate that Benjamin ridicules opponents for traits which he exhibits himself and finds admirable in political allies. I contend that his contempt for uncool activists is an instance of "complicit masculinity" – veneration of a "hegemonic" ideal of masculinity and a concomitant ideal of "emphasised" femininity which together legitimise patriarchy. His judgements about "uncool" activists punish men and women who fail to honour these ideals. Benjamin also complains that social movement activists ruin other people's hobbies by making them "politically correct". I explain this as an instance of the related concept "toxic geek masculinity". I argue that people who do not share Benjamin's views on gender need not accept his construction of anti-racism, feminism, or LGBTQ+ rights as uncool.

In Chapter Six, I detail Shanks's adoption of a dirtbag Left sensibility. I explain that Shanks critiques Australia's right-wing Liberal and National parties as purveyors of neoliberal policies which benefit corporations and the rich, and supports trade unions and the social democratic Labor Party. He also attacks versions of anti-racism, feminism, and LGBTQ+ rights, in the belief that mainstream media outlets embrace shallow "identity" issues in ways which propagandise for the economic status quo. I then detail his adoption of a transgressive style similar to the alt-right/-lite's and the ways in which he tailors his online content to resonate with potential and actual members of the alt-right/-lite.

In Chapter Seven, I evaluate the manoeuvres detailed in the previous chapter. I investigate whether Shanks narrowly attacks the appropriation of anti-racist, feminist, and LGBTQ+ rights issues for neoliberal ends, and whether he imports the alt-right/-lite's problematic views on women, non-white people, and LGBTQ+ people when he courts its audience. Shanks highlights some relevant problems with the uptake of social movement issues in the mainstream media. However, he also pushes a conspiratorial narrative in which racism, sexism, homophobia and transphobia are such minor problems in Australia that movements to address them would not exist without the influence of media companies wanting to distract from economic inequality. I then highlight instances in which his characterisation of social movement activism contains the same problematic elements identified in Benjamin's discourse. His attack on identity politics involves cultural imperialism, scientism, and contempt for people who fail to honour traditional masculinity or femininity. Shanks often appears to pick up these narratives when he

engages with alt-right/-lite media. I argue that his attack on identity politics dismisses feminism, anti-racism, and LGBTQ+ rights in general, not just neoliberalised incarnations thereof, and that he appears to import the alt-right/-lite's prejudices when he courts its audience.

In the Conclusion, I summarise the findings of each of the previous chapters, and again outline the ways in which they address gaps in knowledge and contribute to theoretical debates.

Chapter One

Background information

In this chapter, I provide information on the alt-right/-lite and dirtbag Left. Contextual information on these (often esoteric) online phenomena is required to understand the gaps in academic knowledge, theoretical issues, and approach to case study research detailed in the next chapter. I look at Benjamin as a member of the alt-right/-lite. This collection of Anglophone content-creators and rank-and-file Internet users formed communities around their shared views from the late 2000s, and came to international prominence via their prominent (and sometimes mutual) admiration for Donald Trump in 2016. I describe the main factions and fixations of the alt-right/-lite. An understanding of this network of white nationalists, memesters, trolls, anti-feminists, conspiracy theorists, gamers, and “renegade” academics is required not only to follow my analysis of Benjamin, who has fingers in all of these pies, but also for my analysis of Shanks. Despite his position on the Left, Shanks draws from the same well of memes, terms, and cultural references associated with the online far Right. I then describe the importance of YouTube as a platform for disseminating alt-right/-lite ideas, and detail evidence of a radicalisation pipeline on the website which pulls some viewers from more “moderate” content towards racist extremism. I next describe the controversial political and aesthetic sensibilities of the dirtbag Left. I introduce prominent content-creators and communities who take such an approach, and describe the diverse and often contradictory responses this cohort have elicited in the popular press. Reflecting both Benjamin’s tendency to engage with the entire alt-right/-lite, and the ambivalent relationship between the social democratic Shanks and the reactionary Right, the sometimes esoteric elements of Internet culture described below will resurface in all subsequent chapters of this thesis. Notably, many of the factions and personalities mentioned in this chapter have their roots in North America. However, as indicated below and proven in subsequent chapters, both Benjamin and Shanks are heavily influenced by American and Canadian online culture.

The alt-right/-lite

Trump and the international spotlight

The alt-right/-lite were thrust into the international spotlight during the 2016 United States presidential election, via their association with Donald Trump's successful campaign. In August 2016, Hillary Clinton gave a campaign speech in which she claimed that Trump was influenced by "dark conspiracy theories" from "the far, dark reaches of the Internet". She alleged that Trump was swayed by the bigoted ideas of the "alt-right".¹ Clinton's remarks followed Trump's decision to appoint Steve Bannon – the co-founder and chairman of the far-Right website Breitbart News – as the CEO of his campaign.² In July 2016, Bannon called Breitbart "the platform for the alt-right".³ Alongside Bannon's appointment, Trump's behaviour during the campaign elsewhere showed that he was influenced by the online far Right. In 2015 and 2016, he tweeted an infographic with false information about black criminality which was created by a neo-Nazi, and an anti-Semitic meme which came from an extremist message board.⁴ He retweeted a neo-Nazi Twitter user called "WhiteGenocideTM".⁵ He granted an interview to the far-Right conspiracy theorist Alex Jones and gushed: "Your reputation is amazing. I will not let you down".⁶ His eldest son and campaign surrogate shared a meme of Trump standing proudly alongside Jones and other alt-right/-lite celebrities (including a cartoon character which was claimed as a symbol by white nationalists and neo-Nazis in 2015).⁷ Trump Jr. also

¹ Hillary Clinton, "Transcript: Hillary Clinton's full remarks in Reno, Nevada", *Politico*, August 25, 2016, <https://www.politico.com/story/2016/08/transcript-hillary-clinton-alt-right-reno-227419>

² Will Rahn, "Steve Bannon and the alt-right: a primer", *CBS News*, August 19, 2016, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/steve-bannon-and-the-alt-right-a-primer/>

³ Sarah Posner, "How Donald Trump's New Campaign Chief Created an Online Haven for White Nationalists", *Mother Jones*, August 22, 2016, <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2016/08/stephen-bannon-donald-trump-alt-right-breitbart-news/>

⁴ German Lopez, "Donald Trump's black-on-black crime tweet is wrong in so many ways", *Vox*, November 23, 2015, <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2015/11/23/9782824/donald-trump-black-on-black-crime?subId3=xid:fr1582171974620cbe>; Mike Wendling, "Trump's shock troops: Who are the 'alt-right'?", *BBC News*, August 26, 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-37021991>

⁵ Tal Kopan, "Donald Trump retweets 'White Genocide' Twitter user", *CNN*, January 22, 2016, <https://edition.cnn.com/2016/01/22/politics/donald-trump-retweet-white-genocide/index.html>

⁶ William Finnegan, "Donald Trump and the 'Amazing' Alex Jones", *The New Yorker*, June 23, 2016, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/donald-trump-and-the-amazing-alex-jones>

⁷ Olivia Nuzzi, "How Pepe the Frog Became a Nazi Trump Supporter and Alt-Right Symbol", *The Daily Beast*, April 13, 2017, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/how-pepe-the-frog-became-a-nazi-trump-supporter-and-alt-right-symbol>; Libby Nelson, "Donald Trump Jr. has a white supremacist problem", *Vox*, September 23, 2016, <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2016/9/23/13001830/donald-trump-jr-tweets-controversy-alt-right-white-nationalism>

appeared on a podcast hosted by a white supremacist who usually interviews neo-Nazis and Klansmen.⁸

These events focused the attention of the international media on the various online communities which called themselves the “alt-right” at the time. Within days of Clinton’s speech, many major Anglophone news organisations published “explainer” articles about the phenomenon. The media scrambled to shed light on a suddenly influential movement which, as noted in *The Wall Street Journal*, was “scarcely known ... even one year ago”.⁹ Benjamin, as mentioned in chapters Three and Four, participates enthusiastically in the wider alt-right/-lite’s support for Trump.

White nationalism

By the time Clinton pronounced it, the term “alt-right” had been adopted by a network of communities on dozens of websites. However, the term was initially used only by American white nationalists.¹⁰ White nationalism emerged as an ideology during the 1990s, as brazen white supremacists (such as the Ku Klux Klan) found themselves relegated to the margins of political life. They attempted to return to the mainstream by rebranding as “white nationalists”. They portrayed themselves not as hateful racists, but as advocates for white people as a distinct ethnic group and therefore equivalent to organisations which advocate for black people or Latinos.¹¹ White nationalists now claimed to only want to live separately from non-white people, not dominate them within a shared society.¹² Most American white nationalists cherish the goal – which they liken to Zionism – of ejecting non-white people from North America and creating a white “ethnostate”.¹³ White nationalists fear “white genocide”: the idea that non-white immigration will result in “miscegenation” and the extinction of the white “race”. Some fear that a shadowy group (often Jews) deliberately pursues white genocide as part of its

⁸ Ed Pilkington, “Donald Trump Jr grants radio interview to prominent white supremacist”, *The Guardian*, March 3, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/mar/02/donald-trump-jr-james-edwards-radio-interview-white-supremacist>

⁹ Beth Reinhard, “‘Alt-Right’ Enters the Political Limelight”, *The Wall Street Journal*, August 24, 2016, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/alt-right-enters-the-political-limelight-1472081850>

¹⁰ Matthew Sheffield, “A history of hate: How the alt-right became racist (Part 1)”, *Salon*, December 8, 2016, <https://www.salon.com/2016/12/08/how-the-alt-right-became-racist-a-short-history-of-hate-part-1/>

¹¹ David Neiwert, *Alt-America: The Rise of the Radical Right in the Age of Trump* (London: Verso, 2017), 142.

¹² George Hawley, *Making Sense of the Alt-Right* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 13.

¹³ *Ibid*, 11, 15, 16.

plan for world domination.¹⁴ While white nationalists claim to be animated by love of their own “race” and not hatred of others, the Southern Poverty Law Center finds that this “platitude” collapses upon contact with their discourse, which is filled with “thinly veiled nods to white racial superiority”.¹⁵ David Neiwert finds that the reasons white nationalists provide for wanting to live amongst “their own kind” ultimately boil down to a belief in white supremacy.¹⁶

In the 1990s, influential American white nationalists discarded the pomp associated with the KKK and cultivated a scholarly image.¹⁷ Jared Taylor, a Yale graduate and one-time Harvard lecturer, built a public profile by presenting himself as a non-prejudiced proponent of “race realism”: pseudoscience which paint black and brown people as innately less intelligent and more given to crime than white people.¹⁸ Peter Brimelow (a Stanford graduate and editor at *Forbes* and *National Review*) founded a website to disseminate similar material.¹⁹ The evolutionary psychologist Kevin MacDonald published books alleging that Jews practice an “evolutionary strategy” which enables them to gain control of culture and politics.²⁰ More “lowbrow” white nationalism also existed, as practiced at the neo-Nazi “Aryan Nations” compound in Idaho, or on the neo-Nazi website Stormfront.²¹

The alt-right are the current generation of white nationalists. A white nationalist, Richard Spencer, coined the term “alt-right” in 2008. Spencer adopts the suit-and-tie image pioneered by Taylor (who has himself found a new career as the alt-right’s elder statesman).²² Spencer opposes mainstream American conservatism on the grounds that its obsession with free markets fails to preserve the traditional white American way of

¹⁴ Rosa Schwartzberg, “No, There Isn’t a White Genocide”, *Jacobin*, September 4, 2019, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2019/09/white-genocide-great-replacement-theory>

¹⁵ “White Nationalist”, *The Southern Poverty Law Center*, accessed February 12, 2020, <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/ideology/white-nationalist>

¹⁶ Neiwert, *Alt-America*, 143.

¹⁷ Hawley, *Making Sense of the Alt-Right*, 26; Neiwert, *Alt-America*, 143.

¹⁸ “Jared Taylor”, *The Southern Poverty Law Center*, accessed February 12, 2020, <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/individual/jared-taylor>

¹⁹ “Peter Brimelow”, *The Southern Poverty Law Center*, accessed February 12, 2020, <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/individual/peter-brimelow>

²⁰ Hawley, *Making Sense of the Alt-Right*, 28; Neiwert, *Alt-America*, 144; “White Nationalist”.

²¹ “Aryan Nations”, *The Southern Poverty Law Center*, accessed February 13, 2020, <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/aryan-nations>; “Stormfront”, *The Southern Poverty Law Center*, accessed February 13, 2020, <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/stormfront>

²² Sheffield, “A history of hate”.

life.²³ He frames the alt-right as an “alternative” to a mainstream Right dominated by “cuckservatives”: conservatives whose failure to stop non-white immigrants from defiling white America makes them equivalent to a “cuckolded” husband who fails to stop other men having sex with his wife.²⁴ The archaic term “cuckold” has acquired racial overtones through its contemporary association with a genre of pornography in which a white “husband” watches his “wife” have sex with a black man.²⁵ Financed by Brimelow, Spencer started an online magazine called *Alternative Right* in 2009, before being hired in 2011 by the heir of a publishing fortune to oversee a racist think tank, the National Policy Institute.²⁶ Spencer believes that “[r]ace is something between a breed and an actual species” and wants to create all-white countries through “peaceful ethnic cleansing”.²⁷ He came to prominence when he invoked the Nazi maxims *Heil Hitler* and *Sieg Heil* in a conference speech after Trump’s election win and smirked when audience members threw up Nazi salutes.²⁸ “Lowbrow” white nationalists now also call themselves “alt-right”. The most prominent is Andrew Anglin, who operates the world’s biggest neo-Nazi website (*The Daily Stormer*). Anglin penned a loving “Guide to the Alt-Right” in 2016.²⁹

Benjamin has produced videos with many of these white nationalists. His complex relationship with white nationalism – which involves both explicit denunciations and implicit endorsements – is discussed further in Chapter Three.

²³ Radix Journal, “What Is The Alt-Right?”, *YouTube*, 24:26, December 13, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G74sCg_n9rY

²⁴ “Getting cucky: a brief primer on the radical right’s newest ‘cuckservative’ meme”, *The Southern Poverty Law Center*, August 7, 2015, <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2015/08/07/getting-cucky-brief-primer-radical-rights-newest-cuckservative-meme>

²⁵ David Weigel, “‘Cuckservative’ — the conservative insult of the month, explained”, *The Washington Post*, July 29, 2015, <https://www.gq.com/story/why-angry-white-men-love-calling-people-cucks>

²⁶ Neiwert, *Alt-America*, 153; Sheffield, “A history of hate”.

²⁷ Angela Nagle, *Kill All Normies: The Online Culture Wars from Tumblr and 4chan to the alt-right and Trump* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2017), 39.

²⁸ Daniel Lombroso and Yoni Appelbaum, “‘Hail Trump!’: White Nationalists Salute the President Elect”, *The Atlantic*, November 21, 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/11/richard-spencer-speech-npi/508379/>

²⁹ Andrew Anglin, “A Normie’s Guide to the Alt-Right”, *The Daily Stormer*, August 31, 2016, <https://web.archive.org/web/20160902064632/https://www.dailystormer.com/a-normies-guide-to-the-alt-right/>

These white nationalists initially published their ideas on websites with very small readerships. However, George Hawley explains that the alt-right were able to escape these “isolated Internet ghettos”, from around 2013, by embracing humour and irony.³⁰ Earlier pseudo-academic white nationalists were dry and repetitive, while the earnest neo-Nazism of Stormfront and the Aryan Nations was frightening to ordinary people.³¹ Attempts to be funny and ironic were an alt-right “innovation”.³² Angela Nagle agrees that the alt-right would never have achieved mainstream visibility with “lengthy treatises on obscure blogs”.³³ To concoct an approachable brand of white nationalism, the alt-right embraced Internet culture. They embraced memes and trolling.

The evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins coined the word “meme” in 1976 to emphasise an analogy between units of information and genes. Like genes which propagate themselves by leaping between bodies, memes are pieces of culture which propagate themselves by leaping between brains.³⁴ When used colloquially today, the word “meme” is almost always shorthand for “Internet meme”.³⁵ Any digital object can become a meme, if transmitted from person to person. Patrick Davison states that “[a]n Internet meme is a piece of culture, typically a joke, which gains influence through online transmission”.³⁶ Limor Shifman defines “memes” as “units of popular culture that are circulated, imitated, and transformed by individual Internet users, creating a shared cultural experience in the process”.³⁷ Ryan Milner notes that memes are “collectively created” by people who change earlier iterations.³⁸ Memes ordinarily lack attribution. This leaves anonymous creators free to create transgressive content, and to legally appropriate existing memes.³⁹

³⁰ Hawley, *Making Sense of the Alt-Right*, 19.

³¹ Ibid, 24, 29.

³² Ibid, 20.

³³ Nagle, *Kill All Normies*, 14.

³⁴ “Meme”, in *Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Human Evolution*, ed. Bernard Wood (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 907.

³⁵ Patrick Davison, “The Language of Internet Memes”, in *The Social Media Reader*, ed. Michael Mandiberg (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 122.

³⁶ Ibid, 123.

³⁷ Shifman quoted in Kate M. Miltner, “Internet Memes”, in *The SAGE Handbook of Social Media*, ed. Jean Burgess, Alice Marwick and Thomas Poell (London: SAGE Publishing, 2016), 414.

³⁸ Ryan Milner, *The World Made Meme: Public Conversations and Participatory Media* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2016), 2.

³⁹ Davison, “The Language of Memes”, 132.

The earliest memes were pieces of text which spread in the early 1990s on Usenet (an early precursor to Internet forums). The idea of a “meme” remained obscure during the 2000s.⁴⁰ Davison notes that memes mostly circulated among the unusually tech-savvy people who inhabited the “unrestricted web”.⁴¹ Memes went “from quirky, subcultural oddities” to a ubiquitous aspect of the Internet during the 2010s.⁴² Now almost every major political or cultural moment triggers an explosion of memes.⁴³ While most memes are created for fun, since the early 2010s virtually all political actors have utilised memes to spread their messages.⁴⁴

The term “troll” also developed on Usenet in the 1990s.⁴⁵ One user explained that to “troll” was to upload a post “intended to produce a large volume of frivolous responses”. This post might contradict common knowledge to trap others in tedious arguments, make requests for basic information to waste the time of well-meaning users, or use offensive language to trigger outraged responses. A “well-constructed” troll post tricks inexperienced users into responding while signalling its inauthenticity to “the more savvy and experienced”. Then, “[i]f you don't fall for the joke, you get to be in on it”.⁴⁶ Trolls refer to laughing at people who fall for their antics as “lulz”. This term (a corruption of “LOL”) means laughing and someone else's expense (similar to the German concept of *schadenfreude*). To a troll, the statement “I did it for the lulz” is both an explanation and an excuse for their behaviour.⁴⁷ Academics have disagreed about the value of trolling since the 1990s. Some value trolling as a creative and playful aspect of Internet culture which helps to build communities, while others characterise it as unethical and anti-social.⁴⁸

⁴⁰ Jim McGrath, “Memes”, in *The SAGE Handbook of Web History*, ed. Niels Brügger and Ian Milligan (London: SAGE Publications, 2019), 505.

⁴¹ Davison, “The Language of Internet Memes”, 120.

⁴² Miltner, “Internet Memes”, 412, 415

⁴³ Shipman quoted in Miltner, “Internet Memes”, 412; Milner, *The World Made Meme*, 1.

⁴⁴ Miltner, “Internet Memes”.

⁴⁵ Whitney Phillips, *This is why we can't have nice things: mapping the relationship between online trolling and mainstream culture* (London: The MIT Press, 2015), 16.

⁴⁶ trollfaq@altairiv.demon.co.uk (a.k.a. Andrew/), “The Troller's FAQ”, 1996, <https://web.archive.org/web/20030105223101/http://www.altairiv.demon.co.uk/afaq/posts/trollfaq.html#SECTION1>

⁴⁷ Phillips, *This is why we can't have nice things*, 22, 27; E. Gabriella Coleman, “Phreaks, Hackers, and Trolls: The Politics of Transgression and Spectacle”, in *The Social Media Reader*, ed. Michael Mandiberg (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 111.

⁴⁸ Gabriele de Seta, “Trolling, and Other Problematic Social Media Practices”, in *The SAGE Handbook of Social Media*, ed. Jean Burgess, Alice Marwick and Thomas Poell (London: SAGE Publications, 2016), 392-395.

Many trolls pine for the Internet as it existed before around 2005. Accessible websites like Facebook and YouTube allowed everyone to go online, not just computer “geeks”. The Internet has become a place where people using their real names earnestly disclose their passions and vulnerabilities. Many trolls admire the more anonymous, irreverent, exclusive culture of the early Internet. To trolls, the Internet should be a freewheeling and anonymous place where nothing is taken seriously.⁴⁹ According to Gabriella Coleman, trolls “remind the ‘masses’ that have lapped onto the shores of the Internet that there is still a class of geeks who ... will cause Internet grief, hell, and misery”.⁵⁰ Trolls often target people who go online to display their real convictions.⁵¹

Since its creation in 2005, the bulletin-board website “4chan” has succeeded Usenet as a major hub for memesters and trolls.⁵² 4chan users discuss various hobbies and interests on dedicated “boards”.⁵³ Users do not have accounts. By default, all posts are attributed to “Anonymous”. 4chan posts are also ephemeral – threads are automatically deleted after a period of inactivity. Most content is only available for a few hours or days.⁵⁴ Many boards on 4chan contain ordinary hobbyist chatter, but the website’s most popular board has always been “Random”. Also called “/b/”, this board is reserved for discussion which does not belong elsewhere. One 2011 study found that 30 percent of all traffic on 4chan went to /b/. It received 400,000 posts per day.⁵⁵ The board has a “no rules” ethos.⁵⁶ This combination of anonymity, ephemerality, and lawlessness fostered an environment where users shared dark ruminations about suicide or incest.⁵⁷ Alice Marwick and Rebecca Lewis explain that these factors also led users to produce a constant “stream of racial and sexual epithets” and to share pornographic and violent images “chosen precisely for their transgressive nature”.⁵⁸ However, /b/ is also (as Michael Bernstein *et al.* note) “a prolific meme factory” which can be funny and creative.⁵⁹ Whitney Phillips states that, between

⁴⁹ Nagle, *Kill All Normies*, 16; Phillips, *This is why we can’t have nice things*, 24-26.

⁵⁰ Coleman, “Phreaks, Hackers, and Trolls”, 110.

⁵¹ Phillips, *This is why we can’t have nice things*, 26; Nagle, *Kill All Normies*, 16.

⁵² Phillips, *This is why we can’t have nice things*, 18.

⁵³ Nagle, *Kill All Normies*, 14.

⁵⁴ “Frequently Asked Questions”, 4chan, accessed March 10, 2020, <https://www.4channel.org/faq>

⁵⁵ Michael S. Bernstein *et al.*, “4chan and /b/: An Analysis of Anonymity and Ephemerality in a Large Online Community”, *MIT Media Lab* (2011): 3-5.

⁵⁶ “Rules”, 4chan, accessed March 10, 2020, <https://www.4chan.org/rules>

⁵⁷ Nagle, *Kill All Normies*, 14.

⁵⁸ Alice Marwick and Rebecca Lewis, *Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online* (Data & Society, 2017),

https://datasociety.net/pubs/oh/DataAndSociety_MediaManipulationAndDisinformationOnline.pdf

⁵⁹ Bernstein *et al.*, “4chan and /b/”, 1, 4.

2003 and 2011, /b/ users either created or amplified “nearly every popular meme on the Internet”; the connection “between 4chan and ‘internet culture’ is so deep that you cannot ... talk about one without talking about the other”.⁶⁰ The board is also a hub for trolls. Users troll each other non-stop, and have directed “successful” trolling campaigns at news outlets, celebrities, and churches.⁶¹ Phillips calls /b/ a “critical incubator” for contemporary trolling.⁶²

The spirit of /b/ is imbued in 4chan’s “Politically Incorrect” board. Also called “/pol/”, this board was indispensable to the development of the alt-right. In 2011, 4chan’s creator devised /pol/ as a “containment board”: a space intended to minimise racist discussion on the rest of the website by creating an explicit home for racist users.⁶³ Brian Feldman notes that /pol/ shares its tone of “gleeful disorder” with /b/, and Savvas Zannettou finds that /pol/ users are prolific creators of memes.⁶⁴ However, it is also massively racist. Gabriel Hine *et al.* try to communicate “an idea of the *magnitude* of hate” by noting that the word “nigger” was used in 265,000 posts (about two per minute) in their three-month analysis.⁶⁵

From around 2013, white nationalists embraced 4chan’s culture of memes and trolling. With their racist worldview couched in memes and troll posts, white nationalists hid behind “Poe’s Law”: the idea that it is often impossible to tell whether expressions of extreme views online are sincere or satirical.⁶⁶ If challenged, they could claim that the statement was a joke or a deliberate provocation done for “lulz”. Over time, people exposed to “ironic” or “mischievous” racism can be primed to unironically accept racist ideas which they have seen repeated countless times. Viveca Greene writes that the alt-right “weaponises irony” with these posts which are “simultaneously serious and not

⁶⁰ Phillips, *This is why we can’t have nice things*, 21; Whitney Phillips, “It Wasn’t Just the Trolls: Early Internet Culture, ‘Fun’, and the Fires of Exclusionary Laughter”, *Social Media + Society* 5 (2019): 2.

⁶¹ Phillips, *This is why we can’t have nice things*, 5-6; Marwick and Lewis, *Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online*, 6; Coleman, “Phreaks, Hackers, and Trolls”, 110.

⁶² Phillips, *This is why we can’t have nice things*, 20.

⁶³ Gabriel Emile Hine *et al.*, “Kek, Cucks, and God Emperor Trump: A Measurement Study of 4chan’s Politically Incorrect Forum and Its Effects on the Web,” *arXiv* (2017): 1; Marwick and Lewis, *Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online*, 25.

⁶⁴ Brian Feldman, “Inside /pol/, the 4chan Politics Board Shouted Out in Minneapolis Gun Video”, *New York*, November 25, 2015, <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2015/11/inside-pol-4chans-racist-heart.html>; Savvas Zannettou *et al.*, “On the Origins of Memes by Means of Fringe Web Communities”, *arXiv* (2018): 2.

⁶⁵ Hine *et al.*, “Kek, Cucks, and God Emperor Trump”, 6-7.

⁶⁶ Marwick and Lewis, *Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online*, 11.

serious”.⁶⁷ This approach was pioneered by Anglin at *The Daily Stormer*.⁶⁸ He tells contributors to his website that “[m]ost people are not comfortable with material that comes across as vitriolic, raging, non-ironic hatred”. He explains that “[p]acking our message inside of existing cultural memes and humour can be viewed as a delivery method. Something like adding cherry flavour to children’s medicine”.⁶⁹ His favoured style of memes and troll posts is “drawn directly” from 4chan.⁷⁰ The wider alt-right also employs Anglin’s “[n]on-ironic Nazism masquerading as ironic Nazism”.⁷¹ For instance, Spencer told journalists that the aforementioned Nazi salutes were “clearly done in a spirit of irony”.⁷² *The Guardian* noted that a 2017 alt-right rally in Boston “looked like an animated version of ... 4chan”, with “no swastikas or shaved heads in sight”.⁷³

As discussed in Chapter Three, Benjamin’s response to this approach demonstrates its success. He appreciates and amplifies trolling campaigns and racist memes from /pol/ while considering them “ironic”. In Chapter Six, I discuss the ways in which Shanks himself uses politically incorrect humour to tailor his political commentary at young men otherwise targeted by such discourse.

The alt-right versus the alt-lite

By 2016, many Internet personalities who enjoyed these memes and trolls were calling themselves “alt-right” while also disavowing white nationalism. Breitbart published a “Guide to the Alt-Right”, co-authored by Allum Bokhari and the provocateur Milo Yiannopoulos (who was invited to speak at Australia’s Parliament House by a far-Right Senator in 2017).⁷⁴ This much-cited “explainer” insisted that neo-Nazis were “a tiny,

⁶⁷ Viveca S. Greene, “‘Deplorable’ Satire: Alt-Right Memes, White Genocide Tweets, and Redpilling Normies”, *Studies in American Humor* 5 (2019): 31, 53.

⁶⁸ Marwick and Lewis, *Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online*, 20.

⁶⁹ Ashley Feinberg, “This Is The Daily Stormer’s Playbook”, *The Huffington Post*, December 14, 2017, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/daily-stormer-nazi-style-guide_n_5a2ece19e4b0ce3b344492f2

⁷⁰ Andrew Anglin, “A Normie’s Guide to the Alt-Right”.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Joshua Barajas, “Nazi salutes ‘done in a spirit of irony and exuberance,’ alt-right leader says”, *PBS*, November 22, 2016, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/white-nationalist>

⁷³ Jason Wilson, “Hiding in plain sight: how the ‘alt-right’ is weaponizing irony to spread fascism”, *The Guardian*, May 23, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/may/23/alt-right-online-humor-as-a-weapon-facism>

⁷⁴ Gareth Hutchins and Calla Wahlquist, “Milo Yiannopoulos’s sound and fury fails to rouse Parliament House”, *The Guardian*, December 5, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2017/dec/05/milo-yiannopoulos-sound-and-fury-fails-to-rouse-parliament-house>; Allum Bokhari and Milo Yiannopoulos, “An Establishment Conservative’s Guide to the Alt-Right”, *Breitbart*, March 29, 2016, <http://www.breitbart.com/tech/2016/03/29/an-establishment-conservatives-guide-to-the-alt-right/>

irrelevant contingent” within the alt-right. Most anti-Semitic or racist things posted online by members of the movement are attributable to young people who enjoy transgressing political correctness to “fluster their grandparents”.⁷⁵ The term “alt-right” proved an attractive label for many Anglophone conservatives who wanted to signal their disapproval of mainstream right-wing political parties.⁷⁶ As mentioned, Bannon appropriated the label for *Breitbart*. Jones took up the mantle, as did his second-in-command at the conspiracy website InfoWars, Paul Joseph Watson. The far-right Canadian broadcasters Lauren Southern and Gavin McInnes also accepted the label.⁷⁷ These figures insisted that they enjoyed transgressive memes about race in a fully ironic manner, not because they desired all-white ethnostates.

The willingness of such figures to laugh at racist memes and trolls and call themselves “alt-right” represented the success of the strategy described above. However, many white nationalists nevertheless resented this cohort’s dominance within media coverage of the alt-right. White nationalists coined the pejorative term “alt-lite” to describe this group in 2016.⁷⁸ The white nationalist Brad Griffin complained about “johnny-come-latelys” such as Breitbart, InfoWars, and McInnes who “hopped on the bandwagon” while “watering down our Narrative”.⁷⁹ Anglin complained about non-white nationalists trying to claim the mantle after Clinton “made the Alt-Right a big deal”.⁸⁰ He railed against Yiannopoulos, Jones, Watson, Southern, and McInnes for “taking our brand” without also denouncing Jews.⁸¹ More optimistic white nationalists like Spencer and Greg

⁷⁵ Bokhari and Yiannopoulos, “An Establishment Conservative’s Guide to the Alt-Right”.

⁷⁶ Hawley, *Making Sense of the Alt-Right*, 140-141; Andrew Marantz, “The Alt-right Branding War Has Torn the Movement in Two”, *The New Yorker*, July 6, 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/the-alt-right-branding-war-has-torn-the-movement-in-two>

⁷⁷ Nagle, *Kill All Normies*, 35-39; Hawley, *Making Sense of the Alt-Right*, 145-147.

⁷⁸ NPI / RADIX, “The Alt Light”, *YouTube*, 9:57, August 31, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HsD4ba9944A>; Hunter Wallace, “Alt-Right vs. Alt-Lite”, *Occidental Dissent*, November 23, 2016, <http://www.occidentaldissent.com/2016/11/23/alt-right-vs-alt-lite/>

⁷⁹ Bradley Dean Griffin, “The Southern Poverty Law Center”, accessed February 13, 2020, <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/individual/bradley-dean-griffin>; Wallace, “Alt-Right vs. Alt-Lite”.

⁸⁰ Andrew Anglin, “Infocucks Defames Pepe and the Alt-Right, Claiming This is All About Political Correctness”, *The Daily Stormer*, September 17, 2016, <https://dailystormer.su/infocucks-defames-pepe-and-the-alt-right-claiming-this-is-all-about-political-correctness/>

⁸¹ Andrew Anglin, “Stormer Book Club Crusade: The Final Solution to the Milo Problem”, *The Daily Stormer*, September 27, 2016, <https://dailystormer.su/stormer-book-club-crusade-the-final-solution-to-the-milo-problem/>; Andrew Anglin, “Hero Spencer Under Brutal Assault by Cuckolded Faggots”, *The Daily Stormer*, November 23, 2016, <http://www.dailystormer.com/hero-spencer-under-brutal-assault-by-cuckolded-faggots/>; Andrew Anglin, “Kike-Lover Lauren Southern Should Shut Her Slut Mouth!”, *The Daily Stormer*, September 19, 2016, <https://dailystormer.su/kike-lover-lauren-southern-should-shut-her-slut-mouth/>; Anglin, “Infocucks Defames Pepe and the Alt-Right”.

Johnson (who runs a racist publishing house) maintained hope that the spread of the label “alt-right” would help people find their way to white nationalism via less extreme websites.⁸²

Events in late 2016 and 2017 ensured that “alt-right” did not remain a desirable label. First, the viral spread of Spencer’s post-election speech filled with Nazi allusions made it clear that the man who coined the term “alt-right” was a neo-Nazi.⁸³ In response, many non-white nationalists distanced themselves from the term. The far-Right tabloid *Gateway Pundit* complained that Spencer had “ruined the term for the rest of us”.⁸⁴ Watson (of InfoWars) tried to clarify that people who “like to wear MAGA hats, create memes, and have fun” are distinct from people who “obsess about Jews, racial superiority and Adolf Hitler”.⁸⁵

Next, the “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, Virginia in August 2017 made the term even less appealing. A local white nationalist organised this rally to protest the removal of a statue of a Confederate general.⁸⁶ Prominent white nationalists were billed as speakers.⁸⁷ White nationalists marched through the local university campus on the night before the rally, carrying torches (in reference to the KKK) and chanting Nazi slogans. They surrounded and assaulted a small group of counter-protestors.⁸⁸ Nazi and white supremacist iconography was ubiquitous at the rally itself (on the clothes, flags, and battle shields of rally attendees). A representative of *The Daily Stormer* shouted “Gas the kikes”. Brawls between attendees and counter-protestors erupted in the streets. Some attendees came armed with blunt objects and launched orchestrated attacks on

⁸² Betsy Swan and Gideon Resnick, “Alt Right Rejoices at Donald Trump’s Steve Bannon Hire”, *The Daily Beast*, August 17, 2016, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/alt-right-rejoices-at-donald-trumps-steve-bannon-hire>; Jason Wilson, “‘A sense that white identity is under attack’: making sense of the alt-right”, *The Guardian*, August 24, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/aug/23/alt-right-movement-white-identity-breitbart-donald-trump>; Hawley, *Making Sense of the Alt-Right*, 150-151.

⁸³ Lombroso and Appelbaum, “‘Hail Trump!’”.

⁸⁴ Marantz, “The Alt-right Branding War Has Torn the Movement in Two”.

⁸⁵ Paul Joseph Watson, Twitter post, November 23, 2016, 8:15AM, <https://twitter.com/prisonplanet/status/801179724768825345?lang=en>

⁸⁶ Dara Lind, “Unite the Right, the violent white supremacist rally in Charlottesville, explained”, *Vox*, August 14, 2017, <https://www.vox.com/2017/8/12/16138246/charlottesville-nazi-rally-right-uva>

⁸⁷ Tom Porter, “Who Are the Alt-right Leaders Addressing the White Nationalist Rally in Charlottesville?”, *Newsweek*, August 12, 2017, <https://www.newsweek.com/alt-right-leaders-addressing-largest-white-nationalist-rally-decades-650096>

⁸⁸ “Charlottesville: One killed in violence over US far-right rally”, *BBC News*, August 13, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-40912509>; Dara Lind, “Nazi slogans and violence at a right-wing march in Charlottesville on Friday night”, *Vox*, August 12, 2017, <https://www.vox.com/2017/8/12/16138132/charlottesville-rally-brawl-nazi>

counter-protestors.⁸⁹ One young neo-Nazi rammed his car multiple times into the counter-protestors, injuring nineteen people and killing one woman.⁹⁰

In the wake of Charlottesville, many reactionary figures scrambled to shed the label “alt-right”. Breitbart clarified that when Bannon endorsed the term, he thought it referred to “computer gamers and blue-collar voters who hated the GOP brand”.⁹¹ McInnes said that “in the context of this poor woman’s death, everything has changed” and told his audience to shun anyone interested in anti-Semitism or white nationalism.⁹²

However, efforts from far-Right online personalities to distance themselves from white nationalism cannot be taken at face value. Leaked emails revealed in 2017 that the alt-right explainer Bokhari and Yiannopoulos produced for Breitbart (which downplayed the presence of racism) was sent for edits to a number of prominent white nationalists, and checked by Breitbart management to ensure that endorsements of racist websites (while not removed) were not too obvious.⁹³ The published article characterised white nationalists like Spencer as simply “dangerously bright” intellectuals.⁹⁴ While McInnes disavowed white nationalism after Charlottesville, in 2014 he contributed (alongside Spencer) to a series of “essays by race-realist commentators” on Taylor’s website. McInnes argued that people of different races cannot “live side by side”.⁹⁵ He has also pushed fears of “white genocide”.⁹⁶ The white nationalist organiser of Unite the Right plugged the event on *The Gavin McInnes Show*. He was a member of the Proud

⁸⁹ Shaun, “Charlottesville: The True Alt-Right,” *YouTube*, 53:37, April 2, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zcoYKuoiUrY>

⁹⁰ “Charlottesville: white supremacist gets life sentence for fatal car attack”, *The Guardian*, June 29, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/jun/28/charlottesville-james-fields-life-sentence-heather-heyer-car-attack>

⁹¹ Tony Lee, “Harvard/MIT Study: ‘Breitbart Is NOT Alt-Right’”, *Breitbart News*, August 16, 2017, <https://www.breitbart.com/politics/2017/08/16/harvard-mit-study-breitbart-is-not-alt-right/>

⁹² Rebel News, “Gavin McInnes: Who is REALLY to blame for Charlottesville?”, *YouTube*, 8:10, August 14, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o8DhmEunckg>; Gavin McInnes, “WE ARE NOT ALT-RIGHT”, *Official Proud Boys*, August 21, 2017, <https://officialproudboys.com/proud-boys/we-are-not-alt-right/>

⁹³ Joseph Bernstein, “Here’s How Breitbart And Milo Smuggled White Nationalism Into The Mainstream”, *BuzzFeed News*, October 5, 2017, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/josephbernstein/heres-how-breitbart-and-milo-smuggled-white-nationalism>

⁹⁴ Bokhari and Yiannopoulos, “An Establishment Conservative’s Guide to the Alt-Right”.

⁹⁵ Gavin McInnes, “America in 2034”, *American Renaissance*, June 17, 2014, <https://www.amren.com/news/2014/06/america-in-2034-7/>

⁹⁶ Gavin McInnes, Twitter post, February 6, 2018, 11:00AM, https://twitter.com/gavin_mcinnes/status/879318997845626880; Gavin McInnes, Twitter post, June 26, 2017, https://twitter.com/gavin_mcinnes/status/879318997845626880

Boys, a group for “Western chauvinist” men founded by McInnes in 2016.⁹⁷ The Proud Boys have since been labelled an “extremist group with ties to white nationalism” by the FBI and a “terrorist entity” in Canada, thanks to their involvement in street fighting and the January 2021 attack on the United States Capitol.⁹⁸

Nevertheless, to distinguish themselves from overt white nationalists, most members of the online Right now take exception to being called “alt-right”. To acknowledge that out-and-out white nationalists have won ownership of the term they created, “alt-right” is now usually reserved for unabashed white nationalists, while “alt-lite” refers to members of the online far-Right who at least nominally oppose racism.

As discussed in Chapter Three, Benjamin has been affected by the toxic associations of the term “alt-right” and (like his friend Yiannopoulos) now considers it a smear, while still repeating major tenets of white nationalist ideology. As discussed in Chapter Six, Shanks is credulous of efforts from the likes of McInnes and Yiannopoulos to launder their reputation, and treats them as harmless, funny provocateurs.

The manosphere

One large section of the alt-lite is the so-called “manosphere”. This is an assortment of websites, forums, and YouTube channels on which users discuss masculinity, and take an antagonistic stance towards women and feminism. These users share the conviction that men hold a subordinate position in contemporary society thanks to feminism.⁹⁹ They describe coming to this realisation as “taking the redpill”. This metaphor references a 1999 science fiction film, *The Matrix*, in which the protagonist swallows a red pill and realises that his world is actually a computer simulation run to benefit a race of

⁹⁷ “Proud Boys”, *The Southern Poverty Law Center*, accessed November 5, 2021, <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/proud-boys>; Gavin McInnes, “Introducing: The Proud Boys”, *Taki’s Magazine*, September 15, 2016, <https://www.takimag.com/article/introducing-the-proud-boys-gavin-mcinnis/>

⁹⁸ Jason Wilson, “FBI now classifies far-right Proud Boys as ‘extremist group’, documents say”, *The Guardian*, November 20, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/nov/19/proud-boys-fbi-classification-extremist-group-white-nationalism-report>; Amanda Coletta, “Canadian chapter of the Proud Boys, designated a terrorist group by the government, says it has ‘dissolved’”, *The Washington Post*, May 3, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/05/03/canada-proud-boys-terrorist-group-dissolved/>

⁹⁹ Debbie Ging, “Alphas, Betas, and Incels: Theorizing the Masculinities of the Manosphere”, *Men and Masculinities* 22 (2019): 639, 663.

exploitative machines.¹⁰⁰ “Redpilled” members of the manosphere claim to realise that men are actually the more oppressed class in Western countries, while feminists spread a false narrative about women’s oppression.¹⁰¹ Debbie Ging notes that the “redpill” metaphor is “the key concept that unites all of these communities”.¹⁰² Marwick and Robyn Caplan explain that the term “misandry” – which reduces feminism to “man-hating” – similarly functions as a “common linguistic practice” which fosters a sense of community across the various anti-feminist groups of the manosphere.¹⁰³

Some anti-feminists – Men’s Rights Activists, or MRAs – position themselves as a male advocacy movement which fights for equal rights. Paul Elam, the founder of one prominent Men’s Rights website, explains that MRAs set out to “expose misandry at all levels in our culture”.¹⁰⁴ MRAs argue that higher suicide rates and lower educational achievement show that men and boys are oppressed. Domestic violence against men is tolerated, while fathers face bias in family courts. Men are victimised by false rape accusations. However, from her analysis of their websites, Bailey Poland finds that MRAs are “far more likely” to write misogynistic forum posts or harass feminist women than to actually work towards solving the issues they “claim to care about so deeply”.¹⁰⁵ Ging similarly finds less “activism and lobbying” on these websites than misogynist rants and personal attacks.¹⁰⁶ For instance, Elam has attempted to humiliate an outspoken feminist by selling erotic depictions of her, and established a website for vigilante justice on which he encourages people to post the personal information of women who have apparently harmed men.¹⁰⁷ In 2017, the Southern Poverty Law Center listed his MRA website as a hate group.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁰ Stephen Marche, “Swallowing the Red Pill: a journey to the heart of modern misogyny”, *The Guardian*, April 14, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/apr/14/the-red-pill-reddit-modern-misogyny-manosphere-men>

¹⁰¹ Nagle, *Kill All Normies*, 64.

¹⁰² Ging, “Alphas, Betas, and Incels”, 640.

¹⁰³ Alice E. Marwick and Robyn Caplan, “Drinking male tears: language, the manosphere, and networked harassment”, *Feminist Media Studies* 18 (2018): 553.

¹⁰⁴ Mission Statement”, *A Voice For Men*, accessed February 7, 2020, <https://web.archive.org/web/20130121023951/https://avoiceformen.com/policies/mission-statement/>

¹⁰⁵ Bailey Poland, *Haters: Harassment, Abuse, and Violence Online* (Lincoln: Potomac Books, 2016), 129.

¹⁰⁶ Ging, “Alphas, Betas, and Incels”, 645-646.

¹⁰⁷ Nagle, *Kill All Normies*, 66-67.

¹⁰⁸ “The Year in Hate: Trump buoyed white supremacists in 2017, sparking backlash among black nationalist groups”, *The Southern Poverty Law Center*, February 21, 2018, <https://www.splcenter.org/news/2018/02/21/year-hate-trump-buoyed-white-supremacists-2017-sparking-backlash-among-black-nationalist>

Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW) remain single or celibate in an effort to avoid the areas of life in feminist Western societies which (they believe) are most likely to produce negative outcomes for men.¹⁰⁹ MGTOW avoid marriage in the belief that biased divorce courts will eventually grant full child custody and large maintenance payments to their greedy ex-wives. Some MGTOW avoid dating entirely in the belief that that a woman might change her mind after consensual sex and accuse them of rape.¹¹⁰ The final “level” of MGTOW behaviour involves trying to stay hidden from the “misandrist” state by staying home and working as little as possible.¹¹¹

Members of the manosphere very often appeal to “evolutionary psychology” for explanations of male and female behaviour. Nagle reports that their websites are filled with “anxiety about evolutionary rank”.¹¹² They imagine that men can be divided into hypermasculine “alphas” and weaker “betas”. They believe that women’s biology makes them pursue sex with tall, muscular, conventionally attractive, and self-assured alpha males in order to acquire their genes. They also believe that women have a “nesting instinct”, which makes them want to eventually settle down with meeker, more pliable men who will provide the emotional and financial support necessary to raise children.¹¹³ In the manosphere’s narrative, women have wielded feminism to satisfy both drives at the expense of most men. Before second-wave feminism and the sexual revolution, most people married early. This ensured that young men were likely to secure wives who provided sex and female companionship. However, feminist ideas of independence and the contraceptive pill have allowed women in their twenties to indulge their instinct to pursue sex with alphas. Betas remain alone for years while women chase after a minority of desirable men. Members of the manosphere routinely claim that 80 percent of young women pursue 20 percent of men.¹¹⁴ Around the age of 30, women turn their attention to motherhood and find that there are not enough alphas to go around. Women therefore

¹⁰⁹ Jie Liang Lin, “Antifeminism Online”, in *Digital Environments: Ethnographic Perspectives across Global Online and Offline Spaces*, ed. Urte Undine Frömming, Steffen Köhn, Samantha Fox and Mike Terry (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2017), 78.

¹¹⁰ Martin Daubney, “Meet the men giving up on women”, *The Sunday Times*, November 15, 2015, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/meet-the-men-giving-up-on-women-zqmmthbvjr>

¹¹¹ Sandman, “Introduction to MGTOW”, *YouTube*, 11:29, August 24, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iVXdxaARiAU>

¹¹² Nagle, *Kill All Normies*, 65.

¹¹³ Shawn P. Van Valkenburgh, “Digesting the Red Pill: Masculinity and Neoliberalism in the Manosphere”, *Men and Masculinities* 21 (2018): 9; Ging, “Alphas, Betas, and Incels”, 649.

¹¹⁴ Zack Beauchamp, “Our incel problem”, *Vox*, April 23, 2019, <https://www.vox.com/the-highlight/2019/4/16/18287446/incel-definition-reddit>

settle down with formerly neglected betas, from whom they demand emotional and financial support. Women lose their looks when they turn 30, so these men are lumped with an inferior product.¹¹⁵ Because they attribute this behaviour to women's biological nature, in the manosphere's narrative, "All Women Are Like That".¹¹⁶

Aspiring "pick-up artists" (PUAs) and their gurus in the online "seduction community" hope to attract women despite their "beta" status. Shawn Van Valkenburgh explains that PUAs promote methods for "mimicking alpha behaviour and appearance".¹¹⁷ They lift weights to mimic an alpha's physique, and learn a way of interacting with women, termed "game", which is supposed to mimic an alpha's self-assuredness.¹¹⁸ Ran Almog and Danny Kaplan analyse "pick-up" advice and find that it addresses stereotypical nerds and geeks. It frames courtship as "a game with predetermined rules that may be learned and practiced".¹¹⁹ It treats women as "an object that may be manipulated by playing on inherent biological-evolutionary mechanisms".¹²⁰ Nagle notes that PUA forums "tend to read like a sinister Darwinian guide to tricking the loathed female prey into surrender".¹²¹ For instance, the high-profile PUA Daryush Valizadeh (a.k.a. "Roosh V") has bragged about manipulating women into non-consensual sex.¹²² The Southern Poverty Law Center also lists Valizadeh's website, Return of Kings, as a hate group.¹²³

On "incel" forums – for the "involuntarily celibate" – men have lost hope in attracting women. Incels believe they suffer insurmountable genetic deficiencies which repel

¹¹⁵ Lin, "Antifeminism Online", 89; Van Valkenburgh, "Digesting the Red Pill", 9, Nagle, *Kill All Normies*, 65; Rebecca Jennings, "Incels Categorize Women by Personal Style and Attractiveness", *Vox*, April 28, 2019, <https://www.vox.com/2018/4/28/17290256/incel-chad-stacy-becky>

¹¹⁶ Van Valkenburgh, "Digesting the Red Pill", 9, 13; Stephen Marche, "Swallowing the Red Pill".

¹¹⁷ Van Valkenburgh, "Digesting the Red Pill", 10.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ran Almog and Danny Kaplan, "The Nerd and His Discontent: The Seduction Community and the Logic of the Game as a Geeky Solution to the Challenges of Young Masculinity", *Men and Masculinities* 20 (2017): 28.

¹²⁰ Ibid, 33.

¹²¹ Nagle, *Kill All Normies*, 64.

¹²² "Daryush 'Roosh' Valizadeh", *The Southern Poverty Law Center*, accessed February 10, 2020, <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/individual/daryush-roosh-valizadeh>

¹²³ "Male Supremacy", *The Southern Poverty Law Center*, accessed July 31, 2020, <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/ideology/male-supremacy>

women.¹²⁴ They are often angry at PUAs for selling false hope.¹²⁵ Rather than reassuring one another, incels often confirm that other forum users are unlovable betas. They allow their resentment against alpha males and women to run riot.¹²⁶ Denoting them as interchangeable airheads, incels refer to sexually successful men as “Chads” and the women who pursue them as “Stacys”.¹²⁷ They also refer to women with the dehumanising terms “female humanoid” and “foid”.¹²⁸ Some incels, most notably Elliot Rodger, who killed six people and wounded fourteen others in California in 2014, and Alek Minassian, who killed ten people in Toronto in 2018, have violently taken out their frustration with sexually active people. Some incels online empathise with Rodger and Minassian and celebrate their massacres.¹²⁹

Benjamin rose to fame as an anti-feminist and engages with all of these factions and preoccupations. His dissemination of ideas from the manosphere is analysed across chapters Three, Four, and Five. Shanks makes overtures to incels and he accesses manosphere ideas about evolution through the seduction community, as discussed in chapters Six and Seven respectively.

Conspiracy theorists

Conspiracy theorists are another major branch of the alt-lite. Jones and Watson of InfoWars are the most influent members of this faction. Jones is the most prominent conspiracy theorist in the United States.¹³⁰ Since the mid-1990s, he has worried about the

¹²⁴ Zack Beauchamp, “Incel, the misogynist ideology that inspired the deadly Toronto attack, explained”, Vox, April 25, 2018, <https://www.vox.com/world/2018/4/25/17277496/incel-toronto-attack-alek-minassian>

¹²⁵ Beauchamp, “Incel, the misogynist ideology that inspired the deadly Toronto attack, explained”; Rachel Janik, “‘I laugh at the death of normies’: How incels are celebrating the Toronto mass killing”, *The Southern Poverty Law Center*, April 24, 2018, <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2018/04/24/i-laugh-death-normies-how-incels-are-celebrating-toronto-mass-killing>; Caitlin Dewey, “Incels, 4chan and the Beta Uprising: making sense of one of the Internet’s most-reviled subcultures”, *The Washington Post*, October 8, 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2015/10/07/incels-4chan-and-the-beta-uprising-making-sense-of-one-of-the-internets-most-reviled-subcultures/?noredirect=on>

¹²⁶ Beauchamp, “Incel, the misogynist ideology that inspired the deadly Toronto attack, explained”; ContraPoints, “Incels”, *YouTube*, 35:04, August 17, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fD2briZ6fB0&t=2s>

¹²⁷ Jennings, “Incels Categorize Women by Personal Style and Attractiveness”.

¹²⁸ Janik, “‘I laugh at the death of normies’”.

¹²⁹ Ging, “Alphas, Betas, and Incels”, 71; Beauchamp, “Incel, the misogynist ideology that inspired the deadly Toronto attack, explained”; “Elliot Rodger: How misogynist killer became ‘incel hero’”, *BBC News*, April 26, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-43892189>

¹³⁰ “Alex Jones”, *The Southern Poverty Law Center*, accessed March 4, 2020, <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/individual/alex-jones>

imminent onset of autocracy in America. He believes that a secretive cabal of “globalists” are working to undermine sovereign nations and institute an authoritarian world government, an absolutist “New World Order”.¹³¹ Jones made his name by claiming that disasters such as the Oklahoma City Bombing were “false flag” attacks orchestrated by the American government to create a scared population which will accept martial law. His home-recorded radio show lost most of its affiliates when he blamed the American government for the September 11 attacks.¹³² Jones then rebuilt InfoWars online. In 2017-2018, its website received 20 million monthly visits, and its YouTube channel had attracted 1.3 billion views. However, Jones was removed from all major social media platforms in 2018 for violating hate speech and harassment policies.¹³³ His more recent schtick includes the claim that mass shootings were faked as a pretext for the government to strip people of their guns.¹³⁴ More exotically, Jones claims in his energetic rants that, for instance, the American government uses “weather weapons” to direct tornadoes and hurricanes, and deploys its “gay bomb” to create homosexuals, that Lady Gaga’s 2017 Super Bowl performance was a “satanic ritual”, and that Buzz Aldrin told him that aliens built the pyramids and communicate via an obelisk on the moon of Mars.¹³⁵

His reputation as alt-right/-lite comes from his support for Trump in 2016. Energised by Trump’s anti-establishment rhetoric, Jones coined the infamous “Hillary For Prison” slogan, and pushed the “Pizzagate” conspiracy theory which claimed that Clinton and

¹³¹ Alexander Zaitchik, “Meet Alex Jones”, *Rolling Stone*, March 2, 2011, <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-news/meet-alex-jones-175845/>; Liam Stack, “Globalism: A Far-Right Conspiracy Theory Buoyed by Trump”, *The New York Times*, November 15, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/15/us/politics/globalism-right-trump.html>; “Alex Jones”.

¹³² Hilde Van den Bulck and Aaron Hyzen, “Of lizards and ideological entrepreneurs: Alex Jones and Infowars in the relationship between populist nationalism and the post-global media ecology”, *The International Communication Gazette* 82 (2020): 51; Zaitchik, “Meet Alex Jones”.

¹³³ Alex Hern, “Facebook, Apple, YouTube and Spotify ban Infowars’ Alex Jones”, *The Guardian*, August 6, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2018/aug/06/apple-removes-podcasts-infowars-alex-jones>; “Twitter bans Alex Jones and Infowars for abusive behaviour”, *BBC News*, September 6, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-45442417>

¹³⁴ Van den Bulck and Hyzen, “Of lizards and ideological entrepreneurs”, 43, 49.

¹³⁵ Tucker Higgins, “Alex Jones’ 5 most disturbing and ridiculous conspiracy theories”, *CNBC*, September 18, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/09/14/alex-jones-5-most-disturbing-ridiculous-conspiracy-theories.html>; The Joe Show, “Alex Jones and Eddie Bravo on fake moon landing and Buzz Aldrin UFO story”, *YouTube*, 10:10, February 1, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zDxWLGTw9Tg>; Kurt Bardella, “Alex Jones will never abandon deranged propaganda, that's why Twitter needs to ban him”, *USA Today*, August 21, 2018, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2018/08/21/twitter-needs-ban-alex-jones-and-alt-right-lies-and-hate-column/1036668002/>

other senior Democrats were running a child sex ring from a pizzeria.¹³⁶ He peddled conspiracies about Clinton's dire state of health, and claimed that she was literally a demon from Hell.¹³⁷ However, Jones sits somewhat uneasily in the alt-right/-lite. As a *Rolling Stone* profiler mused in 2011, his views are "too bad-trip weird to fit neatly into any political category".¹³⁸ His most outlandish rants are "oddly endearing" and have "a certain charm" even to critics in the left-wing press.¹³⁹

Watson, who is British, fits more obviously into the alt-right/-lite. Like his boss, Watson has alleged that fluoridated water and aeroplane "chemtrails" are tools of a nefarious "Illuminati", and that September 11 and the Oklahoma City Bombing were "inside jobs". However, around the time he adopted the label "alt-right" in 2015 and 2016, Watson distanced himself from such kookery and focused his attacks on identity politics and political correctness. This saw him attract many new followers, most of them young.¹⁴⁰ He now predominantly attacks feminist, anti-racist, and LGBTQ+ rights activism.¹⁴¹ Watson has won friends in high places; Trump has twice retweeted him, while Trump Jr. has done so over forty times.¹⁴²

Jones and Watson both traffic in the "cultural Marxism" conspiracy theory, which is popular across the alt-right/-lite. It has its roots in books written by the American paleoconservative William Lind in the 1990s.¹⁴³ Tanner Mirrlees explains that this theory

¹³⁶ Tim Murphy, "Conspiracy Theorist in Chief," *Mother Jones* 41 (2016): 5-8; James Doubek, "Conspiracy Theorist Alex Jones Apologizes For Promoting 'Pizzagate'", *NPR*, March 26, 2017, <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2017/03/26/521545788/conspiracy-theorist-alex-jones-apologizes-for-promoting-pizzagate>

¹³⁷ Amber Jamieson, "Conspiracy central: the activists painting Clinton as a sick, terrorist-friendly killer", *The Guardian*, August 26, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/aug/26/hillary-clinton-conspiracy-theories-activists-rightwing>; Ezra Klein, "Trump ally Alex Jones thinks Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton are literally demons from hell", *Vox*, October 10, 2016, <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2016/10/10/13233338/alex-jones-trump-clinton-demon>

¹³⁸ Zaitchik, "Meet Alex Jones".

¹³⁹ Joe Sommerlad, "Alex Jones: Who is the ranting alt-right radio host and what are his craziest conspiracy theories?", *The Independent*, August 9, 2018, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/alex-jones-radio-show-us-alt-right-conspiracy-theories-youtube-infowars-illuminati-frogs-a8483986.html>; Jason Wilson, "How rightwing pundits are reacting to the Manchester attack", *The Guardian*, May 25, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/may/24/rightwing-pundits-manchester-attack-response>

¹⁴⁰ Nico Hines, "Alex Jones' Protégé, Paul Joseph Watson, Is About to Steal His Crackpot Crown", *The Daily Beast*, April 22, 2018, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/alex-jones-protége-paul-joseph-watson-is-about-to-steal-his-crackpot-crown>

¹⁴¹ Wilson, "How rightwing pundits are reacting to the Manchester attack"; Hines, "Alex Jones' Protégé, Paul Joseph Watson, Is About to Steal His Crackpot Crown".

¹⁴² Eric Hananoki, "Infowars' Paul Joseph Watson can't get anything right", *Salon*, June 19, 2017, <https://www.salon.com/test/2017/06/19/infowars-paul-joseph-watson-cannot-get-anything-right/>

¹⁴³ Jerome Jamin, "Cultural Marxism: a survey", *Religion Compass* 12 (2018): 6-7.

holds that progressive social movements since the 1960s have not been “bottom-up community response[s] to the existing problems of racism, sexism, and classism”.¹⁴⁴ Instead, feminist, anti-racist, and LGBTQ+ rights activism is thought to be inauthentic, and part of an “orchestrated plan”.¹⁴⁵ The theory holds that – while in exile from Nazism at Columbia University – the Jewish social theorists of the Frankfurt School concocted an unorthodox strand of Marxism which prioritised the capture of cultural and educational institutions. From there, these Marxists could undermine traditional Western culture.¹⁴⁶ Conspiracists think that the Frankfurt School aimed to subvert traditional American “core values” – i.e. the Christian, heterosexual, patriarchal nuclear family – to make Americans more receptive towards communism.¹⁴⁷ Conspiracists imagine that social movement activists have had their views instilled from above by “a secretive cultural Marxist cabal”, the first generation of whom were Jewish foreigners.¹⁴⁸ Lind has presented this anti-Semitic theory at Holocaust denial conferences.¹⁴⁹ The far-right terrorist Anders Breivik, who targeted youth members of the Norwegian Labour Party and killed 77 people in 2011, considered himself an opponent of cultural Marxism, as did Brenton Tarrant, who targeted Muslim worshippers and killed 51 people in Christchurch in 2019.¹⁵⁰ The worldview of both men demonstrates that belief in cultural Marxism often goes hand-in-hand with worries about the “Islamification” of Western countries. Conspiracists believe that Marxists denounce Islamophobia in an effort to help Muslims undermine Western culture.¹⁵¹ The idea of cultural Marxism has also seen outings in the mainstream media; for instance, in Australia in 2016 many columnists in Rupert Murdoch’s News Corp newspapers denounced a program intended to reduce homo- and transphobic bullying in schools as “cultural Marxism”.¹⁵²

¹⁴⁴ Tanner Mirrlees, “The Alt-right’s Discourse on ‘Cultural Marxism’: A Political Instrument of Intersectional Hate”, *Atlantis: Critical Studies in Gender, Culture & Social Justice* 39 (2018): 60.

¹⁴⁵ Beirich and Hicks quoted in Mirrlees, “The Alt-right’s Discourse on ‘Cultural Marxism’”, 49.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 54

¹⁴⁷ Bill Berkowitz, “‘Cultural Marxism’ Catching On”, *The Southern Poverty Law Center Intelligence Report*, August 15, 2003, <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/2003/cultural-marxism-catching>

¹⁴⁸ Mirrlees, “The Alt-right’s Discourse on ‘Cultural Marxism’”, 56

¹⁴⁹ Rachel Busbridge, Benjamin Moffitt, and Joshua Thorburn, “Cultural Marxism: far-right conspiracy theory in Australia’s culture wars”, *Social Identities* 26 (2020): 726.

¹⁵⁰ Samuel Moyn, “The Alt-Right’s Favorite Meme Is 100 Years Old”, *The New York Times*, November 15, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/13/opinion/cultural-marxism-anti-semitism.html>; Jacob Aasland Ravndal, “The Dark Web Enabled the Christchurch Killer”, *Foreign Policy*, March 16, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/03/16/the-dark-web-enabled-the-christchurch-killer-extreme-right-terrorism-white-nationalism-anders-breivik/>

¹⁵¹ Busbridge, Moffitt, and Thorburn, “Cultural Marxism”, 726, 732.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 732, 733.

As discussed in Chapter Three, Benjamin is himself a sometime conspiracy theorist who denounces cultural Marxism and has collaborated with Watson (a personal friend) and Jones. As discussed in Chapter Six, Shanks is a critic of Watson, but a fan of Jones. His own conspiracy theory about social movement activism, which bears similarities to cultural Marxism, is discussed in Chapter Seven.

The Intellectual Dark Web

A group of academics and political commentators comprise another faction of the alt-lite: the “Intellectual Dark Web” (IDW). This cohort includes (among others) Sam Harris, a neuroscientist and outspoken atheist, Jordan Peterson, an academic psychologist and self-help author, Dave Rubin, an online talk show host, Ben Shapiro, a podcaster and former Breitbart columnist, and Joe Rogan, a comedian and podcaster. The term “Intellectual Dark Web” was popularised by a 2018 profile in *The New York Times*, which praised these figures as “iconoclastic thinkers” who speak uncomfortable truths which might make the enforcers of “toxic” political correctness blacklist them from the mainstream media and universities.¹⁵³ Alan Finlayson explains that this cohort, compared to other factions of the online Right, “speak from traditional, pre-digital bases of authority” in universities and the commercial media, but have used social media to reach wide audiences.¹⁵⁴

To insist that systemic racism, sexism, and homophobia do not exist, this cohort specialises in pseudoscientific speculation about whether social inequalities can be attributed to the inherent deficiencies of women and minorities. Harris, Peterson, Rubin, Shapiro, and Rogan fashion themselves as rational men who deal in facts. They like to characterise their criticism of social movement activism as apolitical, and to present contentious claims about race and gender as simple truths which are covered up by the

¹⁵³ Bari Weiss, “Meet the Renegades of the Intellectual Dark Web”, *The New York Times*, May 8, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/08/opinion/intellectual-dark-web.html>

¹⁵⁴ Alan Finlayson, “Neoliberalism, the Alt-Right and the Intellectual Dark Web”, *Theory, Culture & Society* 39 (2021): 6.

agents of political correctness.¹⁵⁵ For instance, Harris has repeatedly stated that black people have evolved to be less intelligent than white people.¹⁵⁶ He presents the debunked “junk science” of Charles Murray (who believes that the welfare state should be abolished because state interventions cannot overcome the mental deficiencies of black and Latino people) as established fact.¹⁵⁷ Harris dismisses criticism of Murray as “dishonesty and hypocrisy and moral cowardice” of people in the thrall of a “politically correct moral panic”.¹⁵⁸ Meanwhile, Shapiro states that transgender rights activism is “anti-science” because changing one’s gender is biologically impossible.¹⁵⁹ He ignores the foundational distinction between “sex” and “gender”, and mischaracterises transgender people as fantasists who deny the existence of biological sex.¹⁶⁰ Rogan has played his usual role in this ecosystem by listening uncritically as Harris and Shapiro repeated these claims on his popular podcast.¹⁶¹

Peterson is the IDW’s brightest star.¹⁶² He rose to prominence in late 2016, when he protested an amendment to Canadian law which prohibited discrimination based on gender identity, calling it an attack on free speech. Peterson erroneously claimed that

¹⁵⁵ Jacob Hamburger, “The ‘Intellectual Dark Web’ Is Nothing New”, *The Los Angeles Review of Books*, July 18, 2018, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-intellectual-dark-web-is-nothing-new/#!>; Henry Farrell, “The ‘Intellectual Dark Web’, explained: what Jordan Peterson has in common with the alt-right”, *Vox*, May 10, 2018, <https://www.vox.com/the-big-idea/2018/5/10/17338290/intellectual-dark-web-rogan-peterson-harris-times-weiss>; Phil Torres, “Steven Pinker, Sam Harris and the epidemic of annoying white male intellectuals”, *Salon*, October 20, 2019, <https://www.salon.com/2019/10/20/steven-pinker-sam-harris-and-the-epidemic-of-annoying-white-male-intellectuals/>

¹⁵⁶ Torres, “Steven Pinker, Sam Harris and the epidemic of annoying white male intellectuals”.

¹⁵⁷ Sam Harris, “#73 - Forbidden Knowledge: A Conversation with Charles Murray”, *Making Sense with Sam Harris*, April 22, 2017, <https://samharris.org/podcasts/forbidden-knowledge/>; Eric Turkheimer, Kathryn Paige Harden, and Richard E. Nisbett, “Charles Murray is once again peddling junk science about race and IQ”, *Vox*, May 18, 2017, <https://www.vox.com/the-big-idea/2017/5/18/15655638/charles-murray-race-iq-sam-harris-science-free-speech>; Eric Turkheimer, Kathryn Paige Harden, and Richard E. Nisbett, “There’s still no good reason to believe black-white IQ differences are due to genes”, *Vox*, June 17, 2017, <https://www.vox.com/the-big-idea/2017/6/15/15797120/race-black-white-iq-response-critics>; “Charles Murray”, *The Southern Poverty Law Center*, accessed February 17, 2020, <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/individual/charles-murray>

¹⁵⁸ Harris, “#73 - Forbidden Knowledge”.

¹⁵⁹ Ben Shapiro, “Ben Shapiro: The Anti-Science Mainstreaming Of Mental Illness”, *Investor’s Business Daily*, January 1, 2017, <https://www.investors.com/politics/columnists/ben-shapiro-the-anti-science-mainstreaming-of-mental-illness/>

¹⁶⁰ Nathan J. Robinson, “The Cool Kid’s Philosopher”, *Current Affairs*, December 1, 2017, <https://static.currentaffairs.org/2017/12/the-cool-kids-philosopher>

¹⁶¹ Emanuel Maiberg, “The Joe Rogan Experience Is a Safe Space to Launder Bad Ideas”, *Vice*, September 7, 2018, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/9kv9qd/the-joe-rogan-experience-is-a-safe-space-to-launder-bad-ideas; JRE Clips, “Joe Rogan & Ben Shapiro on the Transgender Movement, Men vs. Women in Sports”, *YouTube*, 34:45, August 2, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IdjdNgvF42o>; JRE Clips, “Joe Rogan - Sam Harris on Race & IQ Controversy”, *YouTube*, 12:14, April 18, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5r_E0bXF54U

¹⁶² David Brooks, “The Jordan Peterson Moment”, *The New York Times*, January 25, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/25/opinion/jordan-peterson-moment.html>

misgendering a transgender person could land the offender in front of a human rights tribunal.¹⁶³ He parlayed this sudden fame into a popular series of YouTube lectures and a best-selling self-help book.¹⁶⁴ Peterson's cocktail of political commentary and self-help resonates most with straight white young men who are underachievers and feel alienated, useless, and therefore emasculated.¹⁶⁵ Peterson's work connects Carl Jung's concept of "archetypes" with evolutionary psychology. Michael Shermer calls his work "Darwinian literary studies".¹⁶⁶ Peterson notes that certain themes and moral lessons appear in many different myths, Bible stories, and canonical works of literature.¹⁶⁷ He focuses on heroes who demonstrate strength, discipline, and honour to overcome suffering and adversity.¹⁶⁸ He explains the proliferation of these themes with reference to natural selection. The fittest motifs have survived because they confer adaptive advantages. Ancient stories contain wisdom which has guaranteed the continuation of the species. They are time-tested guides for living well.¹⁶⁹ Converted into self-help dictums, Peterson's insights amount to common-sense clichés about hard work and resilience.¹⁷⁰ Translated into politics, they amount to a celebration of personal responsibility and an excoriation of identity politics as a set of excuses which allow women and minorities to blame their

¹⁶³ Lisa Cumming, "Are Jordan Peterson's Claims About Bill C-16 Correct?", *Torontoist*, December 19, 2016, <https://torontoist.com/2016/12/are-jordan-petersons-claims-about-bill-c-16-correct/>

¹⁶⁴ Karen Heller, "Jordan Peterson is on a crusade to toughen up young men. It's landed him on our cultural divide", *The Washington Post*, May 3, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/jordan-peterson-is-on-a-crusade-to-toughen-up-young-men-its-landed-him-on-our-cultural-divide/2018/05/02/c5baf48-31d6-11e8-94fa-32d48460b955_story.html

¹⁶⁵ David Livingstone Smith and John Kaag, "Thus Spoke Jordan Peterson: A wildly popular psychologist's self-help program is leading young men to authoritarianism", *Foreign Policy* 228 (2018): 52-54; Amol Rajan, "Jordan Peterson's appeal? He fills the hole out of which young men like me have clambered", *New Statesman* 147 (2018): 56; Nathan J. Robinson, "The Intellectual We Deserve", *Current Affairs*, March 14, 2018, <https://www.currentaffairs.org/2018/03/the-intellectual-we-deserve>

¹⁶⁶ Michael Shermer, "Have Archetype - Will Travel: The Jordan Peterson Phenomenon", *Skeptic* 23 (2018): 22-23.

¹⁶⁷ Nicholas Kohler, "Jordan Peterson's people", *Maclean's* 131 (2018): 50.

¹⁶⁸ Dorian Lynskey, "How dangerous is Jordan B Peterson, the rightwing professor who 'hit a hornets' nest'?", *The Guardian*, February 8, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2018/feb/07/how-dangerous-is-jordan-b-peterson-the-rightwing-professor-who-hit-a-hornets-nest>

¹⁶⁹ Kohler, "Jordan Peterson's people"; Kelefa Sanneh, "Jordan Peterson's Gospel of Masculinity", *The New Yorker*, February 26, 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/03/05/jordan-petersons-gospel-of-masculinity>

¹⁷⁰ Stephen Bush, "Why are pick-up artists and Trump fans flocking to read a psychology professor's self-help book?", *New Statesman* 147 (2018): 21; Julian Baggini, "12 Rules for Life by Jordan Peterson — back to basics", *The Financial Times*, January 19, 2018, <https://www.ft.com/content/40c05b84-f7a7-11e7-a4c9-bbdefa4f210b>; Sanneh, "Jordan Peterson's Gospel of Masculinity"; Hari Kunzru, "12 Rules for Life by Jordan B Peterson review — a self-help book from a culture warrior", *The Guardian*, January 18, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/jan/18/12-rules-for-life-jordan-b-peterson-review>; Wesley Yang, "The Passion of Jordan Peterson", *Esquire* May (2018): 86-93.

failures on fake concepts like “patriarchy” and “white privilege”.¹⁷¹ Peterson insists that life is meant to hard and that hierarchies of conscientious winners and lazy losers are natural, as evidenced by their existence in stories dispersed across time and space.¹⁷² The idea that systemic oppression still exists is a fabrication of academic cultural Marxists and “postmodern neo-Marxists”.¹⁷³ Peterson also attributes social inequalities to biology. For instance, he claims that women and men have evolved different natures which account for the gender pay gap.¹⁷⁴

Benjamin’s interaction with many IDW personalities is described in Chapter Three, while his own self-presentation as a “man of science” who uses empirical fact to prove that social inequalities are natural is the subject of Chapter Four. As discussed in chapters Six and Seven respectively, Shanks admires these IDW personalities and himself uses pseudoscience to naturalise traditional gender roles.

Gamergate

These factions coalesced into a more cohesive movement thanks to a 2014 controversy about video games, dubbed “Gamergate”. While it pre-dated the IDW, Gamergate allowed white nationalists, trolls, the manosphere, and conspiracy theorists to intermingle. Game manufacturers have historically targeted an audience of young straight white men. This phenomenon has its roots in an industry crash in 1983, which saw companies narrow their attention to a single reliable demographic. By 1998, one survey found that 80 percent of game consumers were male.¹⁷⁵ Video game companies often produced titles featuring white male protagonists, while non-white people, if they appeared at all, were often villains. Female characters, explains Andrea Braithwaite, were often “damsels in distress” or “sexualised background decorations”.¹⁷⁶ By the 2010s, the

¹⁷¹ Heller, “Jordan Peterson is on a crusade to toughen up young men”; Lynskey, “How dangerous is Jordan B Peterson”.

¹⁷² Sanneh, “Jordan Peterson’s Gospel of Masculinity”; Pankaj Mishra, “Jordan Peterson & Fascist Mysticism”, *The New York Review of Books*, March 19, 2018, <https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2018/03/19/jordan-peterson-and-fascist-mysticism/>

¹⁷³ Lynskey, “How dangerous is Jordan B Peterson”.

¹⁷⁴ Channel 4 News, “Jordan Peterson debate on the gender pay gap, campus protests and postmodernism”, *YouTube*, 29:55, January 16, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aMcjxSThD54>

¹⁷⁵ Kristin Bezio, “Ctrl-Alt-Del: GamerGate as a precursor to the rise of the alt-right,” *Leadership* 14 (2018): 559.

¹⁷⁶ Andrea Braithwaite, “It’s About Ethics in Games Journalism? Gamergaters and Geek Masculinity”, *Social Media and Society* 2 (2016): 1.

assumption that “gamers” were all young straight white men no longer matched reality. A 2016 industry survey found that 44 percent of people who played games were female. Large numbers of women and girls have taken up the hobby, often via mobile phone games.¹⁷⁷ Because this group was less interested in established types of game which are developed with male audiences in mind, the 2010s saw many independent developers eschew traditional genres and engage with more adult themes.¹⁷⁸ Many of their games had no enemies to fight or matches to win, and focused on telling affecting stories.¹⁷⁹ Games like, *Gone Home*, about “coming out” as a lesbian, have been well-received.¹⁸⁰ These shifts in the industry also gave rise to a class of critics and commentators who focus on the social and political themes of games, rather than scoring them according to entertainment value.¹⁸¹

Gamergate was an online harassment campaign directed at women associated with these shifts. It primarily targeted Zoe Quinn, an independent game developer, and Anita Sarkeesian, a feminist media critic. A prelude to Gamergate occurred in 2012, when Sarkeesian launched a Kickstarter campaign to fund a series of videos called *Tropes vs. Women in Video Games*, in which she would critique the representation of women in some classic games. Some gamers interpreted Sarkeesian’s successful Kickstarter as an attack on their hobby. They accused her of throwing around unfair charges of sexism in order to make money.¹⁸² Then, in 2013, Quinn released *Depression Quest*, a free, critically well-received game about mental illness.¹⁸³ The game faced some backlash online from people who disliked its dark themes and the inability to “win” or showcase

¹⁷⁷ Bezio, “Ctrl-Alt-Del”, 560-561.

¹⁷⁸ Simon Parkin, “Zoe Quinn’s Depression Quest”, *The New Yorker*, September 9, 2014, <https://www.newyorker.com/tech/elements/zoe-quinns-depression-quest>; Bezio, “Ctrl-Alt-Del”, 560-561.

¹⁷⁹ Nicole Clark, “A brief history of the “walking simulator,” gaming’s most detested genre”, *Salon*, November 11, 2017, <https://www.salon.com/2017/11/11/a-brief-history-of-the-walking-simulator-gamings-most-detested-genre/>

¹⁸⁰ “Gone Home”, *Metacritic*, accessed March 23, 2020, <https://www.metacritic.com/game/pc/gone-home>; Christopher Grant, “Polygon’s 2013 Game of the Year: Gone Home”, *Polygon*, January 15, 2014, <https://www.polygon.com/2014/1/15/5311568/game-of-the-year-2013-gone-home>; Jon Irwin, “Devs discuss the history and the future of so-called ‘walking sims’”, *Gamasutra*, February 17, 2017, https://www.gamasutra.com/view/news/291307/Devs_discuss_the_history_and_the_future_of_socalled_walking_sims.php

¹⁸¹ Simon Parkin, “Gamergate: A Scandal Erupts in the Video-Game Community”, *The New Yorker*, October 17, 2014, <https://www.newyorker.com/tech/annals-of-technology/gamergate-scandal-erupts-video-game-community>

¹⁸² Nagle, *Kill All Normies*, 18; Bezio, “Ctrl-Alt-Del”, 562.

¹⁸³ Adam Smith, “Mostly Indescribable: Depression Quest”, *Rock Paper Shotgun*, February 14, 2013, <https://www.rockpapershotgun.com/2013/02/14/mostly-indescribable-depression-quest/>; Patrick Klepek, “They Made a Game That Understands Me”, *Giant Bomb*, April 10, 2013, <https://www.giantbomb.com/articles/they-made-a-game-that-understands-me/1100-4619/>

skill.¹⁸⁴ In 2014, Quinn’s ex-boyfriend uploaded an embittered blog post about their relationship in which he accused Quinn of cheating on him with a games journalist.¹⁸⁵ Some readers online incorrectly deduced that that Quinn had traded sex for positive reviews of her game, and thereby eroded the ethical standards of games journalism. This scandal was dubbed “Gamergate”.¹⁸⁶ In this climate, Sarkeesian put her head above the parapet when she continued to upload videos containing feminist games criticism. Participants in Gamergate thought of Quinn and Sarkeesian as a slut and a hustler, who represented a wider faction of feminists who threatened to critique old-fashioned games to death and replace them with boring new ones.¹⁸⁷

Sarkeesian and Quinn, as well as other women who supported them, were subjected to a large harassment campaign. Their harassers threatened these women with rape and death, hacked their websites, and leaked their home addresses, forcing them into hiding. They sent “revenge porn” of Quinn to her family and colleagues.¹⁸⁸ They mocked-up violent pornography featuring Sarkeesian and created a game in which players could punch her in the face.¹⁸⁹ Both women were the subject of hateful memes and discussions, with participants denigrating their appearance, sharing sexual fantasies about them, and hoping to drive them to suicide.¹⁹⁰ The scale of the harassment on 4chan forced its usually permissive founder to ban discussion of Gamergate, and then to sell the website. Participants were pushed onto an even more lawless forum, “8chan”.¹⁹¹

Gamergate was an esoteric controversy which eventually settled down, but it was a crucial formative experience for the alt-right/-lite. Authors who account for the rise of the alt-right/-lite almost all assert that shared participation in Gamergate allowed formerly dispersed white nationalists, trolls, anti-feminists, and conspiracy theorists to form a more cohesive movement.¹⁹² Neiwert explains that these factions began “chatting about

¹⁸⁴ Parkin, “Zoe Quinn’s Depression Quest”.

¹⁸⁵ Marwick and Lewis; *Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online*, 8.

¹⁸⁶ Bezio, “Ctrl-Alt-Del”, 561-562; Neiwert, *Alt-America*, 150-151.

¹⁸⁷ Bezio, “Ctrl-Alt-Del”, 562.

¹⁸⁸ Nagle, *Kill All Normies*, 18.

¹⁸⁹ Adi Robertson, “Trolls drive Anita Sarkeesian out of her house to prove misogyny doesn't exist”, *The Verge*, August 27, 2014, <https://www.theverge.com/2014/8/27/6075179/anita-sarkeesian-says-she-was-driven-out-of-house-by-threats>

¹⁹⁰ Nagle, *Kill All Normies*, 19.

¹⁹¹ David Kushner, “4chan’s Overlord Christopher Poole Reveals Why He Walked Away”, *Rolling Stone*, March 13, 2015, <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-features/4chans-overlord-christopher-poole-reveals-why-he-walked-away-93894/>; Nagle, *Kill All Normies*, 20; Neiwert, *Alt-America*, 151.

¹⁹² Neiwert, *Alt-America*, 138, 152; Marwick and Lewis, *Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online*, 9, 47; Nagle, *Kill All Normies*, 20; Hawley, *Making Sense of the Alt-Right*, 47-48.

politics” during Gamergate, and then cross-pollinated and formed a sense of community.¹⁹³ Marwick and Lewis note that Gamergate demonstrated to these communities that they had “common cause”.¹⁹⁴

Benjamin initially rose to (micro)celebrity on YouTube as a Gamergate campaigner. Finlayson notes that Gamergate demonstrated “the commercial viability of a new kind of ideological entrepreneurship”; Benjamin was one of the key beneficiaries of this trend.¹⁹⁵ His participation in the controversy is analysed in chapters Three and Five. For his part, as discussed in Chapter Six, Shanks affects an interest in video games to better appeal to the alt-right/-lite’s demographic.

The alt-right and -lite’s common enemy

The various factions of the alt-right/-lite share a vocabulary to describe their opponents.¹⁹⁶ In particular, Gamergate pushed an obscure insult into the limelight: “social justice warrior”. All corners of the alt-right/-lite are unified by their use of the term, and hatred of the people it denotes. This taunt is hurled at the perceived agents of identity politics. Calling a feminist, anti-racist, or LGBTQ+ rights activist a social justice warrior – or “SJW” – implies that they are hypersensitive and self-important. SJWs imagine injustice where none exists, and drum up outrage over trivialities in order to show off their fashionable politically correct opinions. They call other people racist, sexist, and homophobic in order to receive praise from their peers.¹⁹⁷ Adrienne Massanari and Shira Chess explain that an SJW in alt-right/-lite discourse is “a humourless shrill who takes pleasure in demonstrating their superiority by policing the behaviour of others”.¹⁹⁸ SJWs are also often painted as hypocrites who are concerned with status, and do not necessarily care about the groups they fight for.¹⁹⁹ In alt-right/-lite parlance, SJWs go about “virtue signalling”. Their activism is simply an attempt to look good (i.e. “signal their virtue”)

¹⁹³ Neiwert, *Alt-America*, 152.

¹⁹⁴ Marwick and Lewis, *Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online*, 9.

¹⁹⁵ Finlayson, “Neoliberalism, the Alt-Right and the Intellectual Dark Web”, 4.

¹⁹⁶ Bezio, “Ctrl-Alt-Del”, 563.

¹⁹⁷ Abby Ohlheiser, “Why ‘social justice warrior,’ a Gamergate insult, is now a dictionary entry”, *The Washington Post*, October 7, 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2015/10/07/why-social-justice-warrior-a-gamergate-insult-is-now-a-dictionary-entry/>

¹⁹⁸ Adrienne L. Massanari and Shira Chess, “Attack of the 50-foot social justice warrior: the discursive construction of SJW memes as the monstrous feminine”, *Feminist Media Studies* 18 (2018): 526.

¹⁹⁹ Ohlheiser, “Why ‘social justice warrior,’ a Gamergate insult, is now a dictionary entry”.

by saying the “right” thing.²⁰⁰ People who take offence at racism, sexism, or homo- and transphobia are also dismissed as thick-skinned “snowflakes”, who feel entitled never to have their views challenged.²⁰¹ Members of the alt-right/-lite also deride male SJWs as “cucks” (short for “cuckolds”). “Cucks” are emasculated, traitorous straight white men who take the side of feminist, anti-racist, and LGBTQ+ rights activists against their own demographic.²⁰²

The alt-right/-lite consider themselves underdogs in the fight against “social justice”. They believe that feminists, anti-racists, and LGBTQ+ rights activists occupy powerful positions within government, academia, and the media, from which they aim to secure preferential treatment for their own groups, exacted at the expense of straight white men. SJWs amass special rights and privileges for women and minorities, while enforcing political correctness to silence dissidents and prevent the articulation of white, male, or heterosexual interests.²⁰³ Annie Kelly explains that the alt-right/-lite’s unifying thread is the belief that “white male identity has been culturally diminished and requires reasserting”.²⁰⁴ As put in *New York* magazine, these white nationalists, trolls, anti-feminists, conspiracists, and intellectuals all share the belief that “social progress is a zero-sum game in which minority groups and women have been winning at the expense of the previous kings of the castle”.²⁰⁵ Breitbart’s Bokhari and Yiannopoulos state that opposition to the forces of identity politics is the “glue” which holds the above factions into a cohesive movement.²⁰⁶ Sean Phelan similarly argues that the figure of the “social justice warrior” serves as an “antagonist” in the sense developed by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe – the naming of a shared antagonist has the capacity to forge different

²⁰⁰ James Bartholomew, “Easy virtue”, *The Spectator*, April 18, 2015, <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/easy-virtue>; “Virtue Signalling”, Cambridge Dictionary, accessed March 27, 2020, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/virtue-signalling>

²⁰¹ Jessica Roy, “Analysis: ‘Cuck,’ ‘snowflake,’ ‘masculinist’: A guide to the language of the ‘alt-right’”, *The Los Angeles Times*, November 15, 2016, <https://www.latimes.com/nation/la-na-pol-alt-right-terminology-20161115-story.html>; Rebecca Nicholson, “‘Poor little snowflake’ – the defining insult of 2016”, *The Guardian*, November 29, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2016/nov/28/snowflake-insult-disdain-young-people>

²⁰² Joseph Bernstein, “Behind The Racist Hashtag That Is Blowing Up Twitter”, *Buzzfeed News*, July 27, 2015, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/josephbernstein/behind-the-racist-hashtag-some-donald-trump-fans-love>; Simon Van Zuylen-Wood *et al.*, “Beyond alt: the extremely reactionary, burn-it-down radical, new-fangled far right,” *New York*, May 1, 2017, <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2017/04/beyond-alt-understanding-the-new-far-right.html>; David Weigel, “‘Cuckservative’ — the conservative insult of the month, explained”, *The Washington Post*, July 29, 2015, <https://www.gq.com/story/why-angry-white-men-love-calling-people-cucks>

²⁰³ Bokhari and Yiannopoulos, “An Establishment Conservative’s Guide to the Alt-Right”.

²⁰⁴ Annie Kelly, “The alt-right: reactionary rehabilitation for white masculinity”, *Soundings* 66 (2017): 75.

²⁰⁵ Van Zuylen-Wood *et al.*, “Beyond alt”, 26.

²⁰⁶ Bokhari and Yiannopoulos, “An Establishment Conservative’s Guide to the Alt-Right”.

identities into “coherent political formations”.²⁰⁷ Finlayson, who notes that earlier movements similarly pitted themselves against an educated “new class” which dominates cultural institutions and exercises discursive power to victimise those with contrary views, agrees that the figure of the social justice warrior “sustains an otherwise unlikely alliance” of reactionaries.²⁰⁸

YouTube

This thesis predominantly analyses YouTube videos. The platform is extremely important for the alt-right/-lite. Phelan concedes that, when members of this milieu boast about being “the best-organised political community on the platform”, they have viewership and “subscriber” numbers on their side.²⁰⁹ In his 2017 study of one white nationalist YouTuber, Zack Exley notes the existence of hundreds of alt-right/-lite content-creators with millions of views each.²¹⁰ *The New York Times* has labelled the right-wing sections of YouTube “the new talk radio”.²¹¹ In 2018, a concerned YouTube employee demonstrated that a hypothetical “Alt-right” category would be as popular as the website’s “Music”, “Sports”, or “Gaming” categories.²¹² Moreover, YouTube videos are a core component of alt-right/-lite discussions on other websites. Hine *et al.* note in their study of /pol/ that links to YouTube were shared “over an order of magnitude” more often than links to any other website.²¹³ Another study of over 27,000 alt-right Twitter accounts found that links to YouTube appeared far more often than links to any other website.²¹⁴

²⁰⁷ Sean Phelan, “Neoliberalism, the Far Right, and the Disparaging of ‘Social Justice Warriors’”, *Communication, Culture & Critique* 12 (2019): 458, 467.

²⁰⁸ Finlayson, “Neoliberalism, the Alt-Right and the Intellectual Dark Web”, 11, 12.

²⁰⁹ Ibid, 463.

²¹⁰ Zack Exley, “Black Pigeon Speaks: The Anatomy of the Worldview of an Alt-Right YouTuber,” *Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy* (2017).

²¹¹ John Hermann, “For the New Far Right, YouTube Has Become the New Talk Radio”, *The New York Times Magazine*, August 3, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/03/magazine/for-the-new-far-right-youtube-has-become-the-new-talk-radio.html>

²¹² Mark Bergan, “YouTube Executives Ignored Warnings, Letting Toxic Videos Run Rampant”, *Bloomberg*, April 2, 2019, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2019-04-02/youtube-executives-ignored-warnings-letting-toxic-videos-run-rampant>

²¹³ Hine *et al.*, “Kek, Cucks, and God Emperor Trump”, 6.

²¹⁴ J.M. Berger, *The Alt-Right Twitter Census: Defining and Describing the Audience for Alt-Right Content on Twitter* (VOX-Pol, 2018), 12, 36, https://www.voxpol.eu/download/vox-pol_publication/AltRightTwitterCensus.pdf

YouTube plays a key role in recruiting people to the alt-right/-lite. A radicalisation pipeline exists on the platform. YouTube’s algorithms have been shown to push users towards far-Right content. These algorithms present users with personalised video recommendations. An “autoplay” feature ensures that a recommended video is always “Up Next”. YouTube’s algorithms aim to maximise the chance of a user staying on the website.²¹⁵ One study conducted in 2016 and 2017 found that simulated users who began with neutral search terms related to news or current affairs were routinely exposed to alt-right/-lite content after watching four “Up Next” videos. YouTube recommended more videos by InfoWars than any other channel.²¹⁶ Another study conducted in 2016 analysed YouTube’s ranking of search results after entering terms related current affairs (e.g. “Syria”, “refugees”, “Trump”).²¹⁷ The authors note the “exceptional levels of visibility” given to alt-right/-lite YouTubers (who often appeared above mainstream news sources).²¹⁸ A study conducted in 2018 looked at lists of “related channels” created by YouTube’s algorithms. Simulated users looking at mainstream news and politics channels were often recommended alt-right/-lite channels, while users looking alt-right/-lite channels were rarely pointed back towards mainstream ones.²¹⁹ These studies demonstrate that YouTube’s algorithms offer up alt-right/-lite videos unsolicited to users who enter neutral search terms or watch moderate content.

Lewis argues that collaborations between YouTubers also radicalise viewers. In 2018, she mapped the interactions between 65 alt-right/-lite YouTube channels, whose operators appeared on one another’s channels as guests or debate partners. She contends that these collaborations make it “remarkably easy for viewers to be exposed to

²¹⁵ Lauren Valentino Bryant, “The YouTube Algorithm and the Alt-Right Filter Bubble”, *Open Information Science* 4 (2020): 85.

²¹⁶ Jack Nicas, “How YouTube Drives People to the Internet’s Darkest Corners”, *The Wall Street Journal*, February 7, 2018, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/how-youtube-drives-viewers-to-the-internets-darkest-corners-1518020478>; Paul Lewis and Erin McCormick, “How an ex-YouTube insider investigated its secret algorithm”, *The Guardian*, February 2, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2018/feb/02/youtube-algorithm-election-clinton-trump-guillaume-chaslot>; Paul Lewis, “Fiction is outperforming reality: how YouTube’s algorithm distorts truth,” *The Guardian*, February 2, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2018/feb/02/how-youtubes-algorithm-distorts-truth>

²¹⁷ Bernhard Rieder, Ariadna Matamoros-Fernandez, and Oscar Coromina, “From ranking algorithms to ‘ranking cultures’: Investigating the modulation of visibility in YouTube search results”, *Convergence* 24 (2018): 54.

²¹⁸ *Ibid*, 64.

²¹⁹ Jonas Kaiser and Adrian Rauchfleisch, “Birds of a Feather Get Recommended Together: Algorithmic Homophily in YouTube’s Channel Recommendations in the United States and Germany”, *Social Media + Society* 6 (2020): 2, 10.

incrementally more extremist content”.²²⁰ Less extreme (alt-lite) YouTubers lead users towards more extreme (alt-right) ones by hosting debates with them and engaging with them on friendly terms. Alt-lite YouTubers who themselves do not collaborate with the alt-right still lead viewers in this direction by collaborating with their peers who do. Lewis hypothesises a situation in which viewers start from more moderate channels and follow a short string of collaborations until they are watching white nationalist material.²²¹

YouTube has assumed a more proactive role in content moderation since 2017.²²² It has hired more staff to remove channels which violate “Community Guidelines” on hate speech and harassment, and has tweaked its algorithms to marginalise “borderline” content which comes close to violating these policies.²²³ YouTube claims that, excluding subscribers who actively seek them out, watch time on “borderline” videos dropped by 70 percent across 2019.²²⁴ YouTube’s algorithms now combat conspiracy theories by temporarily boosting “authoritative” sources (i.e. mainstream news channels) during events such as mass shootings or terrorist attacks.²²⁵ Watch time on “authoritative” videos grew by 60 percent across 2019.²²⁶

Research has nevertheless borne out the idea that a radicalisation pipeline operated on the website in the mid- to late-2010s. Journalists who analysed leaked posts from white supremacist chat servers in 2018 isolated instances in which users tell the story of their own radicalisation. Extremists give credit to YouTube in fifteen of the 75 stories identified. The authors also find that “[f]ascists who become red-pilled through YouTube often start with comparatively less extreme right-wing personalities”.²²⁷ In 2019, Luke

²²⁰ Rebecca Lewis, *Alternative Influence: Broadcasting the Reactionary Right on YouTube* (Data & Society, 2018), 36, https://datasociety.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/DS_Alternative_Influence.pdf

²²¹ Ibid, 13.

²²² The YouTube Team, “The Four Rs of Responsibility, Part 1: Removing harmful content”, *YouTube Official Blog*, September 3, 2019, <https://blog.youtube/inside-youtube/the-four-rs-of-responsibility-remove/>; The YouTube Team, “The Four Rs of Responsibility, Part 2: Raising authoritative content and reducing borderline content and harmful misinformation”, *YouTube Official Blog*, December 3, 2019, <https://blog.youtube/inside-youtube/the-four-rs-of-responsibility-raise-and-reduce/>

²²³ Kevin Roose, “YouTube’s Product Chief on Online Radicalization and Algorithmic Rabbit Holes”, *The New York Times*, March 29, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/29/technology/youtube-online-extremism.html>

²²⁴ Julia Alexander, YouTube claims its crackdown on borderline content is actually working”, *The Verge*, December 3, 2019, <https://www.theverge.com/2019/12/3/20992018/youtube-borderline-content-recommendation-algorithm-news-authoritative-sources>

²²⁵ Alex Hern, “YouTube to crack down on fake news, backing ‘authoritative’ sources”, *The Guardian*, July 10, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2018/jul/09/youtube-fake-news-changes>

²²⁶ Alexander, YouTube claims its crackdown on borderline content is actually working”.

²²⁷ Robert Evans, “From Memes to Infowars: How 75 Fascist Activists Were ‘Red-Pilled’,” *Bellingcat*, October 11, 2018, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/americas/2018/10/11/memes-infowars-75-fascist-activists-red-pilled/>

Munn looked at forum posts and testimonial videos created by former members of the alt-right. He finds that “[i]nstead of the major ‘leap’ into white nationalism, there are hundreds or thousands of micro-nudges over time”.²²⁸ Munn identifies YouTube as an important platform where this occurs and highlights the story of one former member of the alt-right who fell under the thrall of increasingly extreme YouTubers as they collaborated with more moderate figures.²²⁹ Also in 2019, Manoel Horta Ribeiro *et al.* analysed 79 million YouTube comments posted beneath 331,849 videos on 360 alt-right/-lite channels. The authors used people’s commenting histories to show that “users consistently migrate from milder to more extreme content”.²³⁰ Ribeiro *et al.* take these findings to show that “the pipeline effect does exist, and that indeed, users systematically go from milder communities to the Alt-right”.²³¹ As discussed in Chapter Two, three separate studies mention Benjamin as an influential figure in this pipeline.

The dirtbag Left

Prominent proponents

Moving now to left-wing online media and communities, the period since 2016 has seen the emergence of popular Anglophone podcasts, YouTube channels, and forums which champion socialist or social democratic solutions to economic inequality and also attack identity politics. As Phelan explains, members of this cohort criticise the practitioners of identity politics as defenders of neoliberalism who stand “in opposition to an authentic left-wing politics ... rooted in a commitment to class-based, materialist analysis of capitalist oppression”.²³² These content-creators and communities are often called the “dirtbag Left”. They position strains of feminist, anti-racist, and LGBTQ+ rights activism as tools used by the rich to defend the economic status quo.

This cohort is smaller than the alt-right/-lite. Its constituent parts are specific content-creators and their fans, rather than factions. The term “dirtbag Left” was coined by Amber A’Lee Frost, who co-hosts the podcast *Chapo Trap House*.²³³ Launched in

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²²⁹ Luke Munn, “Alt-right pipeline: Individual journeys to extremism online”, *First Monday* 24 (2019).

²³⁰ Manoel Horta Ribeiro *et al.*, “Auditing Radicalisation Pathways on YouTube”, *arXiv* (2019): 1.

²³¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

²³² Phelan, “Neoliberalism, the Far Right, and the Disparaging of ‘Social Justice Warriors’”, 470.

²³³ Jia Tolentino, “What Will Become of the Dirtbag Left?”, *The New Yorker*, November 18, 2016, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/persons-of-interest/what-will-become-of-the-dirtbag-left>

2016, *Chapo Trap House* is one of several American podcasts which appear in almost all media references to the dirtbag Left. *Chapo Trap House* is very successful. As of December 2021, it attracts over AUD \$232,000 per month from over 37,000 donors on Patreon.²³⁴ Its hosts have toured a live show across the United States and the United Kingdom.²³⁵ In 2018, their tie-in book became a *New York Times* best-seller.²³⁶ The podcast involves irreverent, often crude discussion of current affairs from a socialist perspective. The hosts direct obscene insults at public figures. Frost has made a principled defence of such “political vulgarity”. She insists “the norms of civilised discourse” instil reverence towards the rich and powerful, and that this spell can be broken “when crude obscenity is directed at figures of power”.²³⁷ Another host explains that the dirtbag Left encompasses “anyone who isn’t afraid to ... offend the sensibilities of the ‘leftist’ language police”.²³⁸ *Chapo Trap House* attacks the Right, but also often directs scorn at “liberals” – i.e. the Democratic Party and its supporters. Its hosts believe that the mainstream Left in the United States offers hollow expressions of respect and affirmation to women and minorities in an attempt to compensate for and distract from neoliberal policies which exacerbate economic inequality.²³⁹

Chapo Trap House resonates most with young white male underachievers who enjoy video games and Internet culture.²⁴⁰ Its hosts understand that this is the same demographic courted by the alt-right/-lite. One host notes that *Chapo Trap House* “speaks to the same people who ... might otherwise be drawn to someone who cheaply breaks

²³⁴ “Chapo Trap House”, *Patreon*, accessed December 1, 2021, <https://www.patreon.com/chapotraphouse>

²³⁵ Amber A’Lee Frost, Matt Christman, and Virgil Texas, “375 - Live in London: Chapo Calling feat. Rob Delaney”, *Chapo Trap House*, December 12, 2019, <https://www.patreon.com/chapotraphouse/posts>

²³⁶ “Hardcover Nonfiction”, *The New York Times*, September 9, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/books/best-sellers/2018/09/09/hardcover-nonfiction/>

²³⁷ Amber A’Lee Frost, “The Necessity of Political Vulgarity”, *Current Affairs*, 25 August 2016, <https://www.currentaffairs.org/2016/05/the-necessity-of-political-vulgarity>

²³⁸ Jason Rhode, “Chapo Trap House Are the Vulgar, Brilliant Demigods of the New Progressive Left”, *Paste*, July 29, 2016, <https://www.pastemagazine.com/media/chapo-trap-house/chapo-trap-house-are-the-vulgar-brilliant-demigods/>

²³⁹ Felix Biederman, Matt Christman, and Will Menaker, “Episode 1 - THA SAGA BEGINS”, *Chapo Trap House*, March 12, 2016, <https://soundcloud.com/chapo-trap-house/episode-1-31216>

²⁴⁰ Tolentino, “What Will Become of the Dirtbag Left?”; Noreen Malone, “Red Scare Leans Into Nothing: A podcast that offers a critique of feminism, and capitalism, from deep inside the culture they’ve spawned”, *The Cut*, October 25, 2018, <https://www.thecut.com/2018/10/profile-red-scare-podcast.html>; Yohann Koshy, “‘The Voice of the Dirtbag Left’: socialist US comics Chapo Trap House”, *The Guardian*, June 3, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2019/jun/03/chapo-trap-house-podcast-interview-trump-socialist-us-comics>

taboos by doing ‘edgy’ jokes about race and gender”.²⁴¹ He admits of their main demographic that “[s]ome of them turn into Nazis”.²⁴² The hosts use slang coined by the online Right and make knowing references to its esoteric controversies and preoccupations.²⁴³ However, *Chapo Trap House* aims to scratch this cohort’s itch for transgressive material with mockery of “the capitalist class”, rather than marginalised people.²⁴⁴ Its creators believe that the elements of Left should offer the sort of “rebellious comedy” which appeals to this cohort to draw them away from the alt-right/-lite.²⁴⁵

Another American podcast, *Red Scare*, is also often considered “dirtbag Left”. It was founded in 2018 and now attracts over AUD \$79,000 each month from over 13,000 “patrons”.²⁴⁶ One reviewer notes that *Red Scare* is “deliberately offensive” and “unafraid to weaponise vulgarity and humour”.²⁴⁷ The hosts direct much of their scorn at what they see as shallow “liberal feminism”, which directs women to pursue individual success within capitalism.²⁴⁸ They also see themselves as purveyors of a more “exciting” and “fun-loving” approach which matches that of the Right.²⁴⁹ Another podcast, *TrueAnon*, which launched in 2019, also directs vulgar socialist critiques at the rich and powerful.²⁵⁰ It attracts over AUD \$124,000 each month from over 22,000 patrons.²⁵¹ Its hosts criticise the Democratic Party as “hucksters” who use identity politics as a tool to assist the

²⁴¹ Amber A’Lee Frost, Felix Biederman, Matt Christman, Will Menaker and Virgil Texas, “Episode 117 - Kill All Nermals feat. Angela Nagle”, *Chapo Trap House*, April 14, 2017, <https://soundcloud.com/asdlfjhasdlf-jahsdlfjhadf/episode-117-kill-all-nermals-feat-angela-nagle-61417>; Amber A’Lee Frost appearing in Angela Nagle, *Trumpland: Kill All Normies*, documentary film, directed by Leighton Woodhouse, 2017, <https://vimeo.com/263452186>

²⁴² Tolentino, “What Will Become of the Dirtbag Left?”.

²⁴³ Felix Biederman, Matt Christman, and Will Menaker, “Episode 12 Bonus - The French Vasectomy”, *Chapo Trap House*, May 25, 2016, <https://www.patreon.com/chapotraphouse/posts>; Felix Biederman, Matt Christman, and Will Menaker, “Episode 7- The Prince and the Egg: An Anil Dash Adventure”, *Chapo Trap House*, April 25, 2016, <https://soundcloud.com/chapo-trap-house/episode-7-the-prince-and-the-egg-an-anil-dash-adventure-42516>

²⁴⁴ Matt Christman, “Chapo Trap House, Between Hope and Nihilism”, interview by Micah Uetricht, *Jacobin*, September 7, 2018, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2018/09/chapo-trap-house-guide-to-revolution>

²⁴⁵ Frost, Biederman, Christman, Menaker and Texas, “Episode 117 - Kill All Nermals feat. Angela Nagle”; Frost appearing in Nagle, *Trumpland*.

²⁴⁶ “Red Scare”, *Patreon*, accessed December 1, 2021, <https://www.patreon.com/RedScare>

²⁴⁷ Sylvie McNamara, “Red Scare’s Real Offense Is Nihilism”, *Podcast Review*, October 29, 2018, <https://podcastreview.org/review/red-scare/>

²⁴⁸ Malone, “Red Scare Leans Into Nothing”; Leaf Arbuthnot, “Meet the ‘ladies’ of Red Scare, the most gleefully offensive podcast on the internet”, *The Telegraph*, February 7, 2020, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/radio/podcasts/meet-ladies-red-scare-gleefully-offensive-podcast-internet/>

²⁴⁹ Anna Khachiyani and Dasha Nekrasova, “Woke Capitalism w/ Angela Nagle”, *Red Scare*, June 13, 2019, <https://redscarepodcast.libsyn.com/woke-capitalism-w-angela-nagle>

²⁵⁰ Caleb Beckwith, “Epstein Brain is for the People”, *San Francisco Museum of Modern Art*, March 3, 2020, <https://openspace.sfmoma.org/2020/03/epstein-brain-is-for-the-people/>

²⁵¹ “TrueAnon Podcast”, *Patreon*, accessed December 1, 2021, <https://www.patreon.com/TrueAnonPod>

passage of economic policies which have “decimated the working class”.²⁵² They want to reclaim the idea of joyful “transgression” from the alt-right/-lite.²⁵³ The comedy podcast *Cum Town* (despite its relative lack of political content) is also often included in summaries of the dirtbag Left.²⁵⁴ The show attracts over AUD \$132,000 each month from over 21,000 patrons. Its hosts transgresses good taste and political correctness for laughs.²⁵⁵ They are personal friends of the hosts of *Red Scare* and *Chapo Trap House* and have appeared as guests on each show.²⁵⁶

While political content on the platform is exceptional for its aforementioned lean to the far Right, YouTube also hosts dirtbag Left voices. The Americans Ian Kochinski (a.k.a. “Vaush”) and Alexander Haley (“Xanderhal”) use politically incorrect rhetoric to champion socialism, and call upon their former interest in the alt-right/-lite to use its style while promoting left-wing ideas.²⁵⁷ However, the Anglophone Left’s most celebrated YouTube personalities are more likely to defend than reproach so-called “political correctness” and “identity politics”.²⁵⁸ In a nod to Peter Kropotkin’s 1892 anarchist classic *The Conquest of Bread*, this handful of Americans and Brits is known collectively

²⁵² Sam Jaffe Goldstein, “Jeffrey Epstein Is a Feature of Our System: A Conversation with Liz Franczak and Brace Belden, Hosts of ‘Trueanon’”, *The Los Angeles Review of Books*, January 30, 2020, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/jeffrey-epstein-is-a-feature-of-our-system-a-conversation-with-liz-franczak-and-brace-belden-hosts-of-trueanon/>; TrueAnon Pod, Twitter post, March 8, 2020, 5:53AM, <https://twitter.com/TrueAnonPod/status/1236371833445736448>

²⁵³ Goldstein, “Jeffrey Epstein Is a Feature of Our System”.

²⁵⁴ Anna North and Jeff Stein, “Listen to what socialist women are saying about misogyny on the left”, *Vox*, October 24, 2017, <https://www.vox.com/identities/2017/10/24/16503462/dsa-women-cumtown-chapo>; Nellie Bowles, “Socialists Bring Tea Party Anger To ‘Dirtbag Left’”, *The New York Times*, March 1, 2020, 1, 10; “Cum Town”, *Patreon*, accessed June 29, 2021, <https://www.patreon.com/cumtown>

²⁵⁵ Conor Fay, “Agent Provocateur: Nick Mullen versus the maddening moan of Twitter’s Leftist comrades”, *The Circular*, March 23, 2017, <http://thecircular.org/agent-provocateur-nick-mullen-versus-maddening-moan-twitters-leftist-comrades/>

²⁵⁶ Amber A’Lee Frost, Felix Biederman, Matt Christman, and Will Menaker, “Episode 80 - Kolob Trap House feat. Adam Friedland”, *Chapo Trap House*, February 9, 2017, <https://www.patreon.com/posts>; Anna Khachiyani and Dasha Nekrasova, “FinGoth w/ Nick Mullen”, *Red Scare*, December 8, 2018, <https://www.patreon.com/posts>

²⁵⁷ Xanderhal, “Is The dirtbag left A Force For Good? - Debating Zoomer Nation”, *YouTube*, 1:32:27, March 28, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cpBx_r0B15I; Xanderhal, “How I Fell Down The Alt Right Pipeline And Escaped”, *YouTube*, 47:39, December 24, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bWLyW3xEIQw>; Vaush, “My Problems With The Left Part 1: Gatekeeping”, *YouTube*, 38:48, October 3, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JXLUHT6dxFw>

²⁵⁸ Shaan Amin, “Can the Left Win YouTube?”, *The New Republic*, July 2, 2019, <https://newrepublic.com/article/154399/can-left-win-youtube>

as “BreadTube”.²⁵⁹ Each has between 800,000 and 1.3 million “subscribers”.²⁶⁰ This cohort tends to promote left-wing ideas in thoughtful videos which observe “the basic laws of decency”.²⁶¹ Dmitry Kuznetsov and Milan Ismangil celebrate BreadTube videos as “digital praxis” which assists in “the transformation of the inert mass of the working class into a politically engaged united force”.²⁶²

However, in Australia, the nation’s most prominent left-wing YouTuber does take a “dirtbag” approach. Jordan Shanks – who runs the channel “friendlyjordies” – has over 600,000 subscribers on his main YouTube channel. His videos have attracted more views than any more fêted member of BreadTube.²⁶³ Given the term’s American origins, no commentators have included Shanks in profiles of the dirtbag Left. However, I argue that he embraces this sensibility. Shanks champions trade unions and social democratic political parties. He has conducted friendly interviews with a number of Labor Party politicians. He also attacks forms of feminist, anti-racist, and LGBTQ+ rights activism as tools of the rich and powerful. He embraces politically incorrect comedy. His criticism of public figures is often vulgar and aggressive. He appeals to socially dislocated men and boys. Shanks makes knowing references to the alt-right/-lite’s memes and figureheads. As I have chosen Shanks for detailed analysis in this thesis, I will discuss his output and role in Australian political life more fully in coming chapters.

These podcasts and YouTube channels all have unofficial fan forums on Reddit, where listeners discuss current events and emulate the vituperative tone of this media.²⁶⁴ *The New York Times* claims that rhetoric on the *Chapo Trap House* forum is “violent and ugly”.²⁶⁵ This forum, which boasted over 150,000 users, was banned in 2020 as part of a

²⁵⁹ Kevin Roose, “The Making of a YouTube Radical”, *The New York Times*, June 8, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/06/08/technology/youtube-radical.html>; Alexander Mitchell Lee, “Meet BreadTube, the YouTube activists trying to beat the far-right at their own game”, *The Conversation*, March 9, 2021, <https://theconversation.com/meet-breadtube-the-youtube-activists-trying-to-beat-the-far-right-at-their-own-game-156125>

²⁶⁰ “Philosophy Tube”, *YouTube*, accessed June 29, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/user/thephilosophytube>; “ContraPoints”, *YouTube*, accessed June 29, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/user/ContraPoints>; “hbombguy”, *YouTube*, accessed June 29, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/user/hbombguy>

²⁶¹ Amin, “Can the Left Win YouTube?”.

²⁶² Dmitry Kuznetsov and Milan Ismangil, “YouTube as Praxis? On BreadTube and the Digital Propagation of Socialist Thought”, *tripleC* 18 (2020): 205.

²⁶³ “About”, *YouTube*, accessed December 1, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/user/friendlyjordies/about>

²⁶⁴ “Red Scare”, *Reddit*, accessed June 29, 2021, <https://www.reddit.com/r/redscarepod/>; “TrueAnon”, *Reddit*, accessed June 29, 2021, <https://www.reddit.com/r/TrueAnon/>; “friendlyjordies”, *Reddit*, accessed September 3, 2021, <https://www.reddit.com/r/friendlyjordies/>

²⁶⁵ Bowles, “Socialists Bring Tea Party Anger To ‘Dirtbag Left’”.

crackdown on “hate speech”.²⁶⁶ Administrators took issue with posts which advocated political violence against the Right.²⁶⁷ Users would defend these comments as ironic. Some postured as “ironic Maoists” and “ironic Stalinists” and praised the political violence of these regimes.²⁶⁸ This forum for fans of *Cum Town* (which had 41,000 users) was also removed in this crackdown.²⁶⁹ Also on Reddit, the forum r/stupidpol – i.e. “stupid identity politics” – is still active and has 75,000 users as of December 2021. It bills itself as “focused on critiquing identity politics from a Marxist perspective”.²⁷⁰ Its users laugh at identity politics as the purview of neoliberals.²⁷¹

Laudable satire or an “alt-left”

The dirtbag Left is often characterised in the press as a mirror-image of the alt-right/-lite. Positive reports claim that the dirtbag Left’s version of politically incorrect invective “punches up” at rich and powerful people who use identity politics for their own ends. Negative reports maintain that the dirtbag Left’s efforts to harness the same transgressive spirit as the online Right have caused its members to traffic in the same racist, sexist, homo- and transphobic ideas as the alt-right/-lite itself.

In profiles of these content-creators and communities, some journalists have heralded their ability to attract newcomers to the Left with boisterous attacks on hollow, unlikeable

²⁶⁶ Casey Newton, “Reddit bans r/The_Donald and r/ChapoTrapHouse as part of a major expansion of its rules”, *The Verge*, June 29, 2020, <https://www.theverge.com/2020/6/29/21304947/reddit-ban-subreddits-the-donald-chapo-trap-house-new-content-policy-rules>; “r/ChapoTrapHouse stats”, *Subreddit Stats*, accessed June 29, 2020, <https://subredditstats.com/r/chapotraphouse>

²⁶⁷ Ignacio Martinez, “Chapo Trap House subreddit quarantined for allegedly encouraging violence”, *The Daily Dot*, August 7, 2019, <https://www.dailydot.com/debug/chapo-trap-house-subreddit-quarantine/>; “What’s going on with the Reddit admins banning, or about to, ban /r/ChapoTrapHouse?”, *Reddit*, accessed June 29, 2021, https://www.reddit.com/r/OutOfTheLoop/comments/bp7w6p/whats_going_on_with_the_reddit_admins_banning_or/

²⁶⁸ Bowles, “Socialists Bring Tea Party Anger To ‘Dirtbag Left’”.

²⁶⁹ Newton, “Reddit bans r/The_Donald and r/ChapoTrapHouse as part of a major expansion of its rules”.

²⁷⁰ “StupIDPol”, *Reddit*, accessed June December 1, 2021, <https://www.reddit.com/r/stupidpol/>

²⁷¹ “What is the official podcast for this sub?”, *Reddit*, accessed May 6, 2020, https://www.reddit.com/r/stupidpol/comments/c9usfu/what_is_the_official_podcast_for_this_sub/

forms of identity politics.²⁷² The Canadian magazine *Maclean's* praises *Chapo Trap House* for using “many of the tactics of the online alt-right – humour, memes, Twitter trolling and open animosity – while remaining committed to progressive leftist ideology”. The show’s crass attacks on “limp liberal identity politics” are “mobilising people in a way they want to be mobilised”.²⁷³ *Harper's Magazine* praises *Chapo Trap House* for packaging left-wing critiques in a manner that resonates with teenage boys who are otherwise “a prime target for alt-right junk”.²⁷⁴ *New York* writes that *Red Scare* can win over young people who currently lean towards the Right “not because they want to be rich, but because they want to be mean”.²⁷⁵

More ambivalent reports on the dirtbag Left express reservations about its disdain for identity politics. The *New Yorker* notes that “strains of *Chapo Trap House* invective can be hard to take”; the anger and vulgarity of the white male hosts can “sometimes translate as chauvinism”.²⁷⁶ *Dissent* describes the podcast as a fun introduction to anti-capitalism for the uninitiated, but notes that the “blind spots” of the hosts produce offensive moments which could alienate listeners from marginalised communities.²⁷⁷ The *Guardian* characterises the dirtbag Left as a funny attempt to provide a missing socialist presence in the American media. However, dirtbag Left voices tend to view class struggle as a panacea for social problems and overlook the “racist, patriarchal elements of ... labour history”.²⁷⁸ *Podcast Review* recognises *Red Scare* as more exciting than prevailing

²⁷² Rhode, “Chapo Trap House are the Vulgar, Brilliant Demigods of the New Progressive Left”; Ryan Smith, “Chapo Trap House and the burden of the ‘dirtbag left’”, *The Chicago Reader*, August 23, 2017, <https://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/chapo-trap-house-interview-felix-biederman-dirtbag-left-podcast/Content?oid=29354373>; Matthew Sheffield, “The ‘Dirtbag Left’ Can Prevent the Liberal Elite Bubble That Brought Us Donald Trump”, *Salon*, 21 July, 2017, <https://www.salon.com/2017/07/21/the-dirtbag-left-can-prevent-the-liberal-elite-bubble-that-brought-us-donald-trump/>; Adam Nizam, “We Need the Ironic Left—Aka “The Dirtbag Left”—Now More Than Ever”, *Paste*, December 8, 2016, <https://www.pastemagazine.com/politics/chapo-trap-house/we-need-the-ironic-leftaka-the-dirtbag-leftnow-mor/>; James Marriot, “Red Scare, the politically incorrect podcast that’s wooing liberal millennials”, *The Times*, December 11, 2019, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/red-scare-the-politically-incorrect-podcast-thats-wooing-liberal-millennials-lmtqzw25r>; Arbuthnot, “Meet the ‘ladies’ of Red Scare, the most gleefully offensive podcast on the internet”.

²⁷³ John Semley, “The Rise of the Internet’s dirtbag left”, *Maclean's*, 5 July 2017, <https://www.macleans.ca/society/the-rise-of-the-internets-dirtbag-left/>

²⁷⁴ Donald Hughes, “... of what use was the rule?”, *Harper's Magazine*, August 23, 2018, <https://harpers.org/2018/08/chapo-trap-house-guide-to-revolution-book-review/>

²⁷⁵ Malone, “Red Scare Leans Into Nothing”.

²⁷⁶ Tolentino, “What Will Become of the Dirtbag Left?”.

²⁷⁷ Sarah Jones, “The Dirtbag Manifesto”, *Dissent*, October 1, 2018, <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/chapo-trap-house-book-dirtbag-manifesto-satire-liberalism-socialism>

²⁷⁸ Koshy, “‘The Voice of the Dirtbag Left’: socialist US comics Chapo Trap House”.

left-wing discourse, but judges that episodes sometimes “collapse into meaningless offence”.²⁷⁹

In negative reports, the dirtbag Left is judged disdainful of issues which affect women and minorities and often bigoted. Vox alleges that the hosts of *Chapo Trap House* and *Cum Town* indulge in casual racism and sexism and marginalise issues of race and gender.²⁸⁰ The *Daily Beast* characterises the dirtbag Left as “misogynist pigs” who mock feminism as “a bourgeois concern standing in the way of revolution”.²⁸¹ The *New York Times* writes that the dirtbag Left has a “singular focus” on material issues which “runs roughshod” over concerns about racial or gender equality.²⁸² *Salon* accuses this cohort of embracing socialism “as a kind of fashion statement that masks various unsavory attitudes”.²⁸³ Such critics frequently label the dirtbag Left “brocialists” – this portmanteau of “bro” and “socialist” invokes the image of a chauvinistic straight white man who dismisses identity issues as distinct from and less important than economic ones.²⁸⁴

The harshest critics of the dirtbag Left equate it with the alt-right/-lite. Cody Roche has labelled it the “alt-left”. The attempts of its figureheads to “harness a similar zeitgeist to the alt right for their own ends” has backfired, and members have “become the very thing they claim to hate”.²⁸⁵ Dirtbag Left content-creators and communities are now “crypto-fascists”.²⁸⁶ *Jezebel* likens the dirtbag Left to Anglin (the neo-Nazi) at *The Daily Stormer*, because each uses “performative irony” as “a vehicle for smuggling in some truly hateful ideas”.²⁸⁷

Journalists therefore offer very different appraisals of the dirtbag Left. Some praise it for critiquing the abuse of identity politics by rich and powerful people and attracting

²⁷⁹ McNamara, “Red Scare’s Real Offense Is Nihilism”.

²⁸⁰ North and Stein, “Listen to what socialist women are saying about misogyny on the left”.

²⁸¹ James Kirchick, “The Left-Wing Heroes Who Treat Women Like Garbage”, *The Daily Beast*, October 22, 2017, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/the-liberal-left-heroes-who-treat-women-like-garbage>

²⁸² Bowles, “Socialists Bring Tea Party Anger To ‘Dirtbag Left’”.

²⁸³ Amanda Marcotte, “Trump trolls Bernie supporters, urging them to turn against Joe Biden”, *Salon*, April 9, 2020, <https://www.salon.com/2020/04/09/trump-trolls-bernie-supporters-urging-them-to-turn-against-joe-biden/>

²⁸⁴ Faith Agostinone-Wilson, *Enough Already! A Socialist Feminist Response to the Re-emergence of Right Wing Populism and Fascism in Media* (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 25.

²⁸⁵ Cody Roche, “Syria: the alt-left and other lesser known extremisms”, *Medium*, May 14, 2018, https://medium.com/@badly_xerxed/syria-the-alt-left-and-other-lesser-known-extremisms-943ddfa4229e

²⁸⁶ Ibid.

²⁸⁷ Anna Merlan, “What is Red Scare and Am I Exempt From Caring About It? A Brief Guide to the Podcast World’s Laziest Provocateurs”, *Jezebel*, July 11, 2019, <https://jezebel.com/what-is-red-scare-and-am-i-exempt-from-caring-about-it-183622153>

would-be members of the alt-right/-lite to social democracy or socialism. Others characterise it as bigoted and dismissive of issues facing women and minorities. At worst, critics consider the dirtbag Left barely distinguishable from the online Right. Diverse assessments of Shanks in the Australian media are a microcosm of this wider disagreement, as discussed in Chapter Two.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I provided contextual information on the alt-right/-lite and dirtbag Left necessary for understanding my analysis of Benjamin and Shanks. I described the emergence of the alt-right/-lite into the international spotlight in support of Trump in 2016, the faction of white nationalists who first coined the term “alt-right”, their decision to embrace the culture of the early Internet and 4chan to spread racist ideology through faux-ironic memes and trolling, and the broader uptake of the label “alt-right” and its subsequent abandonment after Charlottesville. I introduced the various flavours of anti-feminism found in the manosphere, far-Right conspiracy theorists and their fear of cultural Marxism, the academics and commentators of the Intellectual Dark Web who attribute social inequalities to the inherent nature of women and minorities, and the hostile reaction of Gamergaters to the appearance of new voices in the male-dominated world of video games. I described the banding-together of these groups in opposition to a shared conception of anti-racist, feminist, and LGBTQ+ rights activists as social justice warriors. I then outlined the importance of YouTube to the alt-right/-lite and the existence of a radicalisation pipeline which pulls some viewers from less extreme content towards white nationalism. I described the sensibilities of the dirtbag Left and their adoption by a number of prominent content-creators and communities. This cohort directs its own “politically incorrect” denunciations of identity politics at the demographic courted by the alt-right/-lite, but professes only to attack members of the economic elite who appropriate anti-racism, feminism, and LGBTQ+ rights activism in service of the neoliberal status quo. I finally outlined contradictory assessments of this phenomenon in the popular press. Some observers praise the dirtbag Left’s ability to craft socialist or social democratic content which seems to appeal to young men otherwise courted by reactionary content-creators. Others allege that the dirtbag Left marginalises issues which

affect women and minorities, and spouts prejudiced views similar to the alt-right/-lite's own.

Chapter Two

Literature, theory, and methods

Digital political communication and participation are major topics within political science. Noting the “profound changes to citizen engagement with politics and ... the practices of mobilisation and organisation” wrought by the Internet and social media, Ariadne Vromen provides a detailed discussion of developments within this literature over two decades.¹ Marshalling research (from Western democratic contexts) into diverse forms of online political engagement – by citizens, activist organisations, and political campaigns – Vromen maintains that digital natives are no less politically engaged than earlier generations.² “Digital citizenship” is characterised by “individualisation” (engagement with politics on a selective, issue-to-issue basis, rather than through broader ideological commitments or membership in formal organisations) and by the normalisation of protest in place of more “traditional” forms of engagement.³ However, following the rise of reactionary populist movements in (among other places) the United States, United Kingdom, India, Poland, and Brazil, Michael Trice and John Jones explain that such optimistic views about “the democratising potential of social media” have dissipated since 2016.⁴ Online platforms have demonstrated their “efficiency in connecting isolated radicals to larger communities” and increasing the visibility and appeal of populism and “anti-democratic” extremism.⁵ Howard Tumber and Silvio Waisbord note that much research now focuses on ways in which social media is “conducive to the kind of polarised, anti-rational, post-fact, post-truth communication championed by populism”.⁶ As Sarah Oates observes, Trump’s election, in particular, “caused a significant switch in the debate” from “cyberoptimism” to “cyberpessimism”.⁷

¹ Ariadne Vromen, *Digital Citizenship and Political Engagement: The Challenge from Online Campaigning and Advocacy Organisations* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 3.

² Ibid, 11.

³ Ibid, 9-49.

⁴ Michael Trice and John Jones, “The Challenge of Networked Democracy”, in *Platforms, Protests, and the Challenge of Networked Democracy*, ed. John Jones and Michael Trice (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 1, 6-8.

⁵ Ibid, 5.

⁶ Howard Tumber and Silvio Waisbord, “Introduction”, in *The Routledge Companion to Media Disinformation and Populism*, ed. Howard Tumber and Silvio Waisbord (London: Routledge, 2021), 1.

⁷ Sarah Oates, “Rewired Propaganda: Propaganda, misinformation, and populism in the digital age”, in *The Routledge Companion to Media Disinformation and Populism*, ed. Howard Tumber and Silvio Waisbord (London: Routledge, 2021), 77.

Given these developments, it is noteworthy that recent research into the reactionary, populist, Trump-obsessed factions of the alt-right and -lite (which informed the last chapter) has predominantly taken place in disciplines other than political science. For instance, Braithwaite looks at Gamergate discourse as a feminist video games researcher.⁸ Ging situates her analysis of manosphere websites within men's studies.⁹ Phillips positions her interviews and participant-observation with American trolls as ethnography.¹⁰ Bernhard Rieder *et al.* situate their computational analysis of YouTube's algorithms within "Web search studies".¹¹ Mirrlees dissects the alt-right/-lite's belief in cultural Marxism as one of many media scholars in the field.¹² However, as Finlayson notes, illuminating these phenomena should be a "pressing concern" for political scientists.¹³ These content-creators and communities are changing what is "politically thinkable".¹⁴ Social media has facilitated a boom in "ideological entrepreneurs" – former rank-and-file Internet users turned professional political commentators.¹⁵ Unbeholden to "traditional gatekeepers of ideological purity" (e.g. political parties or publishers) who set clear borders around acceptable ideas or policy proposals, such figures break the "monopoly on what counts as right-thinking".¹⁶ As evidenced when Trump retweets alt-right/-lite content, mainstream newspapers denounce cultural Marxism, or Australian senators host alt-right/-lite personalities in parliament, this cohort not only spruiks populism to wide audiences, but now helps provide its ideological content.¹⁷ Finlayson explains that analysis of ideological entrepreneurs – in particular the alt-right/-lite's – is "a key challenge" for political science.¹⁸ These personalities are symptoms of – and contributors to – the rise of reactionary populism, on which the discipline is now focused. Moreover, as Declan McDowell-Naylor and Stephen Cushion each discuss, alternative online media also exercises an influence on the Left; left-wing populist ideological entrepreneurs contributed to the youth-driven surge in support for the Labour Party at the

⁸ Braithwaite, "It's About Ethics in Games Journalism?", 3.

⁹ Ging, "Alphas, Betas, and Incels", 638, 644.

¹⁰ Phillips, *This is why we can't have nice things*, 7, 10, 37.

¹¹ Rieder, Matamoros-Fernández, and Coromina, "From ranking algorithms to 'ranking cultures'", 51, 54.

¹² Mirrlees, "The Alt-right's Discourse on 'Cultural Marxism'", 49.

¹³ Alan Finlayson, "YouTube and Political Ideologies: Technology, Populism and Rhetorical Form", *Political Studies* 70 (2022): 63.

¹⁴ Alan Finlayson, "Rethinking Political Communication", *The Political Quarterly* 90 (2018): 88.

¹⁵ Finlayson, "YouTube and Political Ideologies", 63.

¹⁶ Finlayson, "Rethinking Political Communication", 84; Finlayson, "Neoliberalism, the Alt-Right and the Intellectual Dark Web", 7.

¹⁷ Tumber and Waisbord, "Media, disinformation, and populism", 19.

¹⁸ Alan Finlayson, "YouTube and Political Ideologies", 62.

2017 United Kingdom election.¹⁹ McDowell-Naylor states that the popularity of such content could influence Labour policy “from the outside inwards”.²⁰ Such media (as discussed below) remains understudied not only by political scientists, but researchers of all stripes.

As well as contributing to political science, I take influence from the interdisciplinary tradition of Critical Discourse Analysis. CDA scholars think of research as an effort to challenge contemporary social injustices by shedding light on their nature and sources. Norman Fairclough explains that CDA research is concerned with “social wrongs” – contemporary social realities which “reduce human flourishing or ... increase human suffering”.²¹ CDA research looks at the role played by language in the exercise of power by dominant social groups (or individuals acting as group members).²² CDA also involves “positive” critique of the role played by language in challenging injustices.²³ Fairclough advises CDA scholars to avoid postulating hypothetical solutions to social problems, and instead focus on alternatives which “actually exist, if often in a marginalised way”.²⁴ As Tuen van Dijk explains, these priorities make CDA “a multidisciplinary and issue-oriented approach”.²⁵ CDA takes as its starting point “pressing social issues which it hopes to better understand” – it “does not primarily aim to contribute to a specific discipline”.²⁶ Fairclough agrees that CDA is interdisciplinary. Authors “need to decide which relevant bodies of social science and theory to engage with”; they situate their work within “a wider analysis of the object of research”.²⁷

Given the racism, sexism, homo- and transphobia in the movement, and the hate crimes committed by some of its members, I take the alt-right/-lite’s existence as a social problem. Better understanding the nature of the alt-right/-lite’s hostility towards feminist,

¹⁹ Declan McDowell Naylor, “#GE2017: Digital Media and the Campaigns”, in *Political Communication in Britain: Campaigning, Media and Polling in the 2017 General Election*, ed. Dominic Wring, Roger Mortimore, and Simon Atkinson (London: Palgrave Macmillan), 187-205; Stephen Cushion, “UK Alternative Left Media and Their Criticism of Mainstream News: Analysing the Canary and Evolve Politics”, *Journalism Practice* 15 (2021): 1-20.

²⁰ Declan McDowell Naylor, “#GE2017: Digital Media and the Campaigns”, 194.

²¹ Norman Fairclough, “Critical discourse analysis”, in *The Routledge Handbook of Discourse Analysis*, ed. James Paul Gee and Michael Handford (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2013), 10.

²² Tuen A. Van Dijk, “Principles of critical discourse analysis”, *Discourse & Society* 4 (1993): 254.

²³ *Ibid.*, 249.

²⁴ Norman Fairclough, “Genres in Political Discourse”, in *Encyclopedia of Language & Linguistics*, ed. E.K. Brown and Anne Anderson (London: Elsevier, 2006), 36-37.

²⁵ Van Dijk, “Principles of critical discourse analysis”, 279.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 252.

²⁷ Fairclough, “Critical discourse analysis”, 14.

anti-racist, and LGBTQ+ rights activism can help to counter it. Moreover, some observers believe that the dirtbag Left's approach to politics can divert or reclaim people from interest in the alt-right/-lite. Dirtbag Left discourse is an important object of research for its own sake, thanks to its reach and potential influence. CDA gives me another reason for analysing the phenomenon – it is sometimes considered a real, if still marginal, solution to the social problems presented by the alt-right/-lite. In line with emphases within CDA, I aim to address deficits in our wider knowledge of these issues. The literature to which I primarily aim to contribute is therefore the broader literature concerned with these phenomena, across the social sciences.

In this chapter, I first identify important gaps in this wider literature. A significant amount of academic work accepts the alt right/ lite's case against social movement activism at face value. However, there is a lack of research which subjects these complaints to critical analysis. In the relatively small literature concerned with the far Right on YouTube, there is a lack of research into figures at the “moderate” end of the platform's radicalisation pipeline. Dirtbag Left media is understudied, despite its reach and indications from scholars in several fields that such studies would benefit their research. Next, I detail key concepts and theories which I draw from in this thesis. While I engage with an eclectic mix of theoretical works to make sense of different aspects of the discourse under investigation, I engage throughout with intra-Left debates about the value of identity politics. Concepts from each side of this debate help me to draw out the substance of complaints about social justice warriors in alt right/ lite and dirtbag Left discourse, and to evaluate their merit. My application of these concepts to case studies makes a contribution to these theoretical debates. I then detail the methods used in this thesis. Taking insights from a number of analytical traditions, I examine the concept of “discourse”, and detail my approach to case study research and purposive sampling.

Gaps in the existing literature

Researchers vs. “social justice warriors”

In the literature on the alt-right/-lite, there is a lack of research which both draws out the detail of the alt-right/-lite's case against identity politics and subjects these complaints to critical analysis. The need for such research is especially pressing given the preponderance of scholarly work which accepts a slew of the alt-right/-lite's claims about

identity politics without critical analysis. Many researchers accept that the alt-right/-lite sprung up in response to flaws in feminist, anti-racist, and LGBTQ+ rights activism.

The most influential version of this thesis was advanced by Nagle in her 2017 taxonomy of the alt-right/-lite, *Kill All Normies*. Nagle does not deny that the alt-right/-lite is bigoted, but endorses the idea that people join the movement in opposition to the real misconduct of social movement activists, particularly the misconduct of feminist, anti-racist, and LGBTQ+ activists online and at universities in the late 2000s and early 2010s. She singles out the blogging website Tumblr as having incubated a “new identity politics”.²⁸ Adherents to this sensibility exaggerate the “emotional injuries” dished out to women and minorities by insensitive cultural products.²⁹ They have coined new genders, into the hundreds.³⁰ They fetishise and self-diagnose physical and mental illnesses (especially post-traumatic stress disorder).³¹ Straight white men practice “self-flagellation” and apologise for their shameful privilege.³² Credibility in the subculture is tied to identity rather than good argumentation. For instance, being a disabled black lesbian makes someone highly credible.³³ Adherents to this sensibility embrace “call-out culture” (or “cancel culture”) and rail against people, whether public figures or ordinary social media users, who have said something that could be construed as sexist, racist, ableist, homo- or transphobic.³⁴ They use “anti-male, anti-straight, anti-white, anti-cis rhetoric” in these attacks.³⁵

Nagle maintains that, because the generation of activists associate with the New Left was so influential, a tolerant moral order prevails in Western societies today. The successors to 1960s feminist, anti-racist, and LGBTQ+ rights activists control most cultural production.³⁶ Mainstream values stipulate tolerance of difference. However, practitioners of identity politics do not want merely to subscribe to mainstream values. In order to appear unusually virtuous, they must “raise the bar” and become “ultrasensitive”.³⁷ This means imagining that “kink shaming” or “cultural appropriation” are serious harms and

²⁸ Nagle, *Kill All Normies*, 54.

²⁹ Ibid, 52.

³⁰ Ibid, 52-53.

³¹ Ibid, 54, 57.

³² Ibid, 55.

³³ Nagle, *Trumpland*.

³⁴ Nagle, *Kill All Normies*, 55.

³⁵ Ibid, 51.

³⁶ Ibid, 28.

³⁷ Nagle, *Trumpland*.

declaring that “even the most mundane acts” are “problematic”.³⁸ While this sensibility was always “relatively niche”, Nagle attributes to it “a huge and unexpected level of influence”.³⁹ It was supposedly adopted by youth-oriented media websites, such as *BuzzFeed*. Its touchstones became part of student activist culture, which has become “anti-free speech” in its efforts to ensure that students do not encounter “microaggressions” or “triggering” material.⁴⁰

Nagle argues that this behaviour is symptomatic of a wider tendency on the British and American centre Left to focus on cultural issues and ignore economic inequality. She contends that the mainstream Anglo-American Left has embraced neoliberalism ever since Bill Clinton and Tony Blair made their respective peace with “Reaganomics” and “Thatcherism” in the 1990s.⁴¹ She contends that the mainstream Left obsesses over identity politics and cultural gestures in order to retain its progressive credentials, despite its “economic sins”.⁴² Feminist, anti-racist, and LGBTQ+ rights activists today are the “absurd apotheosis” of this shift in priorities.⁴³

To Nagle, the alt-right/-lite exists because identity politics “undoubtedly drove many young people to the right”.⁴⁴ Activists with “absurd priorities” triggered a backlash of “irreverent mockery”.⁴⁵ Her argument therefore accepts that the alt-right/-lite’s antipathy towards feminist, anti-racist, and LGBTQ+ rights activism reflects real problems within these movements. She presents an updated version of the argument advanced in 2005 by Brian C. Anderson’s *South Park Conservatives*. Sanctimonious and doctrinaire “liberals” use their monolithic power over cultural institutions to dictate terms to the rest of society, but the development of new media outside of this elite’s control (then cable television, now the Internet) has facilitated youthful and anarchic rebellions against political correctness.⁴⁶

Nagle adopts a (sometimes polemical) narrative style and does not articulate her methods or rally sufficient evidence to prove her thesis. However, *Kill All Normies* arrived when

³⁸ Nagle, *Kill All Normies*, 10, 30.

³⁹ Ibid, 54.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 34, 35.

⁴¹ Ibid, 41-52.

⁴² Ibid, 44.

⁴³ Ibid, 52.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 82.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 7, 8, 10, 82.

⁴⁶ Brian C. Anderson, *South Park Conservatives: The Revolt Against Liberal Media Bias* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery, 2005).

observers were scrambling to understand the alt-right/-lite after it came to prominence during the 2016 United States election. Because Nagle provides esoteric detail about the phenomena with easy familiarity, *Kill All Normies* became a prominent resource for people writing about these issues. Articles in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Economist*, and many other publications have disseminated its argument.⁴⁷ It is a ubiquitous citation for scholars interested in the alt-right/-lite. The vast majority of scholarly references to *Kill All Normies* simply excise relevant factual information from the surrounding argument. Phelan is unusual for pausing to note that Nagle's critics might accuse her of "legitimation of far-right talking points".⁴⁸

Other researchers also argue that problematic forms of identity politics summoned the alt-right/-lite into existence. Phillip Gray describes the alt-right as the "coming home to roost" of progressive identity politics.⁴⁹ He attributes its rise to "those labelled 'social justice warriors' by their detractors". Gray similarly complains that practitioners of identity politics unfairly discredit arguments from people who do not possess marginalised identities, believing that "experience[s] of oppression" make people credible and authoritative.⁵⁰ Meanwhile, students obstruct conservative speakers at universities, Trump supporters are attacked at rallies, and language which positions whiteness as shameful and masculinity as "toxic" has gone mainstream. Activists indulge in "[s]tereotyping and hateful rejection" of straight white men. Race riots and Black Lives Matter (BLM) have raised the level of "racial agitation" in the United States. The prominence of "militant" identity politics makes it easy for the alt-right to argue that political correctness is handed down from "centres of power in government and the media".⁵¹ Activists who call everything "racist" make it easy for ordinary conservatives to entertain alt-right ideas because they will be called "racist" either way.⁵² Gray does not substantiate his case with sufficient evidence. His only example of activists turning

⁴⁷ Michelle Goldberg, "How the Online Left Fuels the Right", *The New York Times*, May 11, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/11/opinion/intellectual-dark-web-red-pilled.html>; Carlos Lozada, "Where the alt-right wants to take America -- with or without Trump", *The Washington Post*, November 3, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/book-party/wp/2017/11/03/where-the-alt-right-wants-to-take-america-with-or-without-trump/>; "How the grotesque online culture wars fuel populism", *The Economist*, August 3, 2018, <https://www.economist.com/open-future/2018/08/03/how-the-grotesque-online-culture-wars-fuel-populism>

⁴⁸ Phelan, "Neoliberalism, the Far Right, and the Disparaging of 'Social Justice Warriors'", 470.

⁴⁹ Phillip W. Gray, "'The fire rises': identity, the alt-right and intersectionality," *Journal of Political Ideologies* 23 (2018), 151.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 142.

⁵¹ Ibid, 152.

⁵² Ibid, 146.

people to the alt-right is one quote from Greg Johnson (the racist publisher) who notes that his message resonates with Tea Party Republicans tired of being called “racist”.⁵³

Luigi Esposito claims that the “guiding principles” of the alt-right developed in reaction to “political correctness”.⁵⁴ Their emphasis on race is a “rebellion against the PC agenda”.⁵⁵ Esposito associates the idea that human “races” are social constructs (and not biological realities) with “political correctness”.⁵⁶ He looks at books and videos produced by “highbrow” white nationalists and notes that they present social constructivist perspectives on race as an effort to “justify miscegenation” and “ignore the unique contributions of white people”.⁵⁷ In the face of politically correct social constructivism, the alt-right has been compelled to assert that “race is real”.⁵⁸ Esposito fails to defend his assumption that social constructivist positions on “race” reflect “political correctness” rather than scientific consensus.⁵⁹ Moreover, he highlights statements in which white nationalists claim to have adopted “race realism” in response to activists with constructivist perspectives on race, but takes their comments at face value and fails to consider the alternative that – rather than having become obsessed with the reality of race in response to constructivist discourse – these figures dislike constructivist discourse because they were already obsessed with the reality of race.

Joe Phillips and Joseph Yi go further, endorsing both the idea that identity politics produced the alt-right/-lite, and the idea that movement is non-bigoted. They critique the media’s “prevailing narrative” about the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, and maintain that “the reality is more complicated and nuanced”.⁶⁰ The media ignores the alt-right/-lite’s advocacy for “features associated with classic liberalism”.⁶¹ Phillips and Yi call white nationalists a “minor faction” of the movement and characterise alt-lite celebrities and their fans as “free speech advocate[s]”, who defend the right to free expression by pushing the boundaries of acceptable speech.⁶² This includes many Unite

⁵³ Ibid, 146.

⁵⁴ Luigi Esposito, “The Alt-Right as a Revolt against Neoliberalism and Political Correctness: the Role of Collective Action Frames”, *Perspectives on Global Development and Technology* 18 (2019): 93.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 103.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 102-103.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 102.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Elizabeth Kolbert, “There’s No Scientific Basis for Race – It’s a Made-Up Label”, *National Geographic* 223 (2018): 1-6.

⁶⁰ Joe Phillips and Joseph Yi, “Charlottesville Paradox: The ‘Liberalizing’ Alt-Right, ‘Authoritarian’ Left, and Politics of Dialogue,” *Society* 55 (2018), 221.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid, 225-226.

the Right attendees. Meanwhile, the alt-right/-lite's opponents, including anti-fascist protestors at Charlottesville, exhibit "characteristics associated with authoritarianism".⁶³ Phillips and Yi maintain that practitioners of identity politics believe in limiting or preventing the speech of white men "until power relations are equalised".⁶⁴ The alt-right/-lite resists this illiberal rhetoric. Once a handful of over-exposed neo-Nazis are discounted, the alt-right/-lite appear as a "liberalising" influence which would do J.S. Mill proud.⁶⁵

Phillips and Yi's discourse analysis fails to prove their point. To establish the nature of the "mainstream" (i.e. non-Nazi) alt-right, they quote four Charlottesville attendees who spoke to the press. They assess posts on Spencer's Alt-Right.com, and put questions to its users.⁶⁶ Their methods find members of the alt-right in conversation with reporters or researchers, and therefore putting their best foot forward. Phillips and Yi take their comments at face value. They uncritically believe Charlottesville attendees who claimed to have marched for non-racist reasons – to defend free speech or historical landmarks.⁶⁷ They do not consider whether such statements – from people who chose to march after a Klannish demonstration, surrounded by racist symbols and language – are disingenuous. As evidence that the alt-right were unfairly characterised as violent neo-Nazis after Charlottesville, Phillips and Yi cite one anti-violence tweet from "[w]ell-known Alt-Right figure Tim Gionet".⁶⁸ Gionet is much better known as "Baked Alaska" and is himself a violent neo-Nazi; he has a history of neo-Nazism both online and offline and was arrested in 2020 for assault, and in 2021 for participating in the attack on the United States Capitol.⁶⁹ Phillips and Yi therefore characterise the alt-right/-lite as liberal defenders of free speech against the "authoritarian Left" by reproducing questionable or unrepresentative comments made by racists.

Other researchers briefly invoked this idea that the alt-right/-lite are reactions to flawed identity politics. Hawley muses that censoring the alt-right on Twitter might do more

⁶³ Ibid, 221.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 226.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 221, 228.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 221.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 222-223, 227.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 223.

⁶⁹ Kyle Cheney, "'Baked Alaska' charged for breaching the Capitol, asks judge to remove GPS monitor", *Politico*, March 26, 2021, <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/03/26/baked-alaska-charged-capitol-breach-478153>; Aja Romano, "Baked Alaska's clout-chasing spiral into white supremacy is an internet morality tale", *Vox*, January 17, 2021, <https://www.vox.com/22235691/baked-alaska-tim-gionet-arrest-capitol-riot-alt-right-buzzfeed>

harm than good, quoting commentator David Frum's claim that "radical, illiberal ... speech policing" in which only the Left are allowed to say "wild and wacky things" drove young men to the alt-right in the first place.⁷⁰ Hawley also notes that some alt-right interviewees claimed to have joined the movement in response to the polarising racial rhetoric of BLM. Letting the alt-right "speak for itself", Hawley does not comment on whether this characterisation of anti-racism is fair.⁷¹ Gabriel Noah Brahm finds time in an article about Trump's victory to claim that a "virulent new strain" of identity politics, practiced by "anti-white-male", illiberal, "prudish, self-righteous, sanctimonious" activists, "generated the alt-right as its very own alter-ego".⁷²

In this literature, many aspects of the alt-right/-lite's attack on feminist, anti-racist, and LGBTQ+ rights activism are endorsed. Each of these authors accepts the claim that serious problems within contemporary Anglophone social movements explain its aversion to identity politics. Over-sensitive, illiberal, censorious activists account for young men's drift towards the alt-right/-lite. This theory has entered the academic literature (and been repeated in the popular press) with little supporting evidence.

There is a lack of research which takes seriously this idea that members of the alt-right/-lite possess substantive complaints which turns members against feminist, anti-racist, and LGBTQ+ rights activism. Some studies have analysed the alt-right/-lite's portrayal of social movement activists. The most comprehensive of these is Massanari and Chess's visual discourse analysis of 26 memes depicting "social justice warriors".⁷³ Their finding that "SJWs" are depicted as "monstrous" thanks to deviance from gender norms is compelling.⁷⁴ However, these insulting cartoons and image macros are not an appropriate source for identifying and evaluating the more substantive objections to identity politics which the alt-right/-lite supposedly possesses. Phelan's study of a small number of alt-right/-lite sources is a "deliberately panoramic overview" which identifies the demonised "social justice warrior" as the movement's shared "antagonist".⁷⁵ His focus is on highlighting resonances between this antagonism and Friedrich Hayek's animosity towards "social justice"; Phelan does not evaluate specific complaints against

⁷⁰ Frum quoted in Hawley, *Making Sense of the Alt-Right*, 164.

⁷¹ Ibid, 8, 78.

⁷² Gabriel Noah Brahm, "Killing the Messenger: Mark Lilla's 'End of Identity Liberalism' and its Critics," *Society* 54 (2017), 326, 328, 329.

⁷³ Massanari and Chess, "Attack of the 50-foot social justice warrior".

⁷⁴ Ibid, 531.

⁷⁵ Phelan, "Neoliberalism, the Far Right, and the Disparaging of 'Social Justice Warriors'", 466.

identity politics.⁷⁶ There is a need for research which both analyses alt-right/-lite discourse to draw out the detail of complaints about identity politics, and subjects these complaints to critical analysis rather than accepting them at face value.

Research into YouTube

Despite YouTube's importance to the alt-right/-lite, the literature on this topic remains sparse. There is a need for further research which details and critiques the arguments and narratives of alt-right/-lite YouTubers. Moreover, most studies into alt-right/-lite YouTubers have focused on figures at the extreme end, rather than the entrance, of YouTube's radicalisation pipeline.

Researchers have applied quantitative methods to the topic. While aforementioned studies into YouTube's algorithms or radicalisation pipeline have been productive, other quantitative efforts to understand the nature of alt-right/-lite YouTube videos themselves have been less successful. Raphael Ottoni *et al.* collect automatically generated transcripts from 3,731 videos "right-wing" videos, and from another 3,942 videos in a control group comprised of popular "News and Politics" channels. Their "right-wing" videos were uploaded by InfoWars, and another twelve content-creators recommended by Alex Jones.⁷⁷ Ottoni *et al.*'s decision to investigate the famously eccentric, atypical Jones is questionable, given their research is framed as an analysis of "right-wing" YouTube more generally.⁷⁸ Moreover, their software-assisted analysis does not yield deep insights. It shows that the InfoWars-adjacent channels talk about vaccines, water fluoridation, and chemical weapons, while "control" channels talk more about "celebrities, TV shows, and general news".⁷⁹ These results give little insight into the detail of the arguments or narratives pushed by Jones and friends.

Isabelle van der Vegt *et al.*'s analysis of transcripts from 56 alt-right/-lite YouTube channels has similar limitations. This corpus was compared to transcripts from 13

⁷⁶ Ibid, 464.

⁷⁷ Raphael Ottoni *et al.*, "Analysing Right-wing YouTube channels: Hate, Violence and Discrimination", *arXiv* (2018): 2.

⁷⁸ Ibid, 1.

⁷⁹ Ibid, 5-7.

“progressive” channels.⁸⁰ These authors find that “topics that may be loosely associated with the ‘ideology’ of the alt-right were found to be used more by [that] group”.⁸¹ This is unsurprising – the researchers assess channels already identified as alt-right/-lite. Van der Vegt *et al.* also note that their methods only produce a list of topics discussed, and do not show whether the alt-right/-lite’s references to feminism (for instance) are “negative or positive in polarity”.⁸²

Other researchers have investigated the topic with qualitative methods. In 2017, Exley produced the first case study of a white nationalist YouTuber – Felix Lace, a.k.a. “Black Pigeon Speaks”. This study is similar to Hawley’s work on “highbrow” white nationalists; Exley situates Lace within the history of American conservatism. Exley identifies the main topic areas in Lace’s videos and provides quotations to illustrate his worldview. For instance, Lace believes that Jewish bankers conspire to enslave the world in debt and that Muslim immigration to the West constitutes a re-commencement of the Islamic campaign to conquer Rome. Exley’s article is more descriptive than analytical. Because he has selected an out-and-out white nationalist for study, Exley seems to have judged that Lace’s views are too outlandish to require critical analysis.⁸³ Lace himself complains in a response video that “there’s no argument about the ideas, ... no rebuttal”. He takes this as typical of the intellectually lazy Left.⁸⁴

Lewis’s 2018 study mapping collaborations between 65 reactionary YouTubers also involves qualitative analysis. Lewis identifies techniques used by alt-right/-lite YouTubers to disseminate their message. She watched content from each channel, and performed “in-depth content analysis” on transcripts from two unspecified channels.⁸⁵ Lewis argues that alt-right/-lite YouTubers “sell” far-right ideology using the same techniques other social media “influencers” use to sell products.⁸⁶ For instance, they give “testimonials” about how accepting far-Right ideology has changed their lives, and undertake “self-branding” to showcase enviable lifestyles apparently afforded to them by

⁸⁰ Isabelle van der Vegt, Maximilian Mozes, Paul Gill, Bennett Kleinberg, “Online influence, offline violence: language use on YouTube surrounding the ‘Unite the Right’ rally”, *Journal of Computational Social Science* 4 (2021): 339.

⁸¹ *Ibid*, 343.

⁸² *Ibid*, 350.

⁸³ Exley, “Black Pigeon Speaks”.

⁸⁴ Black Pigeon Speaks, “How Harvard, the NYTs & George Soros Manufacture VILLAINS,” 18:30, *YouTube*, October, 12, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gmt5pfOiyC0>

⁸⁵ Lewis, *Alternative Influence*, 6.

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 25.

far-Right views.⁸⁷ This excellent study has some limitations. It is unclear how Lewis is able to make claims about such a large number of channels. YouTubers mentioned in this research complain that Lewis places them in an “extremist” network without demonstrating that she has looked closely at their videos.⁸⁸ Moreover, Lewis analyses techniques used to “sell” arguments, rather than the arguments themselves. Her subjects have therefore dismissed the study as another product of the dogmatic, closed-minded Left.⁸⁹

The absence of a focus on argument in the above studies perhaps reflects the selection of obviously kooky or racist subjects, whose arguments do not inspire careful analysis. There is a need, however, for analysis of reactionary YouTubers who are less transparently objectionable. As Melody Devries, Judith Bessant, and Rob Watts explain, far-Right media which does not “explicitly profess hatred” and which is created by people who do not see themselves as hateful “attain[s] a shrewd subtlety which enables or encourages engagement from folks that might be sympathetic to their surface message”.⁹⁰ Many alt-right/-lite YouTubers purport to be non-racist, non-sexist, non-homophobic, non-transphobic and instead oppose social movement activism on principled grounds. As discussed, content-creators at this more “moderate” end of YouTube’s radicalisation pipeline start some viewers on the path towards extremism.

In 2021, Cindy Ma analysed ten members of this cohort, who “operate at the edge of acceptable discourse ... while appealing to a wider cross-section of viewers”.⁹¹ Ma examines videos about race uploaded by these subjects (who do not include Benjamin). She analyses arguments they use to support their claim to non-racist status. For instance, racist speech is framed as ironic humour, and these YouTubers make occasional shows of affinity for specific non-white individuals and communities.⁹² Ma highlights comments which show that these YouTubers are not simply “gateways” to racist extremism – they spread white supremacist rhetoric, but “temper and obfuscate” their

⁸⁷ Ibid, 25-34.

⁸⁸ SomeBlackGuy, “The Guardian Hit Piece on Political YouTubers (Alternative Influence Network),” *YouTube*, 11:22, September 20, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YTltHrjWL1E>

⁸⁹ Stefan Molyneux, “Alternative Influence: YouTube Censorship Manifesto - Rebutted!”, *YouTube*, 1:22:58, September 20, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2j2gmMrqKgM>

⁹⁰ Melody Devries, Judith Bessant, and Rob Watts, “The Uncanny Political Involvement of Technologies”, in *The Rise of the Far Right: Technologies of Recruitment and Mobilisation*, ed. Melody Devries, Judith Bessant, and Rob Watts (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021), 2-3.

⁹¹ Cindy Ma, “What is the “lite” in “alt-lite?” The discourse of white vulnerability and dominance among YouTube’s reactionaries”, *Social Media + Society* 7 (2021): 1, 9.

⁹² Ibid, 9, 10.

views in ways intended to side-step accusations of racism.⁹³ In his 2022 case study of Paul Joseph Watson, Finlayson analyses one of Ma's subjects in more depth. Finlayson outlines Watson's "political theory" and the rhetorical style used to disseminate it.⁹⁴ Watson concocts "a rough blend of Conservatism and Libertarianism". He opposes movements which would alter traditional social hierarchies and divisions, and complains that the arbiters of political correctness (who enforce their own social mores) encroach upon individual freedom.⁹⁵ Watson disseminates this ideology with an "emphasis on 'secrets' and revelations", positioning himself as a brave, moral truth speaker.⁹⁶ Finlayson finds that Watson's "sometimes disparate" political beliefs are held together by the consistent performance of this ethical character.⁹⁷

Quantitative methods have identified common topics in reactionary YouTube videos, but not illuminated the arguments and narratives therein. Qualitative studies have shed more light on these issues, and identified communicative strategies used by these YouTubers. In this literature, only Ma takes as her focus the actual merit (or otherwise) of arguments within this discourse. There is therefore a need for further qualitative research which critiques the arguments and narratives pushed by alt-right/-lite YouTubers. Such research should focus not only on obvious extremists, but on content-creators who ostensibly disavow hatred and discrimination and appeal to wide audiences.

Critical analysis of alt-right/-lite YouTube videos also helps to address the first gap identified in this chapter. If I am to look for the alt-right/-lite's supposed substantive critiques of social movement activism, YouTube is an excellent resource. As Phelan notes, many members of the alt-right/-lite "champion their commitment to long-form video, framing the genre as enabling sophisticated, in-depth conversations".⁹⁸ Many YouTubers produce earnest, quasi-academic videos criticising different aspects of identity politics. Principled critiques of social movements are more likely to be found in such videos than in memes or tweets.

⁹³ Ibid, 1, 6, 12.

⁹⁴ Finlayson, "YouTube and Political Ideologies", 63.

⁹⁵ Ibid, 72.

⁹⁶ Ibid, 72-74.

⁹⁷ Ibid, 65, 74.

⁹⁸ Phelan, "Neoliberalism, the Far Right, and the Disparaging of 'Social Justice Warriors'", 462.

Third, I address a lack of research into the dirtbag Left. Despite its reach, researchers have neglected this media. While noting that future content-creators might succumb to the temptation, Finlayson does not mention this media when stating that there is “no left-wing equivalent” to the “aggressive”, “polemical” discourse of the alt-right/-lite.⁹⁹ Other authors in diverse fields have mentioned the dirtbag Left and indicated its relevance to their work, but none undertakes research into the phenomenon. As with the journalists mentioned in the last chapter, these scholars characterise it in very different ways. Tom Steele mentions the dirtbag Left as a welcome form of working-class radicalism in a cultural studies article expressing hope that online media can fill the gap left by the disappearance of radical adult education.¹⁰⁰ Jonathan Dean mentions the dirtbag Left when making his claim that left-wing discourse became funnier, ruder, and more irreverent in the United Kingdom under “Corbynism”.¹⁰¹ In his analysis of “post-truth” in the age of Trump, David Block calls the dirtbag Left an instance of “bourgeois pessimism”.¹⁰² It is comprised of “elites” who play with irony and wallow in “self-indulgent pessimism” while working-class people “only have time to survive and resist”.¹⁰³ Nicholas Holm mentions the dirtbag Left in another cultural studies article arguing that educated people are becoming more likely to display an ability to perceive hidden power relations as a status symbol.¹⁰⁴ He mentions the dirtbag Left as bearers of this “critical disposition”, and therefore engaged in an “elite practice”.¹⁰⁵ These authors have all noticed the dirtbag Left as a phenomenon relevant to their work, but characterise it in diverse ways. None analyses dirtbag Left material. When any citation is provided, these researchers support their comments with magazines articles about the dirtbag Left.¹⁰⁶

⁹⁹ Finlayson, “Rethinking Political Communication”, 89.

¹⁰⁰ Tom Steele, “Cultural Studies and radical popular education: Resources of hope”, *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 23 (2020): 929.

¹⁰¹ Jonathan Dean, “Left politics and popular culture in Britain: From left-wing populism to ‘popular leftism’”, *Politics* 40 (2020): 10.

¹⁰² David Block, *Post-Truth and Political Discourse* (Cham: Springer International, 2019), 120.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 121.

¹⁰⁴ Nicholas Holm, “Critical capital: cultural studies, the critical disposition and critical reading as elite practice”, *Cultural Studies* 34 (2020): 143, 151.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ Block, *Post-Truth and Political Discourse*, 121; Daniel Trottier, “Coming to Terms with Shame: Exploring Mediated Visibility against Transgressions”, *Surveillance & Society* 16 (2018): 179.

I have a particular focus in this analysis of dirtbag Left media. I aim to shed light on the confusion hinted at here, and described in the last chapter. Some observers argue that the dirtbag Left only “punches up” at rich and powerful people who use identity politics for their own ends, and praise its ability to craft left-wing messages which appeal to would-be members of the alt-right/-lite. Others worry that the dirtbag Left’s critique of identity politics is often dismissive of sexism, racism, homo- and transphobia, and sometimes sexist, racist, or homo- and transphobic itself. Especially stern critics assert that the dirtbag Left’s effort to harness the same politically incorrect energy as the alt-right/-lite have made it very similar to the genuine article. These disagreements reflect a gap in knowledge. I therefore aim to focus on the extent to which attacks on identity politics from this cohort do indeed narrowly target the appropriation of anti-racism, feminism, and LGBTQ+ rights by economic elites, or whether they dismiss each movement more generally. I focus on the relationship between dirtbag Left and alt-right/-lite discourse, and on whether the attempt of the former to court the audience of the latter also involves importing some of its prejudices.

In this section, I identified three gaps which I aim to fill. In response to an influential, but thinly substantiated narrative which blames the alt-right/-lite’s hostility to identity politics on flawed social movement activism, there is a need for research which draws out the alt-right/-lite’s complaints about social justice warriors and subjects them to critical analysis. Within the small literature about alt-right/-lite YouTubers, there is a need for qualitative research which analyses the arguments and narratives pushed by these content-creators, in particular those at the “moderate” end of YouTube’s radicalisation pipeline. There is also a need for scholarly research into the dirtbag Left which sheds light on the relative merit of the above appraisals.

Theoretical framework

An eclectic mix

Many different topics are raised in my analysis of alt-right/-lite and dirtbag Left discourse. Throughout, I accept Carol Johnson’s case for “judicious eclecticism”, which encourages discourse analysts to draw on a range of theoretical and analytical

frameworks on the grounds that each offers “useful, if partial insights”.¹⁰⁷ Like Johnson, I find that an “eclectic mix” of perspectives helps to make sense of different aspects of the discourse under investigation. For instance, I draw on critiques of liberal individualism and Enlightenment thought associated with new social movements, critiques of narrow-minded social positivism (framed as “scientism”) and alternative postmodern epistemologies, and conceptual work on the multiple “masculinities” which co-exist in modern Western societies. I detail this theoretical work more fully in later chapters, to better illuminate aspects of the discourse as they appear. My application of these theories to online media demonstrates that they are still relevant to forms of political discourse which in many cases did not exist when they were conceived. As Johnson notes, “the melding of relevant theoretical analyses and analysis of specific case studies ... strengthen[s] both”.¹⁰⁸ However, my focus when invoking many of these frameworks is on providing the best possible analysis of the material at hand, rather than on wider theoretical contributions.

Another body of conceptual work serves a different function in this thesis and is relevant across all five subsequent chapters. The current study can be situated in the context of wider intra-Left debates about the merit of contemporary feminist, anti-racist, and LGBTQ+ rights activism. Concepts from these debates help me to confront YouTube discourse which is often ill-organised and crude. While I do not make the claim that the YouTubers analysed in this thesis are influenced by (or even aware) of this literature, these concepts help me draw out the substance and weigh the merit of the content-creator’s complaints about social movement activism.

Progressive neoliberalism

While the claim that identity politics hamstring the Left has achieved new prominence since Trump’s victory in 2016, current arguments evoke (as Phelan notes) “antagonisms

¹⁰⁷ Carol Johnson, *Governing Change: Keating to Howard* (Brisbane: University of Queensland, 2000), 2.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 1.

that we can trace back to at least the 1980s”.¹⁰⁹ Critics argue that specific flaws in social movement activism alienate and repel people. Left-wing academic critiques of identity politics come in two main variants. First, socialist authors argue that social movements are flawed because they have made their peace with neoliberalism. “Neoliberalism” refers to a body of ideas and policies which have become influential worldwide since their implementation in the United States and United Kingdom in the 1980s.¹¹⁰ It consists of the reassertion of “classical” eighteenth- and nineteenth-century liberal economic thought. Neoliberals have faith that unregulated capitalist markets will solve all economic and social problems.¹¹¹ They conceive of people as rational agents who pursue their self-interest and strive for self-reliance. They believe that entrepreneurial populations left to their own devices will compete to provide one another with the best possible goods and services.¹¹²

Neoliberalism was considered “new” in the late 1970s because this worldview had been unfashionable since the Great Depression. Classical liberal economic theories had to be updated to include denunciations of the myriad social and economic roles taken on by the state since the 1930s.¹¹³ Neoliberal attacks on “big government” include prescriptions for cutting taxes and regulations on corporations because they constitute brakes on entrepreneurship. Economies are supposed to be driven on the “supply side”; growth and employment follow when producers are incentivised by the prospect of making money and have sufficient capital to invest in production.¹¹⁴ Neoliberals also prescribe rolling back the government provision of social services to allow competitive markets to appear in sectors where the profit motive had not been at play.¹¹⁵ They aim to curb the power of trade unions so that individuals are free to sell their labour on their own terms.¹¹⁶ They

¹⁰⁹ Phelan, “Neoliberalism, the Far Right, and the Disparaging of ‘Social Justice Warriors’”, 470; Mark Lilla, “The End of Identity Liberalism”, *The New York Times*, November 18, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/20/opinion/sunday/the-end-of-identity-liberalism.html>; Rob Hoffman, “How the Left Created Trump”, *Politico*, November 20, 2016, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/11/how-the-left-created-donald-trump-214472>; Robby Soave, “Trump Won Because Leftist Political Correctness Inspired a Terrifying Backlash”, *Reason*, November 9, 2016, <http://reason.com/blog/2016/11/09/trump-won-because-leftist-political-corr>

¹¹⁰ Manfred B. Steger and Ravi K. Roy, *Neoliberalism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2010), 38-41.

¹¹¹ Andrew Heywood, *Political Ideologies* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017), 83.

¹¹² Steger and Roy, *Neoliberalism*, 74.

¹¹³ *Ibid*, 32.

¹¹⁴ Heywood, *Political Ideologies*, 87; Steger and Roy, *Neoliberalism*, 50-51.

¹¹⁵ Steger and Roy, *Neoliberalism*, 40-41, 60, 90.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid*, 40-41, 59.

prescribe cuts to welfare and social insurance payments to combat a “culture of dependency” and spark the work ethic of recipients.¹¹⁷

Many critics note that neoliberalism has benefited the rich and powerful at the expense of the poor and vulnerable. Bob Jessop notes that neoliberalism is often interpreted as “a class offensive by capital against labour”.¹¹⁸ David Harvey chronicles the ways in which neoliberalism has served “the upper echelons of the capitalist class”.¹¹⁹ The “main substantive achievement of neoliberalism” has been to redistribute wealth and income from working people to the rich.¹²⁰ The commodification of social services has forced people to pay owners and investors for things formerly provided by the state. Assaults on trade unions have allowed employers to present disempowered individual workers with precarious, low-paid contracts. Income and capital gains tax cuts have been paid for with regressive sales taxes and user fees. The deregulation of financial markets has facilitated arcane manipulations of money which enrich bankers and investors without producing tangible goods.¹²¹ This behaviour caused the Global Financial Crisis and the consequent decrease in living standards worldwide.¹²²

Drawing on her earlier work on “redistribution” and “recognition”, which theorised ways in which the valorisation of existing group identities stands in the way of transformative changes towards socialism, Nancy Fraser argues that a form of “progressive neoliberalism” has been the dominant political alignment since the early 1990s.¹²³ She applies this analysis to the United States and United Kingdom (and suggests applicability to much of Western Europe).¹²⁴ Fraser contends that, while neoliberalism was born on the Right, Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan’s economic reforms in the 1980s did not usher in neoliberal “hegemony”. This occurred in the 1990s when neoliberalism was

¹¹⁷ Heywood, *Political Ideologies*, 87.

¹¹⁸ Bob Jessop, “Neoliberalism”, in *The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Globalisation*, ed. George Ritzer (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 6.

¹¹⁹ David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 153.

¹²⁰ Ibid, 159.

¹²¹ Ibid, 153-154, 159, 160-162, 168.

¹²² Jessop, “Neoliberalism”, 4; Vishanthie Sewpaul, “Neoliberalism”, in *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioural Sciences*, ed. James D. Wright (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2015), 466.

¹²³ Nancy Fraser, “From Redistribution to Recognition? Dilemmas of Justice in a ‘Post Socialist’ Age”, *New Left Review* 212 (1995) 68-93; Nancy Fraser, “Social Justice in the Age of Identity Politics: Redistribution, Recognition, and Participation”, *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values* (1996); Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking Recognition”, *New Left Review* 3 (2000): 107-120.

¹²⁴ Nancy Fraser, “The End of Progressive Neoliberalism”, *Dissent*, January 2, 2017 https://www.dissentmagazine.org/online_articles/progressive-neoliberalism-reactionary-populism-nancy-fraser

accepted on both sides of Anglo-American politics. Fraser argues that neoliberalism captured the mainstream Left through alliances with feminist, anti-racist, and LGBTQ+ rights activism.¹²⁵ Neoliberals were able to “seduce” the largest segments of each movement because they shared a common enemy.¹²⁶ Like neoliberals, social movements criticised existing social democratic arrangements, which ensured women’s dependency through the family wage and excluded non-white people in less unionised industries.¹²⁷ These two different struggles against post-war social democracy then “intersected fatefully”. Social movement activists “joined up” with neoliberals because this ascendant group was willing to give voice to some of their concerns.¹²⁸ Clinton’s 1992 presidential campaign in the United States and Blair’s “New Labour” in the United Kingdom “ventriloquised” the concerns of social movement activists.¹²⁹ Each was able to appear “progressive” and win elections despite their embrace of neoliberal economics.¹³⁰ Fraser argues that – having “hijacked” the concerns of activists and re-articulated them in “capital-friendly terms” – neoliberals get to seem progressive and exciting while enacting policies which harm working- and middle-class people.¹³¹ Therefore, “[t]hanks in large part to this ethos, policies that fostered a vast upward redistribution of wealth and income suddenly acquired the patina of legitimacy”.¹³²

Fraser contends that this alliance with neoliberalism has infected the “mainstream currents” of feminist, anti-racist, and LGBTQ+ rights activism. Activists now frame their causes and demands in ways which do not infringe upon the interests of their powerful neoliberal bedfellows.¹³³ Radicalism is “confined to the margins”; many activists have developed blinkered understandings of their own movements.¹³⁴ The most visible

¹²⁵ Nancy Fraser, “From Progressive Neoliberalism to Trump and Beyond”, *Public Seminar*, December 21, 2017, <http://www.publicseminar.org/2017/12/from-progressive-neoliberalism-to-trump-and-beyond>

¹²⁶ Fraser, “From Progressive Neoliberalism to Trump and Beyond”; Cinzia Arruzza, Tithi Bhattacharya, and Nancy Fraser, *Feminism for the 99%: A Manifesto* (New York: Verso, 2019).

¹²⁷ Nancy Fraser, “Progressive neoliberalism versus reactionary populism: a Hobson’s choice”, in *The Great Regression*, ed. Heinrich Geiselberger (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017), 43.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Arruzza, Bhattacharya, and Fraser, *Feminism for the 99%*; Fraser, “The End of Progressive Neoliberalism”.

¹³⁰ Fraser, “From Progressive Neoliberalism to Trump and Beyond”.

¹³¹ Arruzza, Bhattacharya, and Fraser, *Feminism for the 99%: A Manifesto*; Fraser, “The End of Progressive Neoliberalism”.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Fraser, “The End of Progressive Neoliberalism”.

¹³⁴ Fraser, “From Progressive Neoliberalism to Trump and Beyond”; Nancy Fraser, “Against Progressive Neoliberalism, A New Progressive Populism”, *Dissent*, January 28, 2017, https://www.dissentmagazine.org/online_articles/nancy-fraser-against-progressive-neoliberalism-progressive-populism

currents of each movement now stress the need to “empower” talented women and minorities to rise in the “winner-takes-all corporate hierarchy”, to diversify society’s upper echelons.¹³⁵ Their vision “asks ordinary people ... to be grateful that it is a woman, not a man, who busts their union”.¹³⁶ Individuals poised to benefit from this “empowerment” agenda are likely to be the most privileged members of their group. Everyone else is “stuck in the basement”.¹³⁷ Because they are unable to admit that the “rage” of white working-class people impoverished by neoliberalism is legitimate, dominant strands of activism belittle this demographic as “culturally backward”.¹³⁸

Fraser argues that this sensibility explains widespread antipathy towards identity politics, and the recent triumphs of the Right.¹³⁹ Neoliberal versions of feminism, anti-racism, and LGBTQ+ rights activism give each movement “a bad name”.¹⁴⁰ Trump supporters and Brexiteers are “[t]humbing their noses” at a political hegemony which impoverishes working-class people and covers its tracks with commitments to watered-down social movement activism.¹⁴¹

Other socialist scholars make similar arguments. Drawing on his earlier Marxist criticism of mainstream “black politics” in the United States, Adolph Reed attacks “left-wing neoliberalism”.¹⁴² Trump’s victory constitutes a rejection of “left-neoliberalism”.¹⁴³ Reed maintains that Hillary Clinton emphasised commitments to feminism, anti-racism, and LGBTQ+ rights to “deflect discussion” from economic inequality.¹⁴⁴ Like Fraser, Reed argues that mainstream social movements have turned toxic because they cannot touch upon class issues. Anti-racists aim only to diversify existing social hierarchies by empowering “competitive individual minority agents who might stand a better fighting

¹³⁵ Fraser, “The End of Progressive Neoliberalism”; Fraser, “From Progressive Neoliberalism to Trump and Beyond”.

¹³⁶ Arruzza, Bhattacharya, and Fraser, *Feminism for the 99%: A Manifesto*.

¹³⁷ Fraser, “From Progressive Neoliberalism to Trump and Beyond”.

¹³⁸ Fraser, “Progressive neoliberalism versus reactionary populism: a Hobson’s choice”; Fraser, “The End of Progressive Neoliberalism”.

¹³⁹ Arruzza, Bhattacharya, and Fraser, *Feminism for the 99%: A Manifesto*.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Fraser, “The End of Progressive Neoliberalism”.

¹⁴² Adolph Reed Jr., “From Jenner to Dolezal: One Trans Good, the Other Not So Much,” *Common Dreams*, June 15, 2015, <https://www.commondreams.org/views/2015/06/15/jenner-dolezal-one-trans-good-other-not-so-much>

¹⁴³ Adolph Reed Jr., “Antiracism: a neoliberal alternative to a left”, *Dialectical Anthropology* 42 (2018): 113.

¹⁴⁴ Adolph Reed Jr., “Black Politics After 2016”, *Nonsite.org*, February 11, 2018, <https://nonsite.org/article/black-politics-after-2016>

chance in the neoliberal rat race”.¹⁴⁵ They pursue “rough parity in the distribution of social goods and bads among designated population groups”; however, resolving such “disparities” does not address the economic system which creates hardship and inequality.¹⁴⁶ Reed agrees that neoliberalised social movements dismiss angry working-class people as bigoted because they cannot acknowledge their real economic plight.¹⁴⁷

The literary theorist Walter Benn Michaels has updated his earlier polemics against identity politics to argue that Trump was elected thanks to public dislike of “the neoliberal left”.¹⁴⁸ This cohort tends to “carry on about racism and sexism ... in order to avoid doing so about capitalism”.¹⁴⁹ Michaels agrees that mainstream social movements simply pursue “diversity” to ensure that “the increasingly successful elites come to look like the increasingly unsuccessful non-elites”.¹⁵⁰ Contemporary social movements do not care about poverty, as long as those affected do not face discrimination along identity lines.¹⁵¹ Activists attribute working-class anger to bigotry and consider themselves “morally superior”.¹⁵²

Fraser, Reed, and Michaels call for a more class-conscious, anti-neoliberal Left which tackles economic inequality and exploitation. In particular, Fraser asserts that building a real movement “for the 99 percent” requires direct criticism of progressive neoliberalism.¹⁵³ She considers Clinton’s failed 2016 candidacy the “Waterloo” of progressive neoliberalism. We are now in “an interregnum ... in which hearts and minds are up for grabs”.¹⁵⁴ It is time for a revitalised Left to “break definitively” with the “shills”

¹⁴⁵ Adolph Reed Jr. and Merlin Chowkwanyun, “Race, Class, Crisis: The Discourse of Racial Disparity and its Analytical Discontents”, *Socialist Register* 48 (2012): 166; Adolph Reed Jr., “Marx, Race, and Neoliberalism”, *New Labor Forum* 22 (2013): 54.

¹⁴⁶ Reed, “Marx, Race, and Neoliberalism”, 53-54.

¹⁴⁷ Reed, “Antiracism: a neoliberal alternative to a left”, 109.

¹⁴⁸ Walter Benn Michaels, “Walter Benn Michaels on how liberals still love diversity and ignore inequality”, interview by Ryan Smith, *The Chicago Reader*, November 23, 2016, <https://chicagoreader.com/arts-culture/walter-benn-michaels-on-how-liberals-still-love-diversity-and-ignore-inequality/>

¹⁴⁹ Walter Benn Michaels, “Against Diversity”, *New Left Review* 52 (2008): 33-38.

¹⁵⁰ Walter Benn Michaels, “Let Them Eat Diversity”, interview by Bhaskar Sunkara, *Jacobin*, January 1, 2011, <https://jacobinmag.com/2011/01/let-them-eat-diversity/>

¹⁵¹ Walter Benn Michaels, *The Trouble With Diversity: How We Learned to Love Identity and Ignore Inequality* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006), 77.

¹⁵² Michaels, “Walter Benn Michaels on how liberals still love diversity and ignore inequality”.

¹⁵³ Arruzza, Bhattacharya, and Fraser, *Feminism for the 99%*.

¹⁵⁴ Arruzza, Bhattacharya, and Fraser, *Feminism for the 99%*; Fraser, “The End of Progressive Neoliberalism”.

who pretend to advocate for women and minorities.¹⁵⁵ While the genuine Left has been “unwilling” to do so in the past, we must “frontally challenge progressive-neoliberal versions” of feminism, anti-racism, and LGBTQ+ rights activism.¹⁵⁶ Left-wing activists can reach new audiences – including people currently drawn to reactionary populism – by tapping into widespread “revulsion” towards progressive neoliberalism.¹⁵⁷

The concept of progressive neoliberalism focuses my attention when assessing alt-right/-lite and dirtbag Left discourse. These authors theorise that specific flaws within social movements repel people and turn them towards reactionary populism. Their critiques help me draw out the substance of complaints about “social justice warriors” in chaotic YouTube discourse and identify instances in which I should “hear out” grievances reminiscent of those outlined by serious academics on the Left. They help me weigh the merit of a content-creator’s complaints and consider the extent to which they reflect distaste for neoliberalised forms of identity politics or traits which develop when activists cannot implicate capitalism in their critiques.

Divisiveness and abstraction

The second strain of intra-Left criticism, from liberal rather than socialist authors, also gained new prominence after Trump’s victory. In these appraisals, feminist, anti-racist, and LGBTQ+ rights movements have divided the Left only to focus on minor injustices and esoteric theories.

The philosopher Richard Rorty argued in 1997 that influential social movements caused the American Left to focus on “cultural politics” from the mid-1960s.¹⁵⁸ This Left then failed to challenge worsening economic inequality because it could not “do two things at once”.¹⁵⁹ Rorty predicted that a Left dominated by educated feminist, anti-racist, and LGBTQ+ rights activists, who dictate “manners” to the rest of society while ignoring economic inequality, will eventually spark “resentment” among working-class people and allow an atavistic “strongman” to take power.¹⁶⁰ These statements resurfaced in

¹⁵⁵ Fraser, “From Progressive Neoliberalism to Trump and Beyond”.

¹⁵⁶ Fraser, “Against Progressive Neoliberalism, A New Progressive Populism”.

¹⁵⁷ Fraser, “The End of Progressive Neoliberalism”.

¹⁵⁸ Richard Rorty, *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 14, 16.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid, 83.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid, 89, 90.

November 2016. Journalists and social media users pointed to Rorty's work as an unheeded prophecy of Trump.¹⁶¹ Rorty did not attack social movements as neoliberal sell-outs. He opposed socialists who believe "capitalism must be overthrown".¹⁶² Instead, he disparaged social movements for their impracticality and obsession with "theorising" problems through postmodern and post-structuralist lenses.¹⁶³ The contemporary Left produces abstract injunctions to "recognise otherness", instead of real policy proposals which might alleviate poverty.¹⁶⁴ Rorty proposed civic nationalism, rather than class-consciousness, as the way forward for the Left. He exhorted women and minorities who practice "cultural politics" to come together with straight white men in "old-fashioned" coalitions in which members emphasised their shared identity as "American citizens".¹⁶⁵

The historian Mark Lilla makes a similar case. He attributes Trump's win to public dislike of the "identity liberalism" practiced by Clinton.¹⁶⁶ She lacked a vision and simply "called out" to women and minorities.¹⁶⁷ This left straight white men feeling excluded and uninspired.¹⁶⁸ Lilla does not criticise identity politics for failing to be anti-capitalist; he considers socialist rhetoric divisive.¹⁶⁹ Rather, like Rorty, he maintains that feminist, anti-racist, and LGBTQ+ rights movements obsess over abstruse postmodern theories of power with little relevance to concrete political struggles.¹⁷⁰ He accuses these movements of focusing on small-fry issues (such as transgender bathrooms) with little relevance to the voting public.¹⁷¹ Lilla also advocates civic nationalism. He wants people to de-emphasise group identities and emphasise "what we share as citizens".¹⁷²

¹⁶¹ Edward Helmore, "Something will crack': supposed prophecy of Donald Trump goes viral," *The Guardian*, November 20, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/nov/19/donald-trump-election-prediction-richard-rorty>; Sean Illing, "Richard Rorty's prescient warnings for the American left," *Vox*, January 12, 2018, <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2017/2/9/14543938/donald-trump-richard-rorty-election-liberalism-conservatives>

¹⁶² Rorty, *Achieving Our Country*, 41, 42, 57.

¹⁶³ *Ibid*, 92, 93.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 78, 79, 99.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 96, 100, 101.

¹⁶⁶ Lilla, "The End of Identity Liberalism".

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid*.

¹⁶⁸ Mark Lilla, "A Conversation with Mark Lilla on His Critique of Identity Politics," interview by David Remnick, *The New Yorker*, August 25, 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/a-conversation-with-mark-lilla-on-his-critique-of-identity-politics>

¹⁶⁹ Mark Lilla, *The Once and Future Liberal* (New York: Harper Collins, 2017), 125, 126.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 81-82, 86-87.

¹⁷¹ Lilla, "The End of Identity Liberalism".

¹⁷² Lilla, *The Once and Future Liberal*, 15.

The sociologist Todd Gitlin has recently extended his 1995 critique of identity politics, arguing that Trump won because of the Left's "obsession with the special status of identity groups".¹⁷³ Gitlin considers much feminist, anti-racist, and LGBT rights activism a "squandering of energy".¹⁷⁴ Activists have become "attached to their marginality" and "left the centres of power uncontested".¹⁷⁵ Identity movements have withdrawn from major political contests to focus on complicated theories of their own oppression.¹⁷⁶ Practitioners of identity politics pick inconsequential (but winnable) fights over "language and imagery".¹⁷⁷ They alienate would-be supporters of the Left by stereotyping all white men as rich and powerful oppressors of marginalised people.¹⁷⁸ Gitlin imagines that a revitalised Left would emphasise "common citizenship" to bring together poor and downwardly mobile people from all backgrounds.¹⁷⁹

These liberal critiques, which focus on divisiveness and abstraction, similarly provide a lens for my analysis of alt-right/-lite and dirtbag Left discourse. They help me draw out potentially defensible critiques of social movements from anarchic YouTube discourse.

Class reductionism

These critiques are controversial. Defenders of feminism, anti-racism, and LGBTQ+ rights have taken issue with efforts to blame shifts to the Right on identity politics. Johanna Brenner argues that Fraser exaggerates the prevalence of corporatised brands of activism, and "completely erases" campaigns and movements which resist neoliberalism.¹⁸⁰ Nanette Funk earlier argued that Fraser imagines that, in "the good old days", dominant forms of feminism involved systemic critiques of capitalism, whereas in reality socialist feminists only ever held a "minority position".¹⁸¹ Fraser ignores socialists who continue to make up a similar proportion of contemporary feminists.¹⁸² Jonah Birch

¹⁷³ Todd Gitlin, "Trying to Think About the Trump Ascendancy", *Salmagundi* 195 (2017): 68.

¹⁷⁴ Todd Gitlin, *The Twilight of Common Dreams: Why America is Wracked by Culture Wars* (New York: Metropolitan, 1995), 35.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 32, 236.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 32, 152.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 146, 158.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 120, 234.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 87, 90, 91.

¹⁸⁰ Johanna Brenner, "There Was No Such Thing as 'Progressive Neoliberalism'", *Dissent*, January 14, 2017, https://www.dissentmagazine.org/online_articles/nancy-fraser-progressive-neoliberalism-social-movements-response

¹⁸¹ Nanette Funk, "Contra Fraser on Feminism and Neoliberalism", *Hypatia* 28 (2013): 181, 184.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, 179, 191.

and Paul Heideman allege that Reed and Michaels attack “the most conservative possible interpretation” of contemporary anti-racism and ignore activists who confront neoliberalism.¹⁸³ Katherine Franke alleges that Lilla’s attack on “identity liberalism” glorifies forms of mid-century liberalism which purported to serve the “common interest”, but actually benefitted white men.¹⁸⁴ Responding to “we-told-you-so” attitudes about identity politics from sections of the Left after Trump’s election, Charles W. Mills defends contemporary anti-racism as a necessary reaction to the hoarding of political and economic advantages by white people.¹⁸⁵ He attributes to Lilla, Fraser, and Michaels the false belief that ending material inequality will also end racial oppression.¹⁸⁶

This is an accusation of “class reductionism”. Such accusations are common in defences of identity-based activism. “Reductionist” viewpoints consider one phenomenon to be entirely explained by another; the first phenomenon is considered an epiphenomenon of the second.¹⁸⁷ Class reductionism is the view that various forms of oppression in modern society – like sexism, racism, homo- and transphobia – can be explained as epiphenomena of the exploitation of the working class by capitalists. From a class reductionist perspective, distinct theories to explain these forms of oppression are unnecessary because they are explained by socialist theory. Distinct movements to eradicate them are unnecessary because they will be remedied by socialist reforms or revolution.¹⁸⁸ The terms “economism” and “economic determinism” are also used to denote this view.¹⁸⁹

In earlier rounds of this debate, attacks on identity politics were also rebuked as class reductionism. Iris Marion Young argued in 1997 that Fraser and Gitlin exaggerate the extent to which “identity” movements ignore material issues. She maintained that most activists who affirm “cultural pride” in marginalised identities conceive of their

¹⁸³ Jonah Birch and Paul Heideman, “The Trouble With Anti-Antiracism”, *Jacobin*, 11 October, 2016, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/10/adolph-reed-blm-racism-capitalism-labor>

¹⁸⁴ Katherine Franke, “Making White Supremacy Respectable. Again”, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, November 21, 2016, <http://blog.lareviewofbooks.org/essays/making-white-supremacy-respectable/>

¹⁸⁵ Charles W. Mills, “Whose Identity Politics?”, *The Nation*, December 16, 2016, <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/what-is-the-left-without-identity-politics/>

¹⁸⁶ Mills, “Whose Identity Politics?”.

¹⁸⁷ Carl Ratner, “Reductionism”, in *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods*, ed. Lisa M. Given (London: SAGE Publishing, 2008), 746-747.

¹⁸⁸ Diana H. Coole, *Women in Political Theory* (Sussex: Wheatsheaf Books, 1988), 193, 222, 205.

¹⁸⁹ Daniel Chandler and Rod Murray, *A Dictionary of Media & Communication* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

behaviour “as a means to economic and political justice”.¹⁹⁰ In 1998, Eric Lott argued that “white male baby-boomer” liberals like Rorty, Gitlin, and Lilla demonstrate little familiarity with “cultural politics” and attack a caricature.¹⁹¹ He accused this cohort of class reductionism, arguing that their dismissal of social movements in favour of civic nationalism relegates women and minorities to marginal status as “extras” who would “presumably be taken care of once the (implicitly white) working class had won”.¹⁹² In her 1998 critique of both socialist and liberal opponents of identity politics, Judith Butler described both factions as “neoconservatism within the Left”. She dismissed criticisms of identity movements, maintaining that “the vitality such movements are enjoying ... continue[s] to keep the Left alive”. To Butler, efforts to discard identity politics and forge “unity” around class-consciousness or common citizenship will re-marginalise women and minorities on the Left. She attributed to her opponents the “discredited” class reductionist notion that racism, sexism, and homophobia are forms of “secondary oppression” which will disappear alongside class exploitation.¹⁹³

For their part, critics of progressive neoliberalism contend (in Reed’s words) that class reductionism is a “myth” propagated by milquetoast liberals to damage the genuine Left – in reality, “no one with any significant voice” actually believes that issues facing women and minorities should be subordinated to demands for economic redistribution.¹⁹⁴ The concept of class reductionism informs my analysis of, in particular, the dirtbag Left. The above authors contend that efforts to win converts from the Right by focusing on economic issues and directly attacking certain forms of identity politics will devolve into class reductionism. Their work encourages me to consider the extent to which the focus on economic class and attack on identity politics in dirtbag Left discourse involves class reductionist portrayals of social movement activism as unnecessary distractions.

Aggrieved entitlement (and similar concepts)

¹⁹⁰ Iris Marion Young, “Unruly Categories: A Critique of Nancy Fraser’s Dual Systems Theory”, *New Left Review* 222 (1997): 147-161.

¹⁹¹ Eric Lott, “Boomer liberalism,” *Transitions* 8 (1998): 24, 31, 34-35, 36.

¹⁹² *Ibid*, 24, 29.

¹⁹³ Judith Butler, “Merely Cultural”, *New Left Review* 227 (1998): 33-43.

¹⁹⁴ Adolph Reed Jr., “The Myth of Class Reductionism”, *The New Republic*, September 25, 2019, <https://newrepublic.com/article/154996/myth-class-reductionism>; Adolph Reed Jr., “Socialism and the Argument against Race Reductionism”, *New Labor Forum* 29 (2020): 37.

For authors who do not blame feminist, anti-racist, and LGBTQ+ rights activism themselves, other concepts explain hostility towards identity politics and political correctness. Several similar concepts theorise this hostility as a reaction to the decline of white, male, and heterosexual privileges.

Among the most influential is “aggrieved entitlement”, developed by men’s studies scholar Michael Kimmel. A number of researchers use this concept to account for elements of the alt-right/-lite.¹⁹⁵ Kimmel himself has briefly suggested that attendees at Charlottesville demonstrated aggrieved entitlement.¹⁹⁶ In 2008, Kimmel also used the concept to account for hostility towards identity politics and political correctness among young white men from middle-class backgrounds who are unmarried and in study or dead-end jobs.¹⁹⁷ This work pre-dates the alt-right/-lite, but covers similar sentiments within a similar demographic. Kimmel also claims that the concept explains enthusiasm for Trump among white men.¹⁹⁸

Kimmel does not accept that *Angry White Men* recoil from genuine flaws in social movement activism. He argues that such men have grown accustomed to the idea that they will be privileged. Earlier generations of white men benefited from “the single greatest affirmative action program in world history”.¹⁹⁹ The fathers and grandfathers of modern young men enjoyed “unfettered access to the American Dream”.²⁰⁰ They waltzed into good jobs which allowed them to buy a home, support a family, and enjoy “respect and authority” as the heads of prosperous households.²⁰¹ Kimmel maintains that white men today feel entitled to this lifestyle. However, their predecessors flourished because discrimination prevented women and minorities from competing for jobs and resources. Cultural changes have now made competition more rigorous and meritocratic. White men are being out-competed for a lifestyle which seems to them like a birthright.²⁰² They

¹⁹⁵ Neiwert, *Alt-America*, 166; Braithwaite, “It’s About Ethics in Games Journalism?” 7; Marwick and Lewis, *Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online*, 14; Ging, “Alphas, Betas, and Incels”, 640, 652; Van Valkenburgh, “Digesting the Red Pill”, 12; Lin, “Antifeminism Online”, 82, 83; Almog and Kaplan, “The Nerd and His Discontent”, 40.

¹⁹⁶ Michael Kimmel, “Trump’s angry white men”, *The World Today* 73 (2017): 14-17.

¹⁹⁷ Michael Kimmel, *Guyland: the perilous world where boys become men* (New York: Harper, 2008), 5-8, 89.

¹⁹⁸ Michael Kimmel, *Angry White Men: American masculinity at the end of an era* (New York: Nation Books, 2017).

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰⁰ Kimmel, “Trump’s angry white men”.

²⁰¹ Kimmel, *Angry White Men*.

²⁰² Ibid.

angrily interpret the levelling of the playing field as a conspiracy against them and “feel that anything even remotely approaching equality is a catastrophic loss”.²⁰³

Kimmel’s application of aggrieved entitlement to a wide array of situations makes its definition somewhat loose. In 2010, he used the term in a different sense to describe an emotion which motivates school shooters (who feel “aggrieved” by bullies and “entitled” to use retaliatory violence).²⁰⁴ In a 2013 book, he invokes aggrieved entitlement to explain talk radio, violent video games, action movies, anti-feminism, deadbeat dads, neo-Nazis, government workers who “go postal”, and the anger of men whose jobs were sent offshore.²⁰⁵ The term’s definition shifts somewhat across these contexts. Despite fuzziness in Kimmel’s usage, many researchers find aggrieved entitlement a useful concept. They deploy it as shorthand for “an outraged response to the waning of privilege”.²⁰⁶

The term “whitelash” (“white backlash”) similarly implies that voters drawn to the reactionary Right are animated by a desire to halt or reverse the waning of white privilege.²⁰⁷ Jessie Daniels has used the concept to explain the appeal of the alt-right.²⁰⁸ Arlie Russell Hochschild developed a similar concept to account for poor Louisianans who support the Tea Party and Trump. She argues that white Christian men expect to enjoy the American Dream, if they are patient and wait their turn. They then interpret measures to redress the oppression of women and minorities as preferential treatment which allows others to cut in line ahead of them. Political correctness attempts to force them to be sympathetic towards the line-cutters.²⁰⁹ Like similar concepts, Hochschild’s “deep story” describes the resentment of people who belong to historically privileged groups and therefore assumed that prosperity would be their birthright. Bharanath Ganesh invokes Hochschild’s concept to account for the behaviour of alt-right/-lite Twitter

²⁰³ Kimmel, “Trump’s angry white men”.

²⁰⁴ Rachel Kalish and Michael Kimmel, “Suicide by mass murder: Masculinity, aggrieved entitlement, and rampage school shootings,” *Health Sociology* 19 (2010): 451-464.

²⁰⁵ Kimmel, *Angry White Men*.

²⁰⁶ Kimmel, *Guyland*, 12.

²⁰⁷ CNN, “Van Jones on a Trump win: This was a white lash,” *YouTube*, November 9, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MA9aSvHzEIU>

²⁰⁸ Jessie Daniels, “The Algorithmic Rise of the ‘Alt-Right’,” *Contexts* 17 (2018), 63-65.

²⁰⁹ Arlie Russell Hochschild, *Strangers in their own land: anger and mourning on the American right* (New York: The New Press, 2016), 22, 101-113.

users.²¹⁰ These concepts interpret criticisms levelled at identity politics as rationalisations of outrage about the decline of unearned privilege.

These concepts inform my analysis of both alt-right/-lite and dirtbag Left discourse. As with class reductionism, they encourage me to look critically at ostensibly principled critiques of identity politics and consider the extent to which they actually reinforce social hierarchies with straight white men at their apex.

I therefore use an eclectic mix of theories and concepts over the course of this thesis to illuminate different themes and strategies unearthed within alt-right/-lite and dirtbag Left discourse. More broadly, this study as a whole can be usefully contextualised within intra-Left debates about the merit of contemporary social movements. Socialist critics of progressive neoliberalism, and liberal critics of divisiveness and abstraction, contend that specific flaws in such movements make people reject identity politics, and in some cases turn to the far Right. Their critiques help me to draw out the substance of complaints about identity politics in disorganised YouTube discourse and to weigh the merit of grievances which (at least on their surface) resemble those detailed by serious academics on the Left. Defenders of social movement activism argue that criticisms of identity politics from elsewhere on the Left are class reductionist, marginalising issues which affect women, non-white people, and LGBTQ+ people in favour of issues of economic class. Their work encourages me to consider whether the dirtbag Left's focus on class and attack on identity politics is dismissive of feminism, anti-racism, and LGBTQ+ rights activism in general. Concepts like aggrieved entitlement, whitelash, and the "deep story" all interpret hostility towards identity politics as a reaction to the waning of unearned privilege. They encourage me to consider whether alt-right/-lite and dirtbag Left complaints about identity politics prop up existing social hierarchies.

²¹⁰ Bharanth Ganesh, "Weaponising white thymos: flows of rage in the online audiences of the alt-right", *Cultural Studies* 34 (2020): 896.

Methodology

Research questions

The discussion to this point allows me to formulate central research questions which address the gaps in knowledge identified in the first part of this chapter and engage with the theoretical debates detailed in the second. They are (to reiterate):

- How are social movement activists constructed in alt-right/-lite and dirtbag Left discourse on YouTube?
- To what extent do constructions of social movement activists in alt-right/-lite and dirtbag Left discourse overlap with one another?
- To what extent do alt-right/-lite and dirtbag Left personalities adequately substantiate the claims which make up these constructions?

In the remainder of this chapter, I discuss the methods used to shed light on these questions.

Discourse analysis

Discourse analysis is well-suited to answer questions of this sort. Johnson notes that this umbrella term has “no clear ‘correct’ usage”; it “can be used legitimately in a variety of ways”.²¹¹ Brian Paltridge writes that “through its relatively short history the term ... has shifted from highlighting one aspect of language usage to another, as well as being used in different ways by different researchers”.²¹² Johnson therefore considers it incumbent upon authors to explain their understanding of “discourse analysis”, and how this affects their research.²¹³ This does not mean that authors must commit themselves to one existing tradition of discourse analysis. Discourse analysis utilises a diverse range of methods and authors commonly borrow selected insights from discourse theorists without emulating their entire methods. Katherine Bischooping and Amber Gazso observe that, while all discourse analysts are guided by “certain central concepts”, many blend insights from several theorists and movements in “eclectic ways” best suited to their research

²¹¹ Johnson, *Governing Change*, 17.

²¹² Brian Paltridge, *Discourse Analysis* (London: Continuum, 2006), 6.

²¹³ *Ibid.*

interests.²¹⁴ My approach to discourse analysis is informed by a number of traditions, to best meet the aims of this thesis.

First, I am influenced by core insights which inform all discourse research. The conception of “discourse” which underpins the field was popularised in large part by Michel Foucault.²¹⁵ Stuart Hall explains that, before Foucault, the term “discourse” was a linguistic concept which simply referred to “passages of connected writing or speech”.²¹⁶ Margaret Wetherell *et al.* observe that the meaning Foucault gave the term “allows one to see the world differently”.²¹⁷ Wetherell explains that discourse analysis is underpinned by “the notion of discourse as *social action*”.²¹⁸ Discourse analysts reject the idea that language is “neutral”, that “[i]t adds nothing but simply conveys from one person to another the nature of the world, people’s impressions, their thoughts and opinions”.²¹⁹ Instead, discourse analysts accept that language plays a key role in constructing the social world.²²⁰ As James Paul Gee and Michael Handford put it, when humans use language “we make the world meaningful in some ways and not others”.²²¹ For instance, odd or deviant behaviour has existed in all human societies, but people across time and cultures have talked about such behaviour as “witchcraft”, “adolescent delinquency”, or “schizophrenia”.²²² For people exposed to the relevant discourse, the existence of witches (or delinquents or schizophrenics) becomes “part of their social reality”.²²³ Language does not simply represent the world; it helps to construct our realities. In Sae-Mi Lee *et al.*’s summary, “[w]e see what we see not because it is *the* universal truth, but because it is what we know to see and look for”.²²⁴ Meanings

²¹⁴ Katherine Bischooping and Amber Gazso, *Analysing Talk in the Social Sciences* (London: SAGE Publications, 2016), 130, 156.

²¹⁵ Margaret Wetherell, “Foundations and Building Blocks”, in *Discourse Theory and Practice*, ed. Margaret Wetherell, Stephanie Taylor, Simeon J. Yates (London: SAGE Publications, 2001), 12-13.

²¹⁶ Stuart Hall, “Foucault: Power, knowledge and discourse”, in *Discourse Theory and Practice: A Reader*, ed. Margaret Wetherell, Stephanie Taylor, Simeon J. Yates (London: SAGE Publications, 2001), 72.

²¹⁷ Margaret Wetherell, Stephanie Taylor, Simeon J. Yates, “Introduction”, in *Discourse Theory and Practice*, ed. Margaret Wetherell, Stephanie Taylor, Simeon J. Yates (London: SAGE Publications, 2001), 1.

²¹⁸ Margaret Wetherell, “Foundations and Building Blocks”, 10.

²¹⁹ Margaret Wetherell, “Themes in Discourse Research: The Case of Diana”, in *Discourse Theory and Practice*, ed. Margaret Wetherell, Stephanie Taylor, Simeon J. Yates (London: SAGE Publications, 2001), 15.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, 16.

²²¹ James Paul Gee and Michael Handford, “Introduction”, in *The Routledge Handbook of Discourse Analysis*, ed. James Paul Gee and Michael Handford (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2013), 5.

²²² Wetherell, “Themes in Discourse Research: The Case of Diana”, 16.

²²³ Paltridge, *Discourse Analysis*, 8.

²²⁴ Sae-Mi Lee *et al.*, “Student-Athletes’ Experiences with Racial Microaggressions in Sport: A Foucauldian Discourse Analysis”, *The Qualitative Report* 23 (2018): 1021.

constructed through language have consequences – discourses determine whether someone displaying aberrant behaviour will be incarcerated, medicated, or burnt at the stake. Discourse analysts therefore see texts as places in which versions of reality are constructed and study the processes by which this is achieved, as well as its consequences.²²⁵ Influenced by these insights, I investigate the ways in which dirtbag Left and alt-right/-lite content-creators use language to make feminist, anti-racist, and LGBTQ+ rights activism meaningful as noxious “identity politics” and construct activists as “social justice warriors”.

While, as mentioned, I draw on multiple discourse theorists and do not aim to follow Foucault’s entire method, I do take several further insights from the Foucauldian tradition. Analyses in this tradition tend to focus on ways in which authoritative “knowledge” on a topic might be “contradictory, questionable, and sometimes illogical”.²²⁶ Foucault’s own analyses focused on the production of “scientific” and “rational” ideas about medicine, mental illness, criminality, and sexuality.²²⁷ Disparaging characterisations of social movements and activists may not be authoritative in the wider world, but they are within the online communities I investigate. Moreover, as indicated in my description of the Intellectual Dark Web and as discussed further in Chapter Four, hostility towards feminism, anti-racism, and LGBTQ+ rights activism is often constructed as “scientific” and “rational”. My approach is shaped by the Foucauldian injunction to question whether such discourses are themselves “messy and haphazard”.²²⁸

I follow Foucault, more than the Critical Discourse Analysis theorists mentioned below, in eschewing granular analysis of the role played by a text’s grammatical features in constructing versions of social reality. A number of key CDA theorists (such as Fairclough, van Dijk, and Ruth Wodak) are themselves linguists, and much CDA research therefore emphasises this sort of “micro-level” analysis.²²⁹ I do not take such an approach, which (in my view) often produces results which are inaccessible to those without strong backgrounds in linguistics. Forensic inspection of sentences or fragments of sentences

²²⁵ Wetherell, “Themes in Discourse Research: The Case of Diana,” 16.

²²⁶ Bischooping and Gazso, *Analysing Talk in the Social Sciences*, 133.

²²⁷ Ibid.

²²⁸ Ibid.

²²⁹ Ruth Wodak, “What CDA is about - a summary of its history, important concepts and its developments”, in *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis*, ed. Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer (London: SAGE Publications, 2001), 6; Van Dijk, “Principles of critical discourse analysis”, 261.

can also limit the scope of research.²³⁰ Foucault believed that earlier analysis of discourse was too narrowly focused on the “rules” of grammar and linguistics.²³¹ By contrast, Foucauldian analysis of the ways in which texts constitute certain versions of social reality focuses more broadly on the identification of themes and representations within discourse.²³² I follow such an approach.

I also take insights from political discourse analysis. Political scientists have participated in the wider “discursive turn” in the social sciences.²³³ Johnson notes that discourse analysis is now “an important and fruitful area of research” which complements more “traditional” forms of political science.²³⁴ My description of this thesis as “political discourse analysis” might be contested by some scholars as disagreements exist on the delimitations of “political discourse”. Van Dijk offers narrow criteria, which only include talk and text created in the course of political action (i.e. “governing, ruling, legislating, protesting, dissenting, or voting”) which is “primarily” intended to serve a “direct functional role” in political processes.²³⁵ He excludes media discourse about politics because its primary goal is to inform the public.²³⁶ However, the online media I investigate is often an attempt to influence political processes – content-creators praise or denounce specific politicians at election time and rally support for petitions and protests. In the hyper-partisan world of online media, I do not consider van Dijk’s distinction tenable. I agree with Fairclough’s broader definition of “political discourse”, which extends beyond the polity and includes all dimensions of social life in which people act to pursue the interests or values of a social group.²³⁷ The texts I analyse fall under Fairclough’s definition, which includes media discourse about politics.²³⁸

²³⁰ Paltridge, *Discourse Analysis*, 197.

²³¹ Bischooping and Gazso, *Analysing Talk in the Social Sciences*, 131.

²³² Rossman and Rallis quoted in Pranee Liamputtong, *Qualitative Research Methods* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

²³³ Patricia L. Dunmire, “Political Discourse Analysis: Exploring the Language of Politics and the Politics of Language”, *Language and Linguistics Compass* 6 (2012): 745.

²³⁴ Carol Johnson, “Australian political science and the study of discourse”, refereed paper presented at the *Australasian Political Studies Jubilee Conference*, Australian National University, Canberra, October 1-4, 2002, https://digital.library.adelaide.edu.au/dspace/bitstream/2440/28318/1/hdl_28318.pdf

²³⁵ Tuen A. Van Dijk, “What is Political Discourse Analysis?”, *Belgian Journal of Linguistics* 11 (1997): 14, 22, 23.

²³⁶ Van Dijk, “What is Political Discourse Analysis?”, 23.

²³⁷ Fairclough, “Genres in Political Discourse”, 33.

²³⁸ *Ibid*, 33-34.

From political discourse analysis, I take the idea that talk and text are consequential forms of political action.²³⁹ In Hall's words, politics is not driven towards some "preordained end" by social or economic factors.²⁴⁰ Political events are often shaped by linguistic interventions.²⁴¹ Hall documents the Thatcher government's success (after a decade of "intense and prolonged contestation") in winning citizens to "a new conception of themselves and society".²⁴² Constructions within discourse of the public sector as inefficient, for instance, left the "familiar Thatcherite litany ... indelibly printed on the public mind".²⁴³ This allowed for otherwise impossible policy outcomes. Norman Fairclough argues that the Blair government's success hinged on its ability to wield language. It successfully constructed "a veiled form of Thatcherism" as the "Third Way" and "New Labour".²⁴⁴ These more palatable formulations were "constantly being talked into being" within government discourse.²⁴⁵ In John Kane's summary: "The lesson is that speech *matters* in politics, and matters in consequential ways".²⁴⁶

Political discourse analysis aims to illuminate the implicit properties of language which is often designed to be palatable. Fairclough explains that political discourse analysis exposes "a gap between rhetoric and reality" in political discourse.²⁴⁷ Despite itself, such discourse often contains "internal evidence" which points towards rationales behind or functions of a text which are not made explicit.²⁴⁸ These "less savoury" elements are often missed in more superficial readings.²⁴⁹ Van Dijk agrees that political discourse analysts look at subtle properties of discourse to make "reliable inferences" about the implicit reasons "behind" a text or the functions it serves.²⁵⁰ Johnson notes that such analysis sometimes involves challenging factual inaccuracies in political discourse, and in this thesis I often refer to evidence from outside texts themselves to show that claims therein are incorrect.²⁵¹ However, political discourse analysis does not aim to expose intentional

²³⁹ Van Dijk, "What is Political Discourse Analysis?", 20.

²⁴⁰ Stuart Hall, *The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left* (London: Verso, 1988), 273.

²⁴¹ Ibid.

²⁴² Ibid, 9, 10.

²⁴³ Ibid, 273, 274.

²⁴⁴ Norman Fairclough, *New Labour, New Language?* (London: Routledge, 2000), 2-3, 9.

²⁴⁵ Ibid, 4.

²⁴⁶ John Kane, "What's at stake in Australian political rhetoric?", in *Studies in Australian Political Rhetoric*, ed. John Uhr and Ryan Walter (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 2014), 10.

²⁴⁷ Fairclough, *New Labour, New Language*, 148.

²⁴⁸ Ibid, 148, 151.

²⁴⁹ Ibid, 145, 151.

²⁵⁰ Van Dijk, "What is Political Discourse Analysis", 40, 41.

²⁵¹ Johnson, *Governing Change*, 15.

lies. Rather, it reveals taken-for-granted and reflexive principles and attitudes.²⁵² Patricia Dunmire explains that political discourse analysis excels in “ferreting out” the ways in which wider social issues (e.g. racism) “manifest discursively” at a given time.²⁵³ I am influenced by this aspect of political discourse analysis. I focus on texts which denounce feminism, anti-racism, and LGBTQ+ rights, but which present – on their surface – as non-sexist, non-racist, and non-homophobic. This constitutes, in van Dijk’s words, the sort of “fishy” discourse which warrants investigation into its subtle and implicit elements.²⁵⁴ My effort in this thesis to investigate the coherence of arguments in texts produced by political content-creators and illuminate the implicit rationales and attitudes “behind” these arguments therefore takes inspiration from political discourse analysis.

Like other in this tradition, I also consider the relationship between discourse and ideology. Political ideologies manifest in discourse. As Finlayson notes, ideas cannot be known entirely in the abstract, disconnected from their formulation in “communicable terms”.²⁵⁵ Van Dijk explains that “ideologies are largely acquired, expressed, and reproduced by discourse”. Discourse analysis is “crucial to understand the ways ideologies emerge, spread, and are used”.²⁵⁶ The term “ideology” – in everyday and academic usage – is often contrasted with “truth” and used to describe the supposed mystifications of one’s political opponents.²⁵⁷ I draw on a political science tradition wherein the term extends to all bodies of thought which (in Andrew Vincent’s definition) “incorporate conceptions of human nature ... [and] interaction; the values to which humans ought either to reject or aspire to; and the correct technical arrangements for social, economic, and political life”.²⁵⁸ Liberalism and fascism or feminism and sexism (for instance) are therefore all considered ideologies. Johnson explains that this conception allows analysts to investigate the diverse “ideological underpinnings” which shape a discursive agent’s construction of contemporary issues.²⁵⁹ Finlayson notes that ideologies function as “playbook[s]” of ready-made “cognitive shortcuts” for making

²⁵² Ibid, 41.

²⁵³ Dunmire, “Political Discourse Analysis”, 745.

²⁵⁴ Van Dijk, “What is Political Discourse Analysis?”, 38.

²⁵⁵ Alan Finlayson, “Ideology and Political Rhetoric”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Ideologies*, ed. Michael Freeden, Lyman Tower Sargent, and Marc Stears (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 209.

²⁵⁶ Tuen A. van Dijk, “Ideology and Discourse”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Ideologies*, ed. Michael Freeden, Lyman Tower Sargent, and Marc Stears (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 176.

²⁵⁷ Ibid, 175.

²⁵⁸ Andrew Vincent, *Modern Political Ideologies* (Hoboken: Wiley, 2010), 18.

²⁵⁹ Johnson, *Governing Change*, 13.

political claims about novel phenomena.²⁶⁰ This conception also allows analysts to draw on ideological perspectives to highlight and critique aspects of other ideologies.²⁶¹ I consider the role of ideological frameworks in shaping ostensibly “pragmatic” political claims. I use competing ideologies (e.g. feminism or anti-racism) to critique them.

Like many political discourse analysts, I also take insights from Critical Discourse Analysis. As mentioned, I follow CDA researchers in analysing contemporary social problems with a view towards effecting “change through critical understanding”.²⁶² I also follow CDA’s instruction to be “critical” of the discourse under analysis. Fairclough clarifies that “critical” analysis involves both “normative and explanatory critique”. It aims to explain and evaluate – rather than “simply describe” – the object of study.²⁶³ Van Dijk agrees that CDA is “unabashedly normative”.²⁶⁴ I therefore take from CDA the licence to offer explanations for – and make normative judgements about – characterisations of anti-racism, feminism, and LGBTQ+ rights in online discourse. Such analysis is necessary because previous researchers have often not sought to evaluate or explain the alt-right/-lite’s claims about identity politics; they have either taken these claims at face value or dismissed them as beneath discussion.

From Fairclough’s work on CDA, I also take the suggestion to pay attention to “the primacy of interdiscursivity” – i.e. the ways in which one discourse “draws upon others in complex ways”.²⁶⁵ In particular, newer discourses combine elements of “relatively stable and durable discourses” to boost their efficacy and ostensible coherence.²⁶⁶ Fairclough develops this idea from a similar Foucauldian concept.²⁶⁷ Jean Carabine draws directly from Foucault’s example and encourages researchers to observe how discourses are “often opportunistic”: in their efforts to “produce potent new ways of conceptualising [an] issue ... discourses ‘hook’ into normative ideas and common-sense notions”.²⁶⁸ I aim to draw out such interdiscursivity in the dirtbag Left and alt-right/-lite’s

²⁶⁰ Finlayson, “Ideology and Political Rhetoric”, 199.

²⁶¹ Johnson, *Governing Change*, 15.

²⁶² Van Dijk, “Principles of critical discourse analysis”, 252.

²⁶³ Fairclough, “Critical discourse analysis”, 9.

²⁶⁴ Van Dijk, “Principles of critical discourse analysis”, 253.

²⁶⁵ Fairclough quoted in Sara Mills, *Discourse* (London: Routledge, 2004), 133-134.

²⁶⁶ Norman Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language* (London: Routledge, 1995), 353

²⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 58.

²⁶⁸ Jean Carabine, “Unmarried Motherhood 1830-1990: A Genealogical Analysis”, in *Discourse as Data: A Guide for Analysis*, ed. Margaret Wetherell, Stephanie Taylor, Simeon J. Yates (London: SAGE Publications, 2001), 269.

characterisation of identity politics. This will help me to draw out aspects of discourse which, in order to be effective, depend upon remaining implicit. For instance, content-creators may attempt to combine contradictory discourses, or draw upon older discourses which have themselves already been convincingly discredited as factually inaccurate or prejudiced.

Insights from several traditions of discourse analysis therefore shape my inquiry into the dirtbag Left and alt-right/-lite's construction of feminist, anti-racist, and LGBTQ+ rights activism. I work with an understanding of language as a form of social action which makes the world meaningful in consequential ways. From Foucault, I take an emphasis on the coherence of discourse which presents itself as "scientific" and "rational" and a focus on themes and representations within texts, rather than their grammatical features. From political discourse analysis, I understand discursive constructions to affect political outcomes. I examine arguments in texts created by political actors, make explicit the implicit rationale "behind" (or function of) a text, and highlight the discursive manifestation of wider social issues. I investigate manifestations and permutations of political ideology within discourse. Influenced by CDA, I orient my research around a contemporary social issue and examine a possible alternative. I also follow CDA's instruction to explain and evaluate the discourse under consideration. I pay attention to the ways in which established discourses are conscripted to legitimate new ones. .

Case study research

In two case studies, I analyse discourse produced by one prominent member from each the alt-right/-lite and dirtbag Left. Case study research involves in-depth investigation of a small number of examples, which are considered cases of a wider phenomenon. Gretchen Rossman and Sharon Rallis explain that case studies "seek to understand the larger phenomenon through close examination of a specific case".²⁶⁹ John Gerring notes that often "in-depth knowledge of an individual example is more helpful than fleeting knowledge about a larger number of examples".²⁷⁰ Bruce Berg agrees that case studies are "able to capture various nuances, patterns, and more latent elements" which might be

²⁶⁹ Ibid.

²⁷⁰ Ibid.

overlooked in large-scale studies.²⁷¹ As mentioned, I aim to uncover elements of online discourse which I believe broader studies (such as Ottoni *et al.*'s content analysis of 13 channels) have failed to illuminate. Moreover, Christine Meyer notes that case studies are “tailor-made for exploring new processes or behaviours or ones that are little understood”.²⁷² Case studies allow researchers to get to grips with relatively novel phenomena, like the alt-right/-lite and the dirtbag Left.²⁷³

My analysis also has a comparative element. To shed light on disagreement about the dirtbag Left's relationship to the alt-right/-lite, I look for similarities, differences, and links between dirtbag Left and alt-right/-lite discourse.²⁷⁴ I compare the dirtbag Left's characterisation of identity politics with alt-right/-lite's to test the contention that the two sensibilities are scarcely distinguishable. Melinda Mills notes that such comparisons between case studies “reveal unique aspects of a particular entity that would be virtually impossible to detect otherwise”.²⁷⁵

A case study approach does not allow me to make generalisations about either phenomena. John Cresswell explains that “[a]s a rule, qualitative researchers are reluctant to generalise from one case to another because the contexts of cases differ”.²⁷⁶ However, this does not mean that my research only advances knowledge of the two content-creators examined here. As Berg notes, “few human behaviours are unique, idiosyncratic, and spontaneous”; an explanation of one person's behaviour is likely to explain the behaviour of some others involved in the same activity.²⁷⁷ Researchers can start from a hunch that insights from earlier work may apply to other cases of interest. Later research can build upon earlier case studies to develop, in a cumulative process, more general knowledge of social realities.²⁷⁸ Findings from case studies should be treated as a “hypothesis” about

²⁷¹ Bruce L. Berg and Howard Lune, *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences* (Boston: Pearson, 2012), 327.

²⁷² Christine Benedicte Meyer, “A Case Study in Case Study Methodology”, in *Field Methods*, ed. H. Russell Bernard (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2001), 330.

²⁷³ Liamputtong, *Qualitative Research Methods*.

²⁷⁴ Melinda C. Mills, “Comparative Research”, in *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods*, ed. Lisa M. Given (London: SAGE Publishing, 2008), 100-103.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁶ John W. Cresswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2007), 74.

²⁷⁷ Bruce L. Berg, *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2001), 232.

²⁷⁸ Michael Quinn Patton, *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2002), 582-584.

the wider phenomenon, which can be tested in further work.²⁷⁹ Jean-Luc Moriceau explains that this perspective “impose[s] upon the reader the charge of ensuring the generalisation of the theory in question”.²⁸⁰ My findings can contribute to the development, over time, of more generalised knowledge about these phenomena.

Selection of case studies

As Michael Quinn Patton insists, careful selection of cases which yield “the most information of greatest utility” is therefore still important in research with sample sizes too small to permit generalisations.²⁸¹ I undertake “purposive sampling”, which requires researchers to identify “[i]nformation-rich cases ... from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry”.²⁸² Ted Palys summarises the approach: “Think of the person or place or situation that has the largest potential for advancing your understanding and look there”.²⁸³ As Berg notes, this requires researchers to develop “special knowledge or expertise” about a phenomenon in order to make informed judgements about sampling.²⁸⁴

Before selecting a subject to illuminate constructions of identity politics by alt-right/-lite YouTubers, I sampled videos from a large number of English-language channels. I was aware of some of these channels through personal experience as a YouTube user, and learnt of others in the map of collaborations created by Lewis.²⁸⁵ I then identified promising content-creators who, in line with the aims of this thesis, often outline their criticisms of identity politics at length, and exist at the more “moderate” end of YouTube’s radicalisation pipeline (wherein content-creators at least claim to disavow racism, sexism, homo- and transphobia). I watched further videos from nine such channels: Amazing Atheist, Armoured Skeptic, Bearing, Chris Ray Gun, Computing Forever, Lauren Southern, Paul Joseph Watson, Sargon of Akkad, and Stefan Molyneux.

²⁷⁹ Ibid, 583.

²⁸⁰ Jean-Luc Moriceau, “Generalizability”, in *Encyclopedia of Case Study Research*, ed. Albert J. Mills, Gabrielle Durepos and Elden Wiebe (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2009), 421.

²⁸¹ Patton, *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods*, 242.

²⁸² Ibid, 230, 234.

²⁸³ Ted Palys, “Purposive Sampling”, in *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods*, ed. Lisa M. Given (London: SAGE Publishing, 2008), 698.

²⁸⁴ Berg, *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences*, 50-51.

²⁸⁵ Lewis, *Alternative Influence*, 10.

I have selected Carl Benjamin – a.k.a. “Sargon of Akkad” – for analysis. As discussed more fully in the next chapter, Benjamin is a popular and prolific British YouTuber. He began uploading videos in 2013 and – as of December 2021 – has uploaded over 1,100 videos to his main channel, which boasts over 900,000 subscribers and 305 million views. He has also uploaded another 1,800 videos to a number of smaller channels, which have collected 280 million more views. Benjamin’s collaborators constitute a *Who’s Who* of the alt-right/-lite. He also made a high-profile run for European Parliament in 2019 as a member of the UK Independence Party (UKIP). Three separate studies into YouTube’s radicalisation pipeline have noted that Benjamin starts some viewers down the path towards white nationalism.²⁸⁶ Despite this indication of extremism, Benjamin denies being racist, sexist, homo- or transphobic, and purports to advance reasonable and principled criticisms of social movements. He critiques identity politics at length and in detail. Nagle met with Benjamin in a 2018 debate at Trinity College Dublin, and (despite political differences) credited him as “principled” critic of identity politics who is unfairly called racist and sexist in the press.²⁸⁷

Benjamin has publicly engaged with all of the alt-right/-lite’s main factions and preoccupations. He has flirted with white nationalism, amplified memes and trolls from 4chan, pushed ideas from the manosphere, peddled conspiracy theories, participated in Gamergate, and fancies himself a member of Intellectual Dark Web. Benjamin’s videos therefore collect talking points from across the alt-right/-lite into one place. These attributes make Benjamin a rich source of information relevant to my research questions. If substantive complaints about feminist, anti-racist, and LGBTQ+ rights activism do circulate within the alt-right/-lite, he is well-placed to articulate them. My focus on Benjamin is a strategic decision to analyse what Patton calls a “critical case”, in which the researcher has reason to think that “if it doesn’t happen here, it won’t happen anywhere”.²⁸⁸

To select a case study from the smaller dirtbag Left, I first acquainted myself with its content-creators. I watched and listened to podcasts and videos produced by *Chapo Trap House*, *Red Scare*, *Cum Town*, and Shanks (a.k.a. “friendlyjordies”). I was aware of some

²⁸⁶ Evans, “From Memes to Infowars”; Lewis, *Alternative Influence*, 3, 10; Horta Ribeiro, “Auditing Radicalisation Pathways on YouTube”, 4.

²⁸⁷ Sargon of Akkad, “Sargon & Angela Nagle On Identity Politics”, *YouTube*, 1:28:25, October 4, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pw33NKXQSLc>

²⁸⁸ Patton, *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods*, 236-237.

of these from personal experience and learnt of others in media reports about the phenomenon. Other content-creators mentioned in the last chapter had not begun their careers during this stage of research in 2018. I have selected Shanks for analysis for several reasons. Shanks stands out because he primarily makes content for YouTube. Because he competes for attention on the alt-right/-lite's platform of choice, I reason that Shanks is especially incentivised to produce content which appeals to would-be members of the alt-right/-lite. While all dirtbag Left content-creators court this demographic, I reason that Shanks (more than podcasters) is competing for their attention "in the trenches". This makes him a rich source of information about issues central to this thesis.

Like others in this milieu, Shanks receives mixed reviews from the mainstream press. For instance, *Rolling Stone* praises his brand of unorthodox politics, which includes righteous "contempt for progressive darlings" and appeals to hard-to-reach young men who are otherwise drawn to right-wing YouTubers.²⁸⁹ *Pedestrian* is more ambivalent, celebrating his ability to direct "the latent rage of the young and disenfranchised" towards corporations and conservative politicians, but highlighting a history of "culturally shaky" comments about women and non-white people.²⁹⁰ Negative coverage in *Vice* calls Shanks "totally insensitive and tone deaf" on racial issues, while *The Advocate* accuses him of "cruel, mean-spirited and lazy" comedy which makes fun of marginalised ethnicities and sexualities.²⁹¹ Criticism in *Crikey* equates Shanks with the reactionary Right – he appeals to "the disaffected" with prejudiced ravings in the manner of Trump or Pauline Hanson.²⁹² This diversity of views reflects the wider confusion about the nature of the dirtbag Left.

Unlike other dirtbag Left personalities, his vulgar style and attitudes towards women and minorities have become prominent issues at the highest levels of public life. In 2020 and

²⁸⁹ Andrew P. Street, "Jordan Shanks' Friendly Game", *Rolling Stone*, September 21, 2020, <https://au.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-features/jordan-shanks-friendly-game-17138/>

²⁹⁰ Cam Tyeson, "The Arrest Of A Friendlyjordies Producer Is An Overreach By Police, Even If He Is Polarising", *Pedestrian*, June 17, 2021, <https://www.pedestrian.tv/news/friendlyjordies-producer-arrest-police-overreach/>

²⁹¹ Liam Armstrong, "Friendlyjordies Equates Triple J to the Group Behind the Rwandan Genocide", *Vice*, January 24, 2018, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/wjp9bw/friendlyjordies-equates-triple-j-with-the-people-behind-the-rwandan-genocide>; Rob Inglis, "Labor needs to distance itself from vlogger friendlyjordies", *The Advocate*, September 26, 2020, <https://www.theadvocate.com.au/story/6942797/labor-needs-to-distance-itself-from-vlogger-friendlyjordies/>

²⁹² Tory Shepherd, "Friendlyjordies is the Pauline Hanson of social media. He's definitely no martyr", *Crikey*, June 21, 2021, <https://www.crikey.com.au/2021/06/21/friendlyjordies-pauline-hanson-social-media-no-martyr/>

2021, Shanks became a regular topic of discussion in the Australian print and broadcast media, and on the floor of state and federal parliaments. These developments are detailed more fully in Chapter Six. In short, politicians and businesspeople targeted by Shanks have alleged in high-profile forums – including the Australian parliament, the Federal Court, and complaints to police – that his critiques are racist, sexist, and vitriolic beyond the degree acceptable in public life.²⁹³ Most notable is his stoush with the former Deputy Premier of New South Wales, John Barilaro, who listed racist attacks from Shanks as a major reason behind his resignation from parliament in October 2021.²⁹⁴ Because past and present Labor Party politicians have appeared in videos with Shanks, members of the Liberal-National Coalition (as well as a number of journalists) have characterised Labor as bigoted by association.²⁹⁵ Some Labor figures – most notably former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd – have defended Shanks in the press and in parliament.²⁹⁶ However, others have anonymously briefed journalists on internal debates about whether working with Shanks is appropriate.²⁹⁷ One MP reported frustration that “two versions” of Shanks exist in media reports, making it hard to judge whether he is a suitable collaborator.²⁹⁸ The nature of his views about women and minorities, and his crass style are therefore significant unanswered questions in Australian public life. These events have focused my attention on Shanks, a decision which constitutes what Patton calls “opportunistic or emergent sampling”; I have taken advantage of developments which unfolded during the

²⁹³ Georgina Mitchell, “John Barilaro sues YouTube comedian Friendlyjordies for defamation”, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, May 28, 2021, <https://www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/john-barilaro-sues-youtube-comedian-friendlyjordies-for-defamation-20210527-p57vvi.html>; Nicolle Flint MP, Twitter post, August 12, 2021, 6:19PM, <https://twitter.com/LiberalAus/status/1426074156345397250>; Mitchell, “John Barilaro reported Friendlyjordies to police six months before producer’s arrest”.

²⁹⁴ Lucy Cormack and Tom Rabe, “John Barilaro to resign as NSW Deputy Premier”, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, October 4, 2021, <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/nsw/john-barilaro-to-resign-as-nsw-deputy-premier-20211004-p58wxd.html>

²⁹⁵ Lucy Cormack and Fergus Hunter, “How to solve a problem like friendlyjordies? Politicians debate new-age commentator”, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, September 20, 2020, <https://www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/how-to-solve-a-problem-like-friendlyjordies-politicians-debate-new-age-commentator-20200918-p55x4a.html>; Caitlin Fitzsimmons, “Labor figures silent on Friendlyjordies ‘wog’ barbs aimed at Barilaro”, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, May 31, 2020, <https://www.smh.com.au/national/labor-figures-silent-on-friendlyjordies-wog-barbs-aimed-at-barilaro-20210530-p57wg5.html>

²⁹⁶ Michael Koziol, “Rudd backs FriendlyJordies as serious ‘broadcaster’ despite controversial acts”, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, November 1, 2020, <https://www.smh.com.au/national/friendlyjordies-a-serious-broadcaster-and-part-of-diverse-media-rudd-20201030-p56a6f.html>; Julian Hill MP, “Arrest of ‘friendlyjordies’ producer raises serious questions”, *YouTube*, 4:48, June 24, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z4aiBWOpzI>

²⁹⁷ Cormack and Hunter, “How to solve a problem like friendlyjordies? Politicians debate new-age commentator”.

²⁹⁸ Rick Morton, “The police, the YouTube star and the Labor Party”, *The Saturday Paper*, June 19, 2021, <https://www.thesaturdaypaper.com.au/news/politics/2021/06/19/the-police-the-youtube-star-and-the-labor-party/162402480011895>

research period.²⁹⁹ Patton also encourages a focus on “politically important cases” which yield relevant and useful information for political actors.³⁰⁰ My analysis yields such information for those unsure about the suitability of collaborations with Shanks.

Text selection

Both Benjamin and Shanks are too prolific for me to analyse their entire output. They both began their YouTube channels in early 2013. I look at material produced between 2013 and late 2021. I analysed texts with an eye towards “theoretical saturation”. That is, as Colleen MacQuarrie explains, I collected data until I had a sense that “no new information is forthcoming from the empirical materials” and that “no further theorising results from the information being collected”.³⁰¹ This approach involves “constant comparison”, in which analysis and data collection happen simultaneously rather than as discrete stages of research.³⁰² From the early stages of data collection, I identified prominent themes in Shanks and Benjamin’s characterisation of social movements and sought out concepts which could help to explain and evaluate them. I continued to collect data until I became satisfied that the themes identified and concepts invoked could account for everything observed in new texts.

This involved two phases of research. In the first, which Patton calls “exploratory”, I started from the earliest uploads on each channel and watched videos in sequence.³⁰³ I intended to watch all videos produced by Benjamin and Shanks in their first year on YouTube, but this proved insufficient in practice. Shanks did not shift his focus to political issues until several months after his first upload, and had not yet warmed to themes which I knew from preliminary research were important parts of his later criticism. I ultimately felt confident that I had developed analytical points ready to be tested (through more focused data collection) after watching 208 videos uploaded by Shanks, to late 2016. Benjamin shared critiques of social movements from his earliest days on YouTube. However, Gamergate – a major formative event for Benjamin – did

²⁹⁹ Patton, *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods*, 240.

³⁰⁰ *Ibid*, 214.

³⁰¹ Colleen MacQuarrie, “Theoretical Saturation”, in *Encyclopedia of Case Study Research*, ed. Albert J. Mills, Gabrielle Durepos and Elden Wiebe (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2009), 927-298.

³⁰² Phyllis Noerager Stern, “Constant Comparison”, in *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods*, ed. Lisa M. Given (London: SAGE Publishing, 2008), 114-115.

³⁰³ Patton, *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods*, 239.

not occur within his first year on YouTube. I therefore only moved on to more focused data collection after watching 207 videos uploaded by Benjamin to the end of 2014.

I then moved on to a more focused search for texts likely to yield information which could confirm, disconfirm, or add nuance to my emergent analysis. I searched for material likely to contain information relevant to themes I had identified in Shanks and Benjamin's discourse. For instance, after I observed that the supposed irrationality of activists is a theme in Benjamin's discourse, I used YouTube's search function to look for videos with relevant keywords (such as "reason", "science", and "facts") in their title or description. This process was complicated by the fact that both men often use titles and descriptions which do not clearly indicate the content of a video. I therefore also manually assessed the titles and thumbnail pictures of their uploads to identify potentially relevant material. In this phase, I also supplemented my data with texts from outside Shanks and Benjamin's own YouTube channels, if they seemed likely to contain relevant information. For instance, I looked at Benjamin's guest appearances on other channels and at certain episodes of the *Friendlyjordies Podcast* which were never uploaded to YouTube.³⁰⁴ I updated and refined my analysis to account for new themes and complexities encountered in this phase of research. I continued this process until I became comfortable that my analysis "will fit any other data ... that might still be collected".³⁰⁵ Overall, in this thesis I directly cite 580 texts created by or featuring either Benjamin or Shanks, the vast majority of which are videos uploaded to their respective YouTube channels.

³⁰⁴ Friendlyjordies Podcast, "PLANET OF THE HUMANS IS FULL OF LIES - Friendlyjordies Podcast Live", *YouTube*, 1:27:43, May 9, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4_WkF3E2iss

³⁰⁵ Margarete Sandelowski, "Theoretical Saturation", in *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods*, ed. Lisa M. Given (London: SAGE Publishing, 2008), 875.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I first contextualised alt-right/-lite and dirtbag Left content-creators within the Internet-driven transformation of political communication, which influences issues central to political science. I then identified gaps in our knowledge of these phenomena. First, there is a need for critical research which tests the popular idea that the alt-right/-lite's aversion to identity politics reflects flaws within social movements. Second, there is a need for research which analyses the arguments of reactionary content-creators at the "moderate" end of YouTube's radicalisation pipeline. Third, there is a need for analysis of dirtbag Left media which illuminates its antagonism towards identity politics, and adoption of an aesthetic resonant with the alt-right/-lite's audience.

I then discussed broader theoretical issues. I utilise a mix of concepts to explain different aspects of online discourse, but consistently draw upon intra-Left debates over the value of identity politics. Socialist critics of identity politics claim that social movement activists exhibit priorities and behaviour which repel and alienate people, born out of their inability to criticise capitalism. Their liberal counterparts attribute dislike of identity politics to activists who prefer the purity and sophistication of marginal movements to the compromise and practicality of effective coalitions. Defenders of social movements believe that these critiques involve class reductionism – dismissive attitudes towards racism, sexism, homophobia and transphobia rooted in a belief that each is secondary to class exploitation. With concepts such as aggrieved entitlement, many scholars interpret dislike of identity politics as resentment about the decline of unearned privilege. These concepts help me draw out the substance of online complaints about social movements.

I outlined the key research questions which guide the remainder of this thesis and the methods used to answer them. I blend insights from Foucauldian, Critical, and Political discourse analysis to identify, evaluate, and explain the ways in which YouTubers use language to construct feminism, anti-racism, and LGBTQ+ rights activism as contemptible "identity politics". I have selected case studies well-placed to address these gaps and theoretical questions. Benjamin presents as a non-bigoted critic of problems within social movements, but features in studies of YouTube's radicalisation pipeline. He collects narratives from across the online far Right into one place. Benjamin belongs to understudied cohort of "moderate" alt-right/-lite YouTubers, and is well-positioned to articulate the alt-right/-lite's substantive complaints about social movements, if these

exist. Shanks divides opinion in Australian public life with his supposed prejudices against women and minorities, and adopts a politically incorrect style to compete for attention on the alt-right/-lite's platform of choice. Shanks embodies the controversial elements of dirtbag Left discourse which I aim to illuminate. I finally explained my approach to text selection, in which, unable to assess either YouTuber's entire output, I aim for theoretical saturation.

In the coming chapter, I begin to shed light on my research questions by identifying and weighing the merit of a major theme in Benjamin's construction of social movement activists. In a narrative which sometimes evokes points made by serious academic critics of identity politics, Benjamin characterises feminist, anti-racist, and LGBTQ+ rights activists as "collectivists" who would violate the individual liberties of men, white people, and heterosexuals.

Chapter Three

Carl Benjamin vs. illiberal activists

In this chapter, I first describe in further detail Benjamin's prominent position within the alt-right/-lite, and outlines many of his views on politics and culture. I then begin to address my research questions by analysing Benjamin's discourse and identifying the first major theme in his hostile construction of anti-racist, feminist, and LGBTQ+ activism. Benjamin claims that modern social movements are characterised by "illiberalism" and "collectivism", which he opposes as a liberal individualist. In my evaluation of these claims, I demonstrate that Benjamin often levels accusations of authoritarianism and "reverse" discrimination in response to innocuous behaviour, which he misrepresents and misinterprets. I then call into question Benjamin's own avowed commitment to liberal individualism. Next, I argue – with reference to the concept of "cultural imperialism" and feminist, anti-racist, and LGBTQ+ critiques of liberal individualism – that Benjamin wants women and minorities to conduct their activism within limits which ensure that it cannot eliminate injustice. Overall, in this chapter I identify an important component part of Benjamin's hostile construction of social movement activism which is potentially valid given its resemblance to points made in academic critiques of identity politics launched from parts of the Left. I contend that Benjamin's complaints about illiberalism and collectivism are not substantiated and cannot be credited as a response to the real presence of these tendencies within social movements.

Benjamin's place in the alt-right/-lite

Biography and income

Benjamin is better known as "Sargon of Akkad". He takes this pseudonym from the ruler of an ancient Mesopotamian empire.¹ Benjamin was born in 1979 and is married with children. He produces videos in the converted garage of his home in Swindon.² He

¹ The Rubin Report, "Sargon of Akkad LIVE: Internet Trolls and Brexit Polls", *YouTube*, 2:04:28, June 20, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0UI9cF9OJaU>; Sargon of Akkad, "Heroes of History: Sargon of Akkad, the First Emperor", *YouTube*, 34:09, March 5, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yt5FmB0p4Ys>

² Kate Prengel, "Carl Benjamin, AKA Sargon of Akkad: 5 Fast Facts You Need to Know", *Heavy*, December 18, 2018, <https://heavy.com/news/2018/12/carl-benjamin-aka-sargon-of-akkad/>

studied computer science at university and formerly worked in IT in the public service, but was fired in 2013 after clashing with a female supervisor over the introduction of affirmative action programs aimed at women.³ Benjamin then tried his hand at independent video game development and raised funds to develop a game on Kickstarter.⁴ He did not complete this project and reimbursed his Kickstarter “backers”.⁵ In 2014, he turned to the viewers of his nascent YouTube channel for financial support. He launched a Patreon page and an online “tip jar” to accept direct payments.⁶ Benjamin has been a professional YouTuber ever since. By December 2018, his Patreon attracted around USD \$12,000 per month from over 3,000 “patrons”.⁷ YouTube also provides a direct income to uploaders who allow advertisements to play before their videos. Benjamin’s exact income from this “monetisation” process is unknown – YouTube pays uploaders at personalised rates. However, the BBC estimated that Benjamin could have been earning up to GBP £20,000 per month from this source in late 2018.⁸

Benjamin’s controversial views have made his income unstable. His Patreon account was deleted in December 2018 when moderators at the website deemed that he had broken their terms of service by using racist and homophobic slurs on YouTube.⁹ Benjamin migrated to the Patreon clone SubscribeStar, where – as of December 2021 – he has attracted over 1,500 donors who each pay at least USD \$1 per month.¹⁰ He uses several such “alt-tech” websites, such as the Twitter clones Parler and Gab, which are created by reactionary developers to host “anti-mainstream” (i.e. violent or offensive) speech which would see users censored or banned on mainstream social media platforms.¹¹ In May

³ Badger Live Streams, “ICMI 2019 Carl Benjamin”, *YouTube*, 43:33, July 5, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u1swWB9A5Jw>; Sargon of Akkad, “Bring on the zombie apocalypse!”, *YouTube*, 6:46, March 25, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EmUcRZvgSto>; The Thinkery, “The CTH Subreddit is Always Angry With Me”, *YouTube*, 17:31, March 28, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oF_Z20hFNjs

⁴ Sargon of Akkad, “Bring on the zombie apocalypse!”, Sargon of Akkad, “Shadows of the undead”, *YouTube*, 0:36, April 5, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nGPW2ivGdSk>

⁵ The Thinkery, “The CTH Subreddit is Always Angry With Me”.

⁶ Sargon of Akkad, “Patreon and Paypal tip email address”, *YouTube*, 12:40, March 30, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6klCrsajw24>

⁷ Nellie Bowles, “Patreon Bars Anti-Feminist for Racist Speech, Inciting Revolt”, *The New York Times*, December 24, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/24/technology/patreon-hate-speech-bans.html>

⁸ Gavin Haynes, “Right Click: The New Online Culture Wars”, *BBC Radio 4*, December 31, 2018, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/m0000qv5>

⁹ Benjamin Goggin, “Crowdfunding platform Patreon defends itself from protests by ‘intellectual dark web,’ publishes slur-filled posts from banned YouTuber”, *Business Insider*, December 18, 2018, <https://www.businessinsider.com.au/patreon-crowdfunding-platform-defends-itself-amid-boycott-2018-12?r=US&IR=T>; Bowles, “Patreon Bars Anti-Feminist for Racist Speech, Inciting Revolt”.

¹⁰ “Sargon”, *SubscribeStar*, accessed December 1, 2021, <https://www.subscribestar.com/sargon>

¹¹ Devries, Bessant, and Watts, “The Uncanny Political Involvement of Technologies”, 15.

2019, YouTube itself “demonetised” Benjamin’s channels after he joked (as discussed below) about raping a female politician.¹² His channels no longer generate advertising income. In an effort to outrun this punishment, Benjamin abandoned his original YouTube channel and begun posting its usual content to a new channel.¹³ YouTube detected this evasive manoeuvre in March 2020, and this channel was also demonetised.¹⁴ Benjamin then started another channel, on which he avoided discussion of contemporary politics in an effort to placate YouTube’s moderators.¹⁵ He soon abandoned this venture and continued uploading political content to his demonetised channels. His newer videos often pushed viewers towards branded merchandise, which Benjamin has sold since 2017. He sells shirts with designs which reference sentiments from his videos (such as “I FUCKING LOVE PATRIARCHY”).¹⁶ In 2020, a succession of online retailers removed Benjamin’s merchandise from their websites.¹⁷

In November 2020, Benjamin launched his own website – The Lotus Eaters – in a re-branding effort.¹⁸ He envisions this website as a more serious news source which appeals to “normies”.¹⁹ He has hired a small team of writers and producers to create content for the website, which also publishes essays by conservative authors.²⁰ Now using his real name, Benjamin hosts the daily *Lotus Eaters Podcast* and contributes occasional articles.²¹ He hopes that this more “credible institution” can function like a think tank and

¹² Toyin Owoseje, “Ukip candidate who repeatedly joked about raping Labour MP has YouTube account stripped of ability to earn money”, *The Independent*, May 11, 2019, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/carl-benjamin-rape-sargon-of-akkad-youtube-jess-phillips-labour-mp-a8909296.html>

¹³ Akkad Daily, “YouTube Have Killed the Sargon of Akkad Channel”, *YouTube*, 6:51, January 26, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vybbn_GPN4g

¹⁴ Akkad Daily, “YouTube Have Demonetised This Channel”, *YouTube*, 11:20, March 4, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mdvcqg9-3_k

¹⁵ Akkad Daily, “YouTube’s Response to Demonetisation is Not Encouraging”, *YouTube*, 8:11, March 5, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YVLwNjACkE8>; The Symposium, “The Suebi Reign of Terror”, *YouTube*, 26:39, March 5, 2020 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lbk-o8FMhcM>

¹⁶ Akkad Daily, “We Will Regret Our Reaction to COVID-19”, *YouTube*, 13:44, May 3, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HBWWqCYDyHw>; Akkad Daily, “Twitch Gets Woke”, *YouTube*, 13:16, May 16, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VpvZy0bXBt4>

¹⁷ Akkad Daily, “What Happened to the Teespring Store?”, *YouTube*, 8:39, May 29, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EtI5V4Gd5Bc>; Akkad Daily, “WarhammerGate”, *YouTube*, 15:08, July 21, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uf8-qLsIGfk>

¹⁸ Akkad Daily, “Well ... A Not Entirely Successful Launch”, *YouTube*, 53:39, November 11, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PR-vmVwv6o>

¹⁹ Akkad Daily, “The Big Reveal”, *YouTube*, 1:42:13, December 5, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QE8IDxyW5yE>

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Akkad Daily, “I Am Alive!”, *YouTube*, 4:06, November 18, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7xAbfvFMbKg>

influence politicians.²² The Lotus Eaters makes money from subscribers who pay to access “Premium” content.²³ A major benefit of the move for Benjamin is independence from Silicon Valley companies which might “deplatform” him – “it makes us harder to interfere with”.²⁴ While most of his former channels now lie dormant, Benjamin still conducts occasional livestream videos on his original demonetised channel.²⁵

White nationalism

Benjamin has engaged with all factions of the alt-right/-lite. His relationship with white nationalism, first, is complicated. He considers it a smear when he is called “alt-right”.²⁶ He does not advocate for white ethnostates. His interactions with white nationalists are sometimes hostile. The slurs which saw him banned from Patreon were directed at white nationalists.²⁷ He was also suspended from Twitter in 2017 for harassment intended to make a white nationalist “unfollow” him.²⁸ Some prominent white nationalists nevertheless see Benjamin as a “useful idiot”. Richard Spencer calls him a “great entry point” to white nationalism.²⁹ Andrew Anglin is a fan of Benjamin and believes that he is “leading people in our direction”.³⁰ In an awkward interaction in 2015, one white nationalist thanked Benjamin for setting him on “the path that got me here”.³¹

This complex dynamic is evident in Benjamin’s many long videos featuring white nationalists. He positions himself as an “intellectually curious” opponent of white

²² Akkad Daily, “The Deplatformings Will Continue Until Morale Improves”, *YouTube*, 1:15:15, February 21, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ALQp-EIJE9c>; Akkad Daily, “The Big Reveal”.

²³ The Lotus Eaters, “Premium”, accessed February 12, 2021, <https://www.lotuseaters.com/premium>

²⁴ Akkad Daily, “The Big Reveal”.

²⁵ Sargon of Akkad, “Doomerpolitics Did Nothing Wrong”, *YouTube*, 57:07, September 5, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=00XrBWtOvdU>

²⁶ Sargon of Akkad, “War Plan Purple”, *YouTube*, 17:32, June 27, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=upOWJjHqL60>

²⁷ Goggin, “Crowdfunding platform Patreon defends itself from protests”.

²⁸ William Hicks, “Popular YouTuber Fought Back Against the Alt Right by Sending Them Interracial Gay Porn”, *Fsetyt*, September 22, 2016, <https://fsetyt.com/popular-youtuber-fought-back-against-the-alt-right-by-sending-them-interracial-gay-porn.html>

²⁹ Richard Spencer, Twitter post, October 4, 2016, 5:55 AM, <https://twitter.com/richardbspencer/status/783387496885264384?lang=en>

³⁰ Andrew Anglin, “World War Sargon 2”, *The Daily Stormer*, December 29, 2015, <https://web.archive.org/web/20170106035858/http://www.dailystormer.com/world-war-sargon-2/>; autism-chan, “Andrew Anglin vs. Sargon of Akkad (2/10/18)”, *YouTube*, 5:18:40, February 3, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l1Gm8WLyRgE>

³¹ Millennial Woes, “Millenniyule 2015 Hangout #1 [Sargon of Akkad edition]”, *YouTube*, 6:37:55, December 19, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=5850&v=IY0spEeh_JE

nationalism, and has uploaded discussions with Spencer, Anglin, Jared Taylor, and Felix Lake.³² He has also had numerous discussions with the Scottish white nationalist Colin Robertson, a.k.a “Millennial Woes”, who has worked with Spencer’s National Policy Institute.³³

In these conversations, Benjamin sometimes provides resistance to the alt-right’s out-and-out racism. He pushes back against claims about “white genocide”, and explains that the birth rates of non-white immigrants do not threaten the white race. He tells white nationalists that low birth rates in Western countries are attributable to prosperity, not conniving Jews or Marxist professors. He mocks their belief that non-white people have evolved to be more fertile than Europeans.³⁴ He denies that people of the same race feel natural affinity for each other.³⁵ He tells white nationalists that Western culture is not an expression of white genes.³⁶ He states that no one is genetically incapable of integrating into Western societies.³⁷ He denies that social problems in Africa or certain neighbourhoods in the United States are attributable to black genetics.³⁸ He uses his knowledge of ancient cultures in Europe and the Middle East to counter the myth that white people have always been more inventive or compassionate than non-white people.³⁹ Benjamin has himself been a victim of the alt-right’s racism; his paternal

³² Sargon of Akkad, “Rambling About: The Alt Right”, *YouTube*, 47:36, December 22, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XdE-bWQK65w>; Andywarski, “Richard Spencer, Styx and Sargon Have a Chat - Andy and JF moderate”, *YouTube*, 4:38:15, January 4, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UiUH-tWHbr8>; autism-chan, “Andrew Anglin vs. Sargon of Akkad (2/10/18)”; The Thinkery, “The Thinkery Podcast #14 - Jared Taylor”, *YouTube*, 59:10, September 21, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jLUZ4uJlkvQ>; Sargon of Akkad, “Black Pigeon Speaks Interview”, *YouTube*, 45:37, June 20, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qH4Fq_5_3gE

³³ Red Ice TV, “NPI 2016 Press Conference”, *YouTube*, 1:09:28, November 27, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NWC_7_ZUuLk; Sargon of Akkad, “‘The Case for White Nationalism’ - A Discussion with Millennial Woes”, *YouTube*, 4:06:35, March 20, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w7UPqno6xvE>

³⁴ Sargon of Akkad, “An Honest Look at the Alt Right”, *YouTube*, 30:31, March 23, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cp0uq-QafYQ>; Sargon of Akkad, “‘The Case for White Nationalism’ - A Discussion with Millennial Woes”; autism-chan, “Andrew Anglin vs. Sargon of Akkad (2/10/18)”.

³⁵ Sargon of Akkad, “‘The Case for White Nationalism’ - A Discussion with Millennial Woes”; The Thinkery, “The Thinkery Podcast #14 - Jared Taylor”.

³⁶ Sargon of Akkad, “‘The Case for White Nationalism’ - A Discussion with Millennial Woes”; Sargon of Akkad, “An Honest Look at the Alt Right”.

³⁷ Sargon of Akkad, “‘The Case for White Nationalism’ - A Discussion with Millennial Woes”.

³⁸ The Thinkery, “The Thinkery Podcast #14 - Jared Taylor”; Sargon of Akkad, “‘The Case for White Nationalism’ - A Discussion with Millennial Woes”.

³⁹ Sargon of Akkad, “‘The Case for White Nationalism’ - A Discussion with Millennial Woes”; The Thinkery, “The Thinkery Podcast #14 - Jared Taylor”.

grandfather was a mixed-race man from Saint Helena, and white nationalists online have called him a “quadroon”. This outed the movement as “hateful” to Benjamin.⁴⁰

Benjamin also argues with white nationalists thanks to his avowed commitment to liberal individualism (as discussed below). He states that removing non-white people from Western countries would be “a violation of individual rights”.⁴¹ He rebuts the contention that the white race has “a right to exist” by making the individualist argument that “groups of people don’t have rights”.⁴² Benjamin champions John Locke and Thomas Paine in arguments with white nationalists.⁴³ He describes white nationalists as “the mortal enemies of any liberal individualist anywhere”.⁴⁴

However, as mentioned, previous research nevertheless identifies Benjamin as a member of YouTube’s radicalisation pipeline, which pushes some users towards white nationalism.⁴⁵ This can be explained, first, because his discussions with white nationalists give them to access his audience. His discussions with Taylor, Robertson, and Lace were hosted on his own channel. He exposed his viewers to the well-practiced arguments of white nationalists. Benjamin defends this decision, which allows viewers to judge ideas for themselves. He laughs at the Left for imagining that white nationalism is “somehow contagious”.⁴⁶ However, compared to the alt-right’s professional propagandists, Benjamin seemed amateurish and unprepared in these interactions. While he challenged some points, he also nodded along to racist dogma. He failed to protest, for instance, when Anglin and Robertson each claimed that dark-skinned people are less intelligent than white and East Asian people. He chimed in with a reminder not to leave “Gypsies” off a list of unintelligent races.⁴⁷ He nit-picked white nationalist ideas and left their substance unchallenged. In discussion with Spencer, he focused on the impracticality of building a white ethnostate in North America, and hardly questioned the validity of the

⁴⁰ Sargon of Akkad, “‘The Case for White Nationalism’ - A Discussion with Millennial Woes”; autism-chan, “Andrew Anglin vs. Sargon of Akkad (2/10/18)”.

⁴¹ autism-chan, “Andrew Anglin vs. Sargon of Akkad (2/10/18)”.

⁴² autism-chan, “Andrew Anglin vs. Sargon of Akkad (2/10/18)”.

⁴³ Andywarski, “Richard Spencer, Styx and Sargon Have a Chat - Andy and JF moderate”.

⁴⁴ Sargon of Akkad, “Weimar America”, *YouTube*, 28:37, August 16, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gwSYhTWk6E8>

⁴⁵ Evans, “From Memes to Infowars”; Lewis, *Alternative Influence*, 3, 10; Horta Ribeiro, “Auditing Radicalisation Pathways on YouTube”, 4.

⁴⁶ Sargon of Akkad, “The Progressive Attack on the YouTube Political Sphere”, *YouTube*, 13:41, September 18, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ypt_pnpJLzY

⁴⁷ autism-chan, “Andrew Anglin vs. Sargon of Akkad (2/10/18)”; Sargon of Akkad, “‘The Case for White Nationalism’ - A Discussion with Millennial Woes”.

goal.⁴⁸ Lewis theorises that collaborations of this sort start viewers down the path to white nationalism.⁴⁹ Dozens of comments below these videos indicate fans of Benjamin's becoming newly interested in white nationalism. Commenters write that Taylor makes "some fantastic arguments that I had never considered before" and that Robertson provides "lots of food for thought".⁵⁰

Immigration and Islam

Benjamin also likely pushes viewers towards white nationalism because his anti-immigration views are closer to the alt-right's than he would admit. He is a self-described "nativist" who advocates for zero immigration to the United Kingdom.⁵¹ He denies interest in "protecting the white race," and talks instead about preserving "Britishness" or "Englishness", understood as a set of liberal values.⁵²

However, Benjamin consistently conflates "Englishness" and "Britishness" with whiteness. Despite claiming the opposite in debates with unabashed racists, Benjamin often casts doubt on the ability of non-white immigrants to integrate into Western cultures. He assumes that first-generation immigrants should never be considered "English".⁵³ He questions whether second-generation immigrants from outside Europe can adopt "English" values, because their parents will instil foreign ideas.⁵⁴ He believes that Muslims, in particular, fail to adopt liberal values.⁵⁵ Muslim immigrants to the United Kingdom "want to live like seventh-century barbarians".⁵⁶ They are "coming over and

⁴⁸ Andywarski, "Richard Spencer, Styx and Sargon Have a Chat - Andy and JF moderate".

⁴⁹ Lewis, *Alternative Influence*, 13, 36.

⁵⁰ The Thinkery, "The Thinkery Podcast #14 - Jared Taylor"; Sargon of Akkad, "'The Case for White Nationalism' - A Discussion with Millennial Woes".

⁵¹ autism-chan, "Andrew Anglin vs. Sargon of Akkad (2/10/18)".

⁵² Sargon of Akkad, "Answering Nazi Comments", *YouTube*, 13:40, August 24, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ixtDh6hEehU>

⁵³ Sargon of Akkad, "#GMB Insanity: The Racist English in London", *YouTube*, 25:17, June 3, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5IAsT6W71y4>

⁵⁴ Akkad Daily, "DEBATE: Do Women Have a Secular Duty to Have Children?", *YouTube*, 25:27, March 23, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jCiQrX2nS2I>

⁵⁵ Akkad Daily, "Muslim Grooming Gangs Still Operating With Impunity in Britain".

⁵⁶ Akkad Daily, "An English Liberal's Perspective on Demographics", *YouTube*, 13:08, March 16, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SzaMfk48DOc>

replicating the conditions of life in Pakistan”.⁵⁷ The pause in Muslim immigration was a “silver lining” of the COVID-19 pandemic.⁵⁸

He often uses the word “English” as a synonym for “white”. Benjamin has uploaded numerous videos about child sex abuse rings uncovered in the north of England in the 2010s.⁵⁹ Most of the offenders were British men of Pakistani heritage. Benjamin describes the crimes as “Muslim men raping English girls”.⁶⁰ This constructs the white victims as English, and denies that the Muslim perpetrators were also English. Benjamin also describes the victims as “predominantly English children”.⁶¹ He here excludes the non-white girls (of Pakistani and Sikh background) who were abused from “English” status. He elsewhere reacts to a report which found that 31 percent of schoolchildren in Birmingham are white (while South Asians are the biggest ethnic group). He interprets this to mean that “only 30 percent ... are actually English”.⁶² Benjamin also insists that the actor John Cleese was correct to assert that London is “not really an English city”, because only 45 percent of Londoners are “white British”. A city full of non-white people (no matter how long their families have been in England) cannot be an English city.⁶³ In this light, when Benjamin worries immigration that will force “the British to become a minority on their own island”, he seems to hold a thinly veiled concern that immigration threatens the existence of a white majority in the United Kingdom.⁶⁴

In 2020, Benjamin adopted the position that women have a “duty to have children”, in order to pass on the “values” which are endangered by immigration.⁶⁵ As mentioned, he is unconvinced that immigrants or the children of immigrants can possess these values; this “duty” cannot apply to them. He delivers an exhortation to breed which only applies to at least third-generation immigrants – effectively to white women. Despite his clashes

⁵⁷ Stephen J James, “THEY ARE THE IMMIGRANTS, VAUSH! |Sargon of Akkad”, *YouTube*, 2:15, December 3, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GH2f620knrM>

⁵⁸ Akkad Daily, “Dispatches from the Coronavirus Bunker”, *YouTube*, 10:33, March 15, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ejx-WkBCnI>

⁵⁹ Sargon of Akkad, “Saudi Britannia”, *YouTube*, 8:20, April 18, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zau9IFwO2J8>; Sargon of Akkad, “Rape Culture UK”, *YouTube*, 30:41, November 27, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OB6zMrlx-g>

⁶⁰ Akkad Daily, “Muslim Grooming Gangs Still Operating With Impunity in Britain”, *YouTube*, 13:27, December 29, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MpwroHQE6nU>

⁶¹ Akkad Daily, “The Home Office Response to the Grooming Gang Petition is Atrocious”, *YouTube*, 16:00, April 25, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mHJ0qlE9UPg>

⁶² Stephen J James, “THEY ARE THE IMMIGRANTS, VAUSH! |Sargon of Akkad”.

⁶³ Sargon of Akkad, “The Last Englishman in London”, *YouTube*, 13:42, May 30, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZAeJJYvSok0>

⁶⁴ Akkad Daily, “An English Liberal's Perspective on Demographics”.

⁶⁵ Akkad Daily, “DEBATE: Do Women Have a Secular Duty to Have Children?”.

with the alt-right, Benjamin's views are therefore not as removed from white nationalism as he likes to insist.

These views have seen Benjamin collaborate in a video with Steve Bannon, the co-founder of Breitbart News and one-time Trump advisor.⁶⁶ His Islamophobia has also seen him collaborate in multiple videos with Tommy Robinson, the founder of the English Defence League (an Islamophobic street movement).⁶⁷

Memes and trolls

Benjamin also engages with white nationalists when he amplifies their memes and trolls, thereby validating the strategy described in Chapter One. He uncritically admires their ability to upset people on the Left.

In 2015, white nationalists on 4chan trolled the mainstream media by having journalists denounce a previously inoffensive cartoon character as racist. Members of the alt-right depicted Pepe the Frog in Nazi regalia, and spread anti-Semitic and racist drawings of Pepe on social media.⁶⁸ In September 2016, Clinton's campaign and the Anti-Defamation League condemned Pepe as a symbol of white supremacy.⁶⁹ Benjamin laughed at this "ultimate trolling".⁷⁰ He insisted that the real butt of the joke was not Jews or non-white people, but the readiness of the Left to see racism everywhere.⁷¹ He spread the memes,

⁶⁶ Sargon of Akkad, "Bannonism: The Revolt of the Little Guy", *YouTube*, 50:52, October 10, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gwKLSAGlWdo>

⁶⁷ Sargon of Akkad Live, "Interviewing Tommy Robinson", *YouTube*, 1:36:28, May 11, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wM7FJrzCcW8>; Sargon of Akkad, "Enemy of the State | Tommy Robinson Interview", *YouTube*, 42:27, March 21, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l72m8heICBk>; Sargon of Akkad, "The Enemy of the British State", *YouTube*, 12:43, August 2, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cFL2Q57b48w>; "Who is Tommy Robinson? The former EDL leader and right-wing figurehead", *The Scotsman*, November 15, 2018, <https://www.scotsman.com/news/uk/who-is-tommy-robinson-the-former-edl-leader-and-right-wing-figurehead-1-4830451/>

⁶⁸ Nuzzi, "How Pepe the Frog Became a Nazi Trump Supporter and Alt-Right Symbol".

⁶⁹ Elizabeth Chan, "Donald Trump, Pepe the frog, and white supremacists: an explainer", *HillaryClinton.com*, September 12, 2016, <https://web.archive.org/web/20160913043519/https://www.hillaryclinton.com/post/donald-trump-pepe-the-frog-and-white-supremacists-an-explainer/>; "Pepe the Frog", *The Anti-Defamation League*, accessed July 29, 2020, <https://www.adl.org/education/references/hate-symbols/pepe-the-frog>

⁷⁰ The Rubin Report, "Internet Trolls and Brexit Polls | Sargon of Akkad | YOUTUBERS | Rubin Report", *The Thinkery*, "Kekistan is a Terrorist Group", *YouTube*, 9:32, September 9, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8nYI_yQE-uU

⁷¹ Sargon of Akkad, "The Symbol of the Resistance", *YouTube*, 10:46, January 10, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QM0VyoVsCYg>

and called them “entirely ironic”.⁷² Benjamin also amplified efforts from 4chan’s /pol/ to normalise Nazism when he spread a meme in which users swear allegiance to the fictional country “Kekistan”.⁷³ The “flag” of Kekistan is modelled on a Nazi war flag.⁷⁴ Benjamin found it hilarious when the Southern Poverty Law Center denounced this meme as racist and characterised them as out-of-touch “normies” who take ironic Nazism too seriously.⁷⁵

In 2017, posters reading “It’s Okay To Be White” were discovered on many American university campuses. This was orchestrated by white nationalists on 4chan, who hoped that journalists and activists would detect the racist intention behind the posters, and denounce them. The trolls hoped that members of the public would see this denunciation as an overreaction – journalists and activists would appear to think that it is *not* “okay to be white”. Onlookers would come to believe that the media and the Left are anti-white, and new white nationalists would be created.⁷⁶ Mainstream conservative commentators took the bait, and indeed characterised criticism of the posters as anti-white.⁷⁷ Benjamin, however, knew that the posters were a “trap” set by white nationalists. He fell into it nevertheless. Benjamin decreed that – even if neo-Nazis were responsible – anyone upset by the posters must “hate white people”. He ranted about the prevalence of anti-white racism. Benjamin recognised towards the end of this tirade that his own commentary “sounds like rabid alt-right propaganda”. However, he shrugged that “the alt-right are right on this”.⁷⁸ He later reminisced about the posters as “such an incredible meme”.⁷⁹

⁷² The Rubin Report, “Internet Trolls and Brexit Polls”.

⁷³ The Thinkery, “Sargon of Akkad explains Kekistan to The Amazing Atheist #FreeKekistan”, *YouTube*, 10:26, April 1, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BCDsXHUwUjY>; The Thinkery, “Kekistan is a Terrorist Group”.

⁷⁴ David Neiwert, “What the Kek: Explaining the Alt-Right ‘Deity’ Behind Their ‘Meme Magic’”, *The Southern Poverty Law Center*, May 9, 2017, <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2017/05/08/what-kek-explaining-alt-right-deity-behind-their-meme-magic>

⁷⁵ The Thinkery, “The SPLC Denounces Kekistan”, *YouTube*, 13:04, May 11, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MtXwkD-KgLg>

⁷⁶ Janell Ross, “‘It’s okay to be white’ signs and stickers appear on campuses and streets across the country”, *The Washington Post*, November 4, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2017/11/03/its-okay-to-be-white-signs-and-stickers-appear-on-campus-and-streets-across-the-country/>; Rachel Mealey, “Here’s how ‘It’s OK to be white’ made its way from internet trolls to a vote in our Senate”, *ABC News*, October 17, 2018, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-10-17/origins-of-its-ok-to-be-white-slogan-supremacists-united-states/10385716>

⁷⁷ Michael Edison Hayden, “It’s OK to Be White: How Fox News Is Helping to Spread Neo-Nazi Propaganda”, *Newsweek*, November 19, 2017, <https://www.newsweek.com/neo-nazi-david-duke-backed-meme-was-reported-tucker-carlson-without-context-714655>

⁷⁸ Sargon of Akkad, “This Week in Stupid (05/11/2017)”, *YouTube*, 31:12, November 5, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BAPJwSzjBWw>; “Diversity = White Genocide”, *The Anti-Defamation League*, accessed August 10, 2020, <https://www.adl.org/education/references/hate-symbols/diversity-white-genocide>

⁷⁹ The Thinkery, “The Media is Primed to React”, *YouTube*, 7:20, October 23, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nGRqS-411ew>

Benjamin therefore validates the alt-right's decision to smuggle their beliefs into wider political discourse through memes and trolling.

The manosphere

Benjamin is an influential member of the manosphere. His earliest YouTube videos, throughout 2013 and 2014, were almost all attacks on feminism.⁸⁰ He has engaged with all facets of manosphere activity. He has spoken at a Men's Rights conference organised by Paul Elam (of hate group A Voice For Men) and called himself "a friend and a fellow-traveller and a well-wisher".⁸¹ He characterises MRAs as legitimate activists who might indulge in some vitriolic language, but otherwise work on men's issues such as prostate cancer awareness or suicide prevention.⁸² He creates angry videos defending MRAs when they are mocked or criticised.⁸³ He is well-disposed towards the MGTOW movement.⁸⁴ Benjamin has been an invested user of MGTOW forums.⁸⁵

He shares ideas about evolutionary psychology from the manosphere. He tells women to find a partner when they are "evolutionarily" most attractive between the ages of 18 and 22. He warns women about the "long-term consequences" of being promiscuous in their twenties.⁸⁶ Men are naturally averse to promiscuous women, who will end up alone with "eggs that have dried up".⁸⁷ Benjamin attributes "domestic nesting instincts" to women. He maintains that women are attracted to being "acted upon" by traditionally masculine

⁸⁰ Sargon of Akkad, "Anita Sarkeesian Doesn't Understand Words (Feminist Frequency)", *YouTube*, 26:38, June 27, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nVFLCpz8_jc; Sargon of Akkad, "Anita Sarkeesian Doesn't Understand People (Feminist Frequency)", *YouTube*, 4:25, June 22, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M8DV27FedHw>

⁸¹ Badger Live Streams, "ICMI 2019 Carl Benjamin".

⁸² Sargon of Akkad, "Why Do People Hate Feminism #10 - #Feminism is a Supremacy Movement", *YouTube*, 34:24, September 6, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nxKLezZU4eg>

⁸³ Sargon of Akkad, "Lena Dunham, comedienne extraordinaire!", *YouTube*, 12:16, March 14, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n6tiyGqL9ck>; Sargon of Akkad, "The Tale of Mickey, the abusive husband", *YouTube*, 11:04, March 22, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fPyHmNWIBs>

⁸⁴ Sargon of Akkad, "Feminism 2: the re-privileging", *YouTube*, 11:03, February 12, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MEfEfqf1CR0>

⁸⁵ Sargon of Akkad, "This woman displays little-to-no self-awareness", *YouTube*, 16:07, February 26, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WFzqWeJiBXQ>; Sargon of Akkad, "The end of MGTOW?", *YouTube*, 1:02 February 11, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xS6PTNcCW9g>

⁸⁶ Akkad Daily, "The Incel Ask Me Anything", *YouTube*, 24:38, December 5, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MwilEabpT38>

⁸⁷ Akkad Daily, "It's Okay to be a #Tradwife", *YouTube*, 19:23, January 24, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=msSzBkF_L-4

men.⁸⁸ Benjamin advises dateless male viewers that “it is within your power to change how masculine you are”. He tells them to “cultivate your manliness” by lifting weights and being more assertive.⁸⁹

Benjamin does criticise some PUAs who push the most misogynistic versions of this narrative. They “want treat women like animals” and utilise “distasteful techniques”.⁹⁰ However, Benjamin still sees them as fellow-travellers, thanks to their supposed persecution by the Left. He complained when Daryush Valizadeh (of the hate group Return of Kings) was denied visas to Australia and the United Kingdom, and when harassment on Twitter forced him to cancel a public event.⁹¹

Benjamin has also expressed sympathy for incels. In 2019, Benjamin called incels “more oppressed” than non-white or LGBT people.⁹² He blames feminism for their mass killings. Our “feminised” societies caused the 2014 Isla Vista massacre, because feminists make young men feel “demonised” for their gender. Feminism encourages young women to pursue sex with an attractive minority of men, and causes severe sexual frustration in lonely men like Elliot Rodger. Feminism causes “these poor fucking guys” to go insane.⁹³

Conspiracy theories

Benjamin also spreads conspiracy theories. He admits to watching “as many conspiracy theory videos as possible”. He claims to see them as nonsensical entertainment.⁹⁴ However, he regurgitates many conspiracy theories in earnest. Benjamin claims that

⁸⁸ Akkad Daily, “It’s Okay to be a #Tradwife”; Sargon of Akkad, “Advice for Incels”, *YouTube*, 11:47, December 26, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eMoBELOiGMk>

⁸⁹ Sargon of Akkad, “Advice for Incels”.

⁹⁰ Sargon of Akkad, “Don’t Waste Your Time”, *YouTube*, 10:14, June 18, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cXkC65dElpY>; Sargon of Akkad, “Illiberal Progressives”, *YouTube*, 1:12:47, September 3, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zH0mPfR-K2U>

⁹¹ Sargon of Akkad, “Illiberal Progressives”; Sargon of Akkad, “The Regressive Left has Become the Religious Right”, *YouTube*, 53:22, April 5, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2NYCJLSE7xE>

⁹² Akkad Daily, “The Incel Ask Me Anything”.

⁹³ Sargon of Akkad, “Feminism and Facebook”, *YouTube*, 6:43, May 29, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4YNyqvFno5U>; Karl Benjamin for South West England MEP, “Carl Benjamin’s ‘Feminist System’ Defence of Mass Shooter Elliott Rodger (full video)”, *YouTube*, 21:59, April 21, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6x5WFYpdhbU>

⁹⁴ Akkad Daily, “YouTube Censors Coronavirus/5G Conspiracy Theories”, *YouTube*, 11:44, April 7, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PSLU30p_ZW8

Adolf Hitler lived out his days in South America.⁹⁵ He claims that al-Qaeda did not orchestrate the September 11 attacks.⁹⁶ He speculates that Michelle Obama is a transgender woman.⁹⁷ He intimates that the 2014 attack on Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 was faked by Ukraine to frame Russia.⁹⁸ In 2020, he stated that the George Floyd protests were led by “out of town anarchists” and professional “agitators” who were paid by the billionaire George Soros.⁹⁹ As a Jewish immigrant who donates large sums to the Democratic Party and progressive causes, Soros is a boogeyman for far-Right conspiracy theorists.¹⁰⁰ Benjamin also accuses Soros of orchestrating Central American migrant caravans to the United States.¹⁰¹ He protests that criticism of Soros is not anti-Semitic, despite himself labelling Soros a “rootless cosmopolitan” (a Soviet euphemism for Jews) and joking that he pays agitators in “shekels”.¹⁰²

In 2020, he spread many conspiracy theories about COVID-19. He speculated that the United Kingdom’s COVID-19 statistics were inflated to exaggerate the severity of the pandemic.¹⁰³ He lent his weight to Mike Pompeo’s assertion that the virus was created in

⁹⁵ Sargon of Akkad, “Adolph Hitler faked his suicide and lived out his days in Argenina, according to the FBI”, *YouTube*, 2:46, March 7, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EwO3cNeDP5Q>; The Thinkery, “Am I a Conspiracy Theorist?”, *YouTube*, 8:37, June 2, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kx4ZDd1vDGU>

⁹⁶ Sargon of Akkad, “What I Saw”, *YouTube*, 5:25, June 26, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FgNfH52PG_8; goodfella, “Hangout With Sargon Of Akkad & Me - 12th July '14”, *YouTube*, 3:25:10, July 12, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g32dsKlOlbg>

⁹⁷ Sargon of Akkad, “This Week in Stupid (10/08/2014)”, *YouTube*, 23:53, August 9, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uHWf33CUUt4>; Sargon of Akkad, “Re: Individualism vs Collectivism, a Response to SJW Gamer 101”, *YouTube*, 48:21, November 23, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nt8Y-gKmSeA>

⁹⁸ Sargon of Akkad, “Inspector Cameron is On The Case”, *YouTube*, 4:11, July 23, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UF5jf0Wn2mA>

⁹⁹ Akkad Daily, “The Minneapolis Riots of Peace”, *YouTube*, 16:57, May 29, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GbJ_A74KZuM; Akkad Daily, “McRevolution”, *YouTube*, 1:48:55, June 3, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CdtRaU5-unM>; Akkad Daily, “The Revolution Has Arrived”, *YouTube*, 2:39:30, May 31, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zd7R6CVoUdc>

¹⁰⁰ Veronika Bondarenko, “George Soros is a favourite target of the right -- here's how that happened”, *Business Insider*, May 20, 2017, <https://www.businessinsider.com.au/how-did-george-soros-become-the-favorite-boogeyman-of-the-right-2017-5?r=US&IR=T>

¹⁰¹ Akkad Daily, “George Soros’s Guilty Conscience”, *YouTube*, 11:49, September 24, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FNEjI3wo-LY>

¹⁰² Akkad Daily, “George Soros’s Guilty Conscience”; Akkad Daily, “The Revolution Has Arrived”.

¹⁰³ Akkad Daily, “Celebrities DESTROY Racism!”, *YouTube*, 3:24:18, June 5, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bOO0q2ed52U>

a Chinese laboratory.¹⁰⁴ He spread a theory in which an American researcher was murdered by Chinese agents before he could reveal that COVID-19 is man-made.¹⁰⁵ He claimed that the mainstream media tried to stop the use of hydroxychloroquine as a COVID-19 treatment because its success would make Trump look smart for spruiking it.¹⁰⁶

Benjamin also spread the theory that Joe Biden and the Democratic Party stole the 2020 United States presidential election. After the election, Benjamin trawled far-Right websites and social media accounts and disseminated their accusations of voter fraud.¹⁰⁷ In debunking this “Big Lie”, David Canon and Owen Sherman find that the claims advanced by Benjamin are “easily disproven” with further context or factual corrections.¹⁰⁸ He continues in 2021 to claim that Biden and the Democrats stole the election.¹⁰⁹

Benjamin also pushes the “cultural Marxism” conspiracy.¹¹⁰ He claims that followers of the Frankfurt School cultivated feminist, anti-racist, and LTBQ rights activism because undermining Western traditions sets the stage for communist revolution.¹¹¹ He states that movements such as BLM are “stoked up by communist revolutionaries” from academia,

¹⁰⁴ Akkad Daily, “Did COVID-19 Escape From the Wuhan Virus Laboratory?”, *YouTube*, 11:31, May 6, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I-PNVczw4II>; Jack Brewster, “A Timeline Of The COVID-19 Wuhan Lab Origin Theory”, *Forbes*, May 10, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jackbrewster/2020/05/10/a-timeline-of-the-covid-19-wuhan-lab-origin-theory/#48346c625aba>; Peter Daszak, “Ignore the conspiracy theories: scientists know Covid-19 wasn't created in a lab”, *The Guardian*, June 9, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/jun/09/conspiracies-covid-19-lab-false-pandemic>

¹⁰⁵ Akkad Daily, “Did COVID-19 Escape From the Wuhan Virus Laboratory?”; Zhaoyin Feng, “Bing Liu: Chinese-born professor dies in US murder-suicide”, *BBC News*, May 7, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-52568716>

¹⁰⁶ Akkad Daily, “What is Behind the Establishment's Opposition to Hydroxychloroquine?”, *YouTube*, 10:20, April 19, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VEqFK9tdC2c>

¹⁰⁷ Akkad Daily, “‘There's No Evidence of Voter Fraud’ Stream”, *YouTube*, 1:43:30, November 9, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kHHsHZ5fnfk>

¹⁰⁸ David T. Canon and Owen Sherman, “Debunking the ‘Big Lie’: Election Administration in the 2020 Presidential Election”, *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 51 (2021): 546-581.

¹⁰⁹ Akkad Daily, “What Should Patriots Do Now?”, *YouTube*, 28:31, January 21, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bIVqyS4uBO4>

¹¹⁰ Sargon of Akkad, “Why Don't I Criticise the Right”, *YouTube*, 25:43, April 11, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KFO0VytARXQ>; Sargon of Akkad, “TEDx: the Beluga Chronicles”, *YouTube*, 29:38, August 4, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vQLIPkDc3kw>; Sargon of Akkad, “Marxism, Feminism and Housework”, *YouTube*, 31:51, February 18, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GmbWyQgg3k>; Sargon of Akkad, “Liberal Ideas #1 - The Cancer in the Left”, *YouTube*, 16:16, October 13, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hFnd6IS0DrY>; Sargon of Akkad, “Steve Shives and the Rejection of Facts”, *YouTube*, 32:48, October 19, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dmVCXSGuG14>

¹¹¹ The Thinkery, “‘Cultural Marxism’ Trends on Twitter”, *YouTube*, 10:37, March 26, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0_HgiukIME

who dream up ways to destabilise capitalist society.¹¹² He elsewhere endorses a similar theory, wherein social movement activism is the result of Cold War operations which saw KGB agents indoctrinate university students.¹¹³ He insists either way that “Marxists have taken over the school system and decided to indoctrinate kids”.¹¹⁴ Women, non-white people, and LGBTQ+ people are fooled into considering themselves oppressed by a “cabal” of socialist intellectuals.¹¹⁵

Benjamin’s credentials as a conspiracy theorist have seen him twice appear with Alex Jones as a guest on InfoWars.¹¹⁶ More often, he works with personal friend Paul Joseph Watson.¹¹⁷

The Intellectual Dark Web

Benjamin is not usually listed as a member of the IDW. He lacks the requisite academic credentials or mainstream appeal. He has, however, engaged with members of the IDW. He has hosted a discussion with Jordan Peterson, in which the pair discussed the tragic “mating situation” which sees powerful women become spinsters because “men tend to mate across and down dominance hierarchies”.¹¹⁸ Benjamin has appeared on Joe Rogan’s podcast and discussed the apparent fact that gender roles are “always informed by biology”.¹¹⁹ Benjamin has appeared multiple times on Dave Rubin’s online talk show.¹²⁰

¹¹² Akkad Daily, “Is Douglas Murray Right About ‘the End of Empire’?”, *YouTube*, 11:22, September 25, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7p5UICMudDA>

¹¹³ Akkad Daily, “Celebrities DESTROY Racism!”.

¹¹⁴ Sargon of Akkad, “Indoctrinating Your Children”, *YouTube*, 40:37, April 20, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NMiyvy7X8wg>

¹¹⁵ Sargon of Akkad, “Jordan Peterson Was Right”, *YouTube*, 41:30, November 22, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HW5rdoqtTiQ>

¹¹⁶ Alan Beck, “Sargon of Akkad on Alex Jones Show”, *YouTube*, 1:10:15, October 16, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tYmqcid4cUo>

¹¹⁷ Sargon of Akkad Live, “PJW on Brexit, UKIP, the Media and Offending All The Right People”, *YouTube*, 44:20, August 4, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QCPudNJWOgw>; Paul Joseph Watson, “Sargon of Akkad: The YouTube Purge”, *YouTube*, 34:43, March 3, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U85G7Lhvg54>

¹¹⁸ Sargon of Akkad Live, “Interviewing Dr Jordan Peterson”, *YouTube*, 2:06:32, April 10, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VJMCQ94t98k>

¹¹⁹ PowerfulJRE, “Joe Rogan Experience #979 - Sargon of Akkad”.

¹²⁰ The Rubin Report, “Gamergate, Feminism, Regressive Left | Sargon of Akkad | YOUTUBERS | Rubin Report”, *YouTube*, 1:11:06, February 12, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A_oavkedzb4; The Rubin Report, “Trump, Libertarians, & the Alt Right | Sargon of Akkad | YOUTUBERS | Rubin Report”, *YouTube*, 1:08:04, December 9, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9BwMpqodrWQ>; The Rubin Report, Internet Trolls and Brexit Polls | Sargon of Akkad | YOUTUBERS | Rubin Report”.

Peterson and Sam Harris both protested when Benjamin's Patreon count was removed, deleting their own lucrative accounts in solidarity.¹²¹

Moreover, like these academics and broadcasters, he often uses pseudoscience to characterise social inequalities as natural and inevitable. He dismisses the social sciences as biased, and champions the natural sciences – in particular evolutionary psychology – as the best method for understanding human behaviour.¹²² The adoration (and misuse) of science is a major theme of his discourse, as discussed in the following chapter.

Gamergate

Benjamin was a zealous participant in Gamergate. He uploaded dozens of videos about the controversy. In 2014, he joined the chorus accusing Zoe Quinn of trading sex for positive reviews of her game.¹²³ Benjamin called her a “slag” who “whored herself out for coverage”.¹²⁴ His grievances with Anita Sarkeesian, the critic behind *Tropes vs. Women in Video Games*, predated Gamergate. Benjamin's first ever YouTube videos were angry responses to Sarkeesian's feminist criticism of comic books.¹²⁵ Her later criticism of video games caused Benjamin to attack her as an “imposter” and “charlatan”. He insisted that Sarkeesian lacks interest in the medium and makes ill-founded, “incendiary” accusations about sexism in video games for financial gain.¹²⁶ Benjamin claimed that Sarkeesian courts harassment to raise her profile.¹²⁷ He called her a “con artist” and claimed that she faked death threats for attention.¹²⁸ He has made over 30

¹²¹ Bowles, “Patreon Bars Anti-Feminist for Racist Speech, Inciting Revolt”.

¹²² Sargon of Akkad Live, “Discussing Evolutionary Psychology with Professor Gad Saad”, *YouTube*, 2:45:51, November 3, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UgytiUCKebY>

¹²³ Sargon of Akkad, “Let's Play: Oppression Quest”, *YouTube*, 9:09, August 25, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EqtPB94LyPA>; The Rubin Report, “Sargon of Akkad on Classical Liberalism and Gamergate”, *YouTube*, 24:19, February 10, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B7qgyU4V8Pc>

¹²⁴ Sargon of Akkad, “Lies, Damned Lies and the Video Game Press #GamerGate #NotYourShield”, *YouTube*, 10:56, August 19, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bAJYmrKR8WE>

¹²⁵ Sargon of Akkad, “Anita Sarkeesian Doesn't Understand Words (Feminist Frequency)”; Sargon of Akkad, “Anita Sarkeesian Doesn't Understand People (Feminist Frequency)”.

¹²⁶ Sargon of Akkad, “Who is Harassing Anita Sarkeesian?”, *YouTube*, 23:12, April 14, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1eQW-NvtAEs>

¹²⁷ Sargon of Akkad, “Anita Sarkeesian and the People Who Like Her”, *YouTube*, 39:36, February 23, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZnDJpqjospU>

¹²⁸ Sargon of Akkad, “GDC 2014 - Dredging up some irrelevant trash”, *YouTube*, 12:55, May 4, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JxN3cbzW5E4>

videos about Sarkeesian.¹²⁹ Sarkeesian has called Benjamin one of her “notorious harasser[s]”.¹³⁰

Benjamin believed that Quinn and Sarkeesian’s misdeeds revealed widespread corruption and ideological fanaticism within the video games press. Most publications defended Quinn and Sarkeesian, and denounced Gamergaters. This demonstrated to Benjamin that “progressives” had infiltrated this media.¹³¹ He declared that “the video game press has become infested with social justice warriors”.¹³² Snobbish progressive journalists were contemptuous of the tastes of normal gamers.¹³³ Given their way, they would criticise fun games out of existence and badger developers into replacing them with boring politically correct ones.¹³⁴ Benjamin outlined a conspiracy theory in which these journalists were influenced by a handful of feminist games academics.¹³⁵ Shira Chess and Adrienne Shaw have discussed Benjamin’s feverish misinterpretation of their own work as emblematic of the inscrutability of academia to outsiders.¹³⁶ Benjamin insisted throughout Gamergate that games should be thought of as mindless entertainment.¹³⁷ Real gamers just “want to be left alone” to enjoy their favourite pastime.¹³⁸ People who worry about “inclusivity” in games are needlessly politicising his hobby.¹³⁹ It is harmless if playing games

¹²⁹ PowerfulJRE, “Joe Rogan Experience #979 - Sargon of Akkad”.

¹³⁰ Dee Lockett, “The 10 Biggest YouTube Dramas of 2017”, *Vulture*, December 29, 2017, <https://www.vulture.com/2017/12/youtube-drama-2017-jake-paul-pewdiepie-adpocalypse.html>

¹³¹ The Rubin Report, “Sargon of Akkad on Classical Liberalism and Gamergate”.

¹³² Sargon of Akkad, “Lies, Damned Lies and the Video Game Press #GamerGate #NotYourShield”.

¹³³ Sargon of Akkad, “Objective Video Game Reviews”, *YouTube*, 5:39, March 19, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-wYez31BeY4>

¹³⁴ Sargon of Akkad, “This Week in Stupid - XL #GamerGate #NotYourShield Edition! (31/08/2014)”, *YouTube*, 53:48, August, 31, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N_K13iEWQfY

¹³⁵ Sargon of Akkad, “Why Gamers Had To Die: Part 1 - Gamers Don't Need Diversity”, *YouTube*, 17:10, December 11, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PF5a5IgbuYk>; Sargon of Akkad, “Why Gamers Had To Die: Part 2 - The Industry Must Change For Diversity”, *YouTube*, 21:13, December 19, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GOt-YZ_i0Fk; Sargon of Akkad, “Why Gamers Had To Die: Part 3 - Pseudo-Academics and Lazy Journalists”, *YouTube*, 10:46, February 4, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d6gc3zb4EnM>; Sargon of Akkad, “A Conspiracy Within Gaming #GamerGate #NotYourShield”, *YouTube*, 23:34, September 9, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yJyU7RSvs_s; Sargon of Akkad, “The Feminist Ideological Conquest of DiGRA (Part 1) #GamerGate #NotYourShield”, *YouTube*, 22:58, September 26, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=28D6_8Kulpc; Sargon of Akkad, “How DiGRA Caused the End of Gamers, #Gamergate and #NotYourShield”, *YouTube*, 7:08, October 2, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rouq-VdgXdo>

¹³⁶ Shira Chess and Adrienne Shaw, “A Conspiracy of Fishes, or, How We Learned to Stop Worrying About #GamerGate and Embrace Hegemonic Masculinity”, *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 59 (2015): 208-220.

¹³⁷ Benjamin, “GDC 2014 - Dredging up some irrelevant trash”.

¹³⁸ Sargon of Akkad, “Lies, Damned Lies and the Video Game Press”.

¹³⁹ Sargon of Akkad, “Why #GamerGate is so Important to Me”, *YouTube*, 12:24, September 20, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yZI2IRbSKts>

sometimes involves ogling sexualised female characters.¹⁴⁰ Benjamin characterised Gamergate as a defensive action launched by people “sick to the back teeth of having progressivism pushed on them”.¹⁴¹ Benjamin’s involvement in Gamergate saw him collaborate with Milo Yiannopoulos, who himself rose to fame championing the cause as an editor at Breitbart.¹⁴² Yiannopoulos became a regular collaborator and friend of Benjamin’s.¹⁴³

Campaign for European Parliament

In 2019, Benjamin’s public profile reached a peak when he ran for European Parliament as a member of UKIP. Benjamin claimed to have joined UKIP in 2018 as a joke. He convinced Watson and Yiannopoulos to also join, because he knew that the trio’s support for UKIP would elicit responses from the press. He laughed at outraged coverage of the development. However, Benjamin also agreed in earnest with UKIP’s anti-Muslim agenda and praised the party for “mainstreaming the conversation” about the conflict between Islam and “British values”.¹⁴⁴ He praised UKIP as the only right-thinking party on political correctness, immigration, Islamic extremism, and the “radical Left”.¹⁴⁵ In 2018, he addressed UKIP’s youth conference and a UKIP demonstration in front of Downing Street. He produced a video for its national conference and attended strategy meetings with UKIP’s then-leader, Gerard Batten.¹⁴⁶ Benjamin struck a populist note in his campaign. He promised to “make sure the concerns of regular people are actually represented in the halls of power”.¹⁴⁷ He fashioned himself as “the tip of the spear when

¹⁴⁰ PowerfulJRE, “Joe Rogan Experience #979 - Sargon of Akkad”.

¹⁴¹ Benjamin, “Lies, Damned Lies and the Video Game Press”.

¹⁴² Sargon of Akkad, “A Conversation with Milo Yiannopoulos about #GamerGate”, *YouTube*, 2:26:35, April 18, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DzK7VqGfGSs>

¹⁴³ Sargon of Akkad, “A Conversation with Milo Yiannopoulos (11/06/2015)”, *YouTube*, 2:06:25, June 12, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j6W7qOE40VU>; Sargon of Akkad, “British Banter with Milo Yiannopolous”, *YouTube*, 24:31, May 24, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tUUCi5dpWrw>

¹⁴⁴ Sargon of Akkad, “War Plan Purple”, *YouTube*, 17:32, June 27, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=upOWJjHqL60>

¹⁴⁵ Sargon of Akkad, “Exactly as Expected”, *YouTube*, 16:25, May 27, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bDPZF4HJ85Y>

¹⁴⁶ Nick Lowles *et al.*, *State of Hate 2019: The People vs. The Elite?* (London: Hope Not Hate, 2019), 71.

¹⁴⁷ Sargon of Akkad, “My Campaign to become an MEP for South West England”, *YouTube*, 3:59, April 12, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AmytXiVXoYs>

it comes to breaking through the shield of political correctness” which prevents discussion of sensitive issues.¹⁴⁸

Press coverage of Benjamin’s candidacy focused on an incident from 2016, when he tweeted abuse at a female Labour member of Parliament. When Jess Phillips lamented on Twitter that women online face ubiquitous rape threats, Benjamin responded: “I wouldn’t even rape you”.¹⁴⁹ He doubled down on this comment in a YouTube video during the campaign.¹⁵⁰ Jeremy Corbyn, then-Leader of the Opposition, denounced Benjamin’s comments as “appalling”.¹⁵¹ Nigel Farage, UKIP’s leader between 2006 and 2016, called them “vile”.¹⁵² After Batten defended Benjamin’s comments as “satire”, three UKIP MEPs abandoned the party in protest and joined Farage’s new Brexit Party.¹⁵³

UKIP won no seats at the European elections in May 2019. The party lost all 24 seats it had won in 2014. Most former UKIP voters jumped ship to Farage’s Brexit Party.¹⁵⁴ Benjamin has dismissed Farage as “politically correct” on the issue of Islam.¹⁵⁵ In July 2019, UKIP’s National Executive Council banned Batten from contesting the leadership on the grounds that his “far-right” associations had brought the party into “disrepute”.¹⁵⁶ Angry at the sidelining of his preferred leader, Benjamin cut ties with UKIP in November 2019.¹⁵⁷

¹⁴⁸ Sargon of Akkad, “Sargon of Akkad Sky News Segment”, *YouTube*, 7:48, April 25, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DfRffGdeXDg>

¹⁴⁹ Martin Daubney, “I set out to troll her — why all this fuss about 600 rape tweets?”, *The Times*, June 5, 2016, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/i-set-out-to-troll-her-why-all-this-fuss-about-600-rape-tweets-56h38ts97>

¹⁵⁰ Jonathon Read, “UKIP candidate's comments branded 'shit' by MP after making more rape 'jokes'”, *The New European*, May 3, 2019, <https://www.theneweuropean.co.uk/top-stories/ukip-candidate-carl-benjamin-makes-fresh-more-rape-jokes-1-6032632>

¹⁵¹ Jeremy Corbyn, Twitter post, May 4, 2019, 10:13AM, <https://twitter.com/jeremycorbyn/status/1124723640652709890?lang=en>

¹⁵² Sargon of Akkad, “Exactly as Expected”.

¹⁵³ Greg Heffer, “Three MEPs quit UKIP after Gerard Batten's defence of candidate's 'rape' tweet”, *Sky News*, April 15, 2019, <https://news.sky.com/story/three-meps-quit-ukip-after-gerard-battens-defence-of-candidates-rape-tweet-11694846>

¹⁵⁴ Sean Morrison, “Ukip results: Gerard Batten's party loses all of its MEPs at European elections as support completely collapses”, *The Evening Standard*, May 28, 2019, <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/politics/european-election-results-ukip-loses-all-of-its-meps-as-support-completely-collapses-a4152051.html>

¹⁵⁵ The Thinkery, “Why Did Nigel Farage REALLY Leave UKIP?”, *YouTube*, 17:42, December 6, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fDbojVzbqjE>; Akkad Daily, “Who Am I Voting For in the December Election?”, *YouTube*, 10:15, November 1, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yjendVi1Eu4>

¹⁵⁶ Akkad Daily, “Gerard Batten Blocked from Running for #UKIP Leader”, *YouTube*, 26:40, July 11, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AOXkjsNPOO0>

¹⁵⁷ Akkad Daily, “Who Am I Voting For in the December Election?”.

Benjamin therefore is one of the alt-right/-lite's prime movers. However, he takes exception to being called "far-Right".¹⁵⁸ He rejected even the label "right-wing" for most of his YouTube career.¹⁵⁹ Only from 2019 and 2020 has he accepted his role as a "right-wing commentator" and referred to the Right as "we" and "us".¹⁶⁰ Beforehand, Benjamin often characterised himself as left-wing. In 2015, he called himself a member of the "Libertarian Left".¹⁶¹ In 2016, he positioned himself in "a movement within the Left".¹⁶² In 2017, he claimed to have always considered himself a "leftie".¹⁶³

This manoeuvre shapes Benjamin's attacks on social movements. He dwells on the flaws of feminist, anti-racist, or LGBTQ+ rights activism almost to the exclusion of all else, but insists that he does not want to spend his time doing so. Benjamin insists that the behaviour of social justice activists is so bad that he cannot remain silent. Inaction would make him "complicit".¹⁶⁴ He sometimes characterises his criticism as a form of tough love, an effort to "improve my team".¹⁶⁵ He claims that identity politics has "metastasised into an into an authoritarian cancer that is consuming the Left".¹⁶⁶ He positions his attacks as an attempt to help cure this disease. Even now that he acknowledges his place on the Right, Benjamin insists that his political positions have stayed consistent, while the Left has been "collapsing into [its] most radical elements".¹⁶⁷

Benjamin rarely shares reactionary viewpoints without framing them as responses to the excesses of social movement activists. Even when endorsing far-Right politicians, he positions himself as a reluctant supporter who must embrace the lesser of two evils to thwart candidates beholden to identity politics. Benjamin has been a devoted Trump supporter since shortly before the 2016 election, but insists that he supported Bernie

¹⁵⁸ Sargon of Akkad, "My Political Compass 2019", *YouTube*, 24:27, January 3, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=swhQdq8Vmzc>

¹⁵⁹ Sargon of Akkad, "Surprise! You're a Racist!", *YouTube*, 14:51, August 25, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=78zpbzz-JGw>; Sargon of Akkad, "Surprise! You're a Racist! (Part 2)", *YouTube*, 10:11, August 24, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yaJz4-8ocH4>; Sargon of Akkad, "Re: Individualism vs Collectivism, a Response to SJW Gamer 101".

¹⁶⁰ Sargon of Akkad, "My Political Compass 2019"; Akkad Daily, "Left/Right Tribalism is Killing the Left", *YouTube*, 2:31:00, August 1, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NKkzoNL41WU>

¹⁶¹ Sargon of Akkad, "My Political Compass Results".

¹⁶² Sargon of Akkad, "The Regressive Left has Become the Religious Right".

¹⁶³ Sargon of Akkad, "Why Don't I Criticise the Right".

¹⁶⁴ Sargon of Akkad, "Who I Am and What I Do", *YouTube*, 14:16, December 8, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y6qPflKrruU>

¹⁶⁵ Sargon of Akkad, "Why Don't I Criticise the Right".

¹⁶⁶ Sargon of Akkad, "Liberal Ideas #1 - The Cancer in the Left".

¹⁶⁷ Akkad Daily, "Left/Right Tribalism is Killing the Left".

Sanders until BLM activists gained influence over him.¹⁶⁸ He “unfortunately” felt obliged to endorse Marine Le Pen in the 2017 French election because he believed that Emmanuel Macron was too scared of being called “racist” to address Islamic extremism.¹⁶⁹ He supported Jair Bolsonaro in the 2018 Brazilian election and the Law and Justice Party in the 2020 Polish election because he believed that LGBTQ+ rights activists in each nation had gone too far.¹⁷⁰

Benjamin therefore positions himself as a would-be supporter of the Left who has been turned to the Right by problems with identity politics. When he shares reactionary views, he almost always insists that some action on the part of feminist, anti-racist, or LGBTQ+ rights activists has forced his hand. He claims to feel a responsibility to push common-sense ideas into the public sphere to counter the lies and foolishness of social movement activists. These attributes make Benjamin well-suited to meeting the aims of this thesis. He complains often (and at length) that specific flaws within social movement activism have forced him to abandon the Left and become a champion for alt-right/-lite ideas.

In the remainder of this chapter, I analyse one major accusation which Benjamin levels at these movements. He considers them “collectivist” and “illiberal”.

Liberalism and authoritarianism

Collectivist and illiberal activism

Benjamin characterises himself as a liberal individualist and modern identity movements as threats to liberal individualism. He defines himself as an “English liberal” and a

¹⁶⁸ Sargon of Akkad, “Hillary Must Lose”, *YouTube*, 27:03, October 12, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dtRj6x1jHuU>; Sargon of Akkad, “Anyone But Hillary”, *YouTube*, 19:14, November 8, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UPUjOJ6YPYY>; Sargon of Akkad, “Trump or Sanders?”, *YouTube*, 24:47, March 1, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s8LGseGlrKE>; Akkad Daily, “Left/Right Tribalism is Killing the Left”.

¹⁶⁹ The Thinkery, “Thinkery Podcast #1 - The System Against the Nation (The Green Man's Burden)”, *YouTube*, 1:19:25, April 29, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TpdNE01tGYk>; Sargon of Akkad, “I Think Le Pen Will Win”, *YouTube*, 11:36, April 22, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VPFtwMcjzRs>

¹⁷⁰ Not Sargon, Twitter thread, January 4, 2019, 11:43, <https://ibb.co/sqCYdjH>; Akkad Daily, “Eastern Europe is Rejecting LGBT Ideology”, *YouTube*, 11:06, February 28, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PDXb4fTVyIM>

“classical liberal”.¹⁷¹ Benjamin coined the term “liberalist”, reasoning that “if someone who promotes feminism is a feminist, and someone who promotes socialism is a socialist ... then someone who promotes liberalism must be a liberalist”.¹⁷² Benjamin states that the liberal individualist ideology of the Enlightenment is “definitely the apex of human development”.¹⁷³

He subscribes to a conventional account of liberal individualism which is elsewhere summarised by Young. In feudal societies, the church, the state, and the force of tradition justified inequality by maintaining that different groups of people possessed “different natures”. Royals and noblemen were born superior to peasants and serfs. Enlightenment thought then swept away this regime of “caste and class” in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Liberal philosophers and politicians insisted that people “should be treated as individuals, not as members of groups”. The law should express rights in universal terms. Everyone should be treated according to same rules and standards. In a society of “individuals”, people are not hampered by expectations and stereotypes about the group into which they are born. The “elimination of group difference” will therefore end unjust forms of oppression and privilege. Positions of authority will be distributed meritocratically. Equal citizens will meet in the “public sphere” to make decisions.¹⁷⁴ Carole Pateman explains that this narrative positions liberal individualism as “the emancipatory doctrine *par excellence*” – the adoption of Enlightenment ideals in Western Europe and North America eliminated all unfair justifications of subordination “in one fell swoop”.¹⁷⁵

Benjamin sometimes makes videos about Enlightenment texts such as Paine’s *The Age of Reason* and Rousseau’s *Discourse on Inequality*.¹⁷⁶ However, he usually takes his definitions of liberalism and individualism from Wikipedia and online dictionaries. Liberalism (via Wikipedia) is “a political philosophy or worldview founded on ideas of

¹⁷¹ Sargon of Akkad, “About”, *YouTube*, accessed April 30, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/user/SargonofAkkad100/about>; The Thinkery, “The CTH Subreddit is Always Angry With Me”.

¹⁷² Sargon of Akkad, “2018: What We Can Do”, *YouTube*, 4:19, January 9, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=41y7L7BjDX0>

¹⁷³ Sargon of Akkad, “Re: Individualism vs Collectivism, a Response to SJW Gamer 101”.

¹⁷⁴ Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 156-158.

¹⁷⁵ Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988), 39.

¹⁷⁶ Sargon of Akkad, “The Age of Reason - A Quick Analysis”, *YouTube*, 11:17, November 29, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VaDhUh1aJ0c>; Sargon of Akkad, “An Overview of Rousseau's Discourse on Inequality”, *YouTube*, 8:27, December 8, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7EHhV-DRBSg>

liberty and equality”. Liberals “support programs such as freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of religion, free markets, civil rights, democratic societies, secular governments, and international cooperation”.¹⁷⁷ Individualism (via Merriam Webster) is “the conception that all values, rights, and duties originate in individuals”. It is “a theory maintaining the political and economic independence of the individual and stressing individual action and interests”.¹⁷⁸

With these definitions in hand, Benjamin contends that the “modern progressive movement is ... directly opposed to the classical liberalism of the Enlightenment”.¹⁷⁹ He insists that political approaches which emphasise groups are immoral.¹⁸⁰ Via Merriam Webster, he defines collectivism as “emphasis on collective rather than individual action or identity”.¹⁸¹ To Benjamin, collectivists put “the importance of the group above the importance of the individual”.¹⁸² This always creates an “in-group/out-group dichotomy” in which some groups are valorised and others are demonised.¹⁸³ The Nazis loved Aryans and vilified Jews, the Soviets loved proletarians and vilified kulaks.¹⁸⁴ This is why group-focused ideologies are “the most bloody ideologies in all of history”.¹⁸⁵

To Benjamin, “collectivism is the very root of identity politics”.¹⁸⁶ Feminist, anti-racist, and LGBTQ+ rights activists all “demarcate a group” as deserving of “special treatment” and unique “group rights”.¹⁸⁷ Straight white men meanwhile become a hated out-group and are “treated to an array of stereotypes” (equivalent to “calling a black person a nigger”).¹⁸⁸ To Benjamin, social movements are collectivist and therefore “separated by

¹⁷⁷ Sargon of Akkad, “Illiberal Progressives”.

¹⁷⁸ Sargon of Akkad, “Liberal Ideas #3 - Individualism vs Collectivism”, *YouTube*, 24:36, November 4, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vFh6Yy-rIB8>

¹⁷⁹ Sargon of Akkad, “Illiberal Progressives”.

¹⁸⁰ Sargon of Akkad, “An Exhortation to the English”.

¹⁸¹ Sargon of Akkad, “Liberal Ideas #3 - Individualism vs Collectivism”.

¹⁸² Sargon of Akkad Live, “#Liberalist Stream #1 - Principles”, *YouTube*, 2:11:15, January 11, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yaoPiRKQ9Os>

¹⁸³ Sargon of Akkad, “Liberal Ideas #3 - Individualism vs Collectivism”; Sargon of Akkad, “The Regressive Left has Become the Religious Right”.

¹⁸⁴ Sargon of Akkad, “Liberal Ideas #3 - Individualism vs Collectivism”.

¹⁸⁵ Sargon of Akkad, “Re: Individualism vs Collectivism, a Response to SJW Gamer 101”.

¹⁸⁶ Sargon of Akkad, “This Week in Stupid (30/08/2015)”, *YouTube*, 26:25, August 30, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qHGzFsgl3oY>

¹⁸⁷ Rubin, “Sargon of Akkad on Classical Liberalism and Gamergate”; Benjamin, “#Liberalist Stream #1 - Principles”.

¹⁸⁸ Sargon of Akkad, “The Regressive Left has Become the Religious Right”.

a hair's breadth" from Nazism and Stalinism.¹⁸⁹ The practitioners of identity politics would lead us "back into the industrialised slaughters of the twentieth century".¹⁹⁰

Benjamin maintains that, as collectivist ideologies, feminism, anti-racism, and LGBTQ+ rights activism are inherently "illiberal".¹⁹¹ Collectivism precipitates violations of civil liberties, because "there is no way to avoid defining the out-group as people who do not deserve the same protections as the in-group".¹⁹² Social movement activists supposedly advance the cause of their favoured groups by running roughshod over other people's civil liberties. Citing freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, freedom of the press, *laissez-faire* trading and the rule of law, Benjamin claims that "almost every liberal principle is under attack" from "this hyper-collectivist, hyper-authoritarian, anti-liberal progressive ideology".¹⁹³ "Left-wing authoritarian" movements behave in ways "designed to tear apart the Western liberal tradition".¹⁹⁴ Beholden to collectivist ideologies, feminist, anti-racist, and LGBTQ+ rights activists go about "othering" straight white men and violating their liberties to benefit women and minorities.¹⁹⁵

As mentioned, some scholars who blame the alt-right/-lite's existence on social movement activism also criticise these apparent tendencies. Nagle complains that activists are "anti-free speech" and indulge in "anti-male, anti-straight, anti-white, anti-cis rhetoric".¹⁹⁶ Gray protests the "hateful" stereotyping of straight white men.¹⁹⁷ The "authoritarianism" of identity politics and "liberalism" of the alt-right is the focus of Phillips and Yi's article.¹⁹⁸ Benjamin claims that he has been turned to the Right by exactly these flaws. I test this claim later in this chapter.

Oppression as a thing of the past

Benjamin contends that no good reasons exist for women and minorities to affirm or mobilise their group identities. He believes that justice has already been established,

¹⁸⁹ Sargon of Akkad, "Weimar America".

¹⁹⁰ Akkad Daily, "The Deplatformings Will Continue Until Morale Improves".

¹⁹¹ Sargon of Akkad, "Illiberal Progressives".

¹⁹² Sargon of Akkad, "Liberal Ideas #3 - Individualism vs Collectivism".

¹⁹³ Sargon of Akkad, "Illiberal Progressives".

¹⁹⁴ Sargon of Akkad, "Liberal Ideas #2 - Neo-Progressive Activists", *YouTube*, 10:45, October 20, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=30rReG5sdyM>; Sargon of Akkad, "Why Don't I Criticise the Right".

¹⁹⁵ Sargon of Akkad, "Liberal Ideas #2 - Neo-Progressive Activists".

¹⁹⁶ Nagle, *Kill All Normies*, 51.

¹⁹⁷ Gray, "'The fire rises'", 152.

¹⁹⁸ Phillips and Yi, "Charlottesville Paradox".

because all people have the rights and freedoms associated with citizenship in the Enlightenment tradition. He sometimes concedes that liberal philosophers and politicians in the past were prejudiced and excluded groups from certain rights and freedoms. He accepts that the American civil rights movement was necessary because equal rights and liberties were denied to black people.¹⁹⁹ However, the value and completeness of liberal ideals of justice are “completely separate from the people that uttered them”.²⁰⁰ To Benjamin, the only acceptable feminist, anti-racist, or LGBTQ+ rights campaigns aim at the extension of full citizenship. He considers such projects “Mission Accomplished”.²⁰¹ Feminist movements should dissolve because legal discrimination was eradicated “decades ago”.²⁰² Reasonable feminist demands “were all agreed to in the Seventies when it was still relevant”.²⁰³ Women enjoy the same legal rights as men – feminism therefore has “achieved its goals” and should be “consigned to history”.²⁰⁴ Anti-racist movements should dissolve because *de jure* racial discrimination has been eradicated. Anti-discrimination laws from the 1960s and 1970s should be considered “the final form of anti-racism”.²⁰⁵ Modern anti-racists complain as though they are “back in the Sixties”.²⁰⁶ LGBTQ+ rights movements should dissolve because legal discrimination against LGBTQ+ people has been eliminated, as was “inevitable” in countries influenced by liberal principles.²⁰⁷

Benjamin does not deny that inequalities between social groups persist. However, he claims that such inequalities are not injustices because they stem from the choices or inherent nature of woman and minorities. He denies that Western countries are still patriarchal.²⁰⁸ He observes that Western societies do not conform to definitions (from Wikipedia and online dictionaries) which describe “patriarchy” as a social system in

¹⁹⁹ autism-chan, “Andrew Anglin vs. Sargon of Akkad (2/10/18)”.

²⁰⁰ Andywarski, “Richard Spencer, Styx and Sargon Have a Chat”.

²⁰¹ Sargon of Akkad, “The Lunatics Have Taken Over the Asylum”.

²⁰² Sargon of Akkad, “Why Do People Hate #Feminism? #8 - Yes All Feminists”, *YouTube*, 17:16, March 8, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oQQyxkPNaow>

²⁰³ Sargon of Akkad, “Fuck the King!”, *YouTube*, 29:40, June 29, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x23HQncUbII>

²⁰⁴ Sargon of Akkad, “What Does Feminism Mean?”, *YouTube*, 16:14, May 13, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PqSOZZleBGg>

²⁰⁵ Akkad Daily, “No Whites Allowed”, *YouTube*, 11:45, June 25, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T0l8U_CluBU

²⁰⁶ Akkad Daily, “Antifa to be Designated a Terrorist Organisation”, *YouTube*, 2:14:15, June 1, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JnBarZsjma0>

²⁰⁷ Akkad Daily, “The Gay Refugees of Uganda”, *YouTube*, 9:26, October 12, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z_1lJ7WrXB0

²⁰⁸ Sargon of Akkad, “Submit, Puny Males!”, *YouTube*, 11:47, September 23, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cdolFBDErdA>

which fathers have supreme authority over women and children.²⁰⁹ He states that the success of individual women in business, politics, and entertainment shows Western countries to be non-patriarchal.²¹⁰ Only “conspiracy theorists” could believe in the survival of patriarchy.²¹¹ The Western world is now a “meritocracy”. We live in a system that allows any hard-working woman to “rise to the top where they rightfully belong”.²¹² Gender inequalities are attributable to women’s “own lack of merit”, not sexism.²¹³ Most artists represented in British galleries are male because women have not produced “great art”.²¹⁴ Most famous philosophers are male because women have been less “insightful”.²¹⁵ Most successful comedians are male because “women are not funny”.²¹⁶ Men earn more money because women make “poor choices” and prefer to work in low-stress, low-paid professions like nursing and childcare.²¹⁷ Men dominate STEM fields because women are not interested in science.²¹⁸ Most CEOs and corporate board members are male because “being a leader is a competitive position” and “women prefer to be co-operative”.²¹⁹

Benjamin denies that racism is still prominent in Western countries. Institutional racism is a “boogeyman”; white supremacy a “mythical concept”.²²⁰ Successful black musicians prove that the United Kingdom is free of systemic racism.²²¹ Barack Obama’s election is

²⁰⁹ Sargon of Akkad, “Why Do People Hate #Feminism? #2 - The Patriarchy”, *YouTube*, 23:27, April 1, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IrfkoGCK0SE>; Sargon of Akkad, “The Patriarchy”.

²¹⁰ Sargon of Akkad, “The Patriarchy”, *YouTube*, 8:50, June 23, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iSksPKQ7Ys0>

²¹¹ Sargon of Akkad, “Why Do People Hate #Feminism? #8 - Yes All Feminists”.

²¹² Sargon of Akkad, “The Patriarchy”.

²¹³ Sargon of Akkad, “The Female Aristocracy”, *YouTube*, 14:50, April 2, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UdVkBpDnKuo>

²¹⁴ Sargon of Akkad, “Do we still need feminism?”, *YouTube*, 15:10, January 9, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WslioBI487s>

²¹⁵ Sargon of Akkad, “I need feminism because some piglets are more equal than others”, *YouTube*, 8:03, February 20, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=750lAwAl628>

²¹⁶ Sargon of Akkad, “This Week in Stupid (24/08/2014)”, *YouTube*, 33:24, August 24, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5wOBz40r-lc>; Sargon of Akkad, “Feminism is the Establishment”, *YouTube*, 42:03, March 21, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9KASgSBfY1k>

²¹⁷ Sargon of Akkad, “Equal Pay Day: Because women are prone to make stupid decisions”, *YouTube*, 14:28, April 12, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OSCeO-ysSv8>; Sargon of Akkad, “What is feminism?”, *YouTube*, 13:30, October 15, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZzljCdqR26o>

²¹⁸ Sargon of Akkad, “Are you against quotas?”, *YouTube*, 14:32, April 7, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v3r5xPLfbmY>

²¹⁹ Sargon of Akkad, “Ban Bossy by being bossy”, *YouTube*, 9:11, March 10, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aSyEglmjUhk>

²²⁰ Sargon of Akkad, “#Feminism, #BlackLivesMatter and the Failure of #Humanism”, *YouTube*, 26:36, April 15, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sdi0hz8T0b0>; Sargon of Akkad, “Why Do Black People Commit More Crime?”, *YouTube*, 19:43, July 13, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KIpcxy9M1pw>

²²¹ Akkad Daily, “Stormzy Declares Britain is ‘100% Racist’”, *YouTube*, 10:27, December 21, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BzbrS_x3SSc

“an immediate and obvious refutation” of the idea that the United States is racist.²²² Persistent racial inequalities are caused by the non-white people’s shortcoming, not racism. Racial inequality in the American criminal justice system “isn’t the result of systematic oppression, [it] is the result of many individual choices”.²²³ Black people simply “commit godawful amounts more crime than other races”.²²⁴ This explains the disproportionate incarceration of black Americans.²²⁵ This “sheer volume of crime” is also “more than enough to explain why so many black people are shot by police”.²²⁶ Benjamin knows that poverty and crime go hand-in-hand, but insists that black Americans are poor because they refuse to finish high school or raise children within stable marriages.²²⁷ Black men are instead enamoured with “thug culture”. They pursue tattoos and “bling” instead of working to support their families.²²⁸ Children raised in poor “matriarchal” households with absent fathers become criminals.²²⁹ The culture in black “ghettoes” is “very adversarial towards authority”. Black men endanger themselves by being confrontational towards police.²³⁰

Benjamin denies the existence of widespread homo- and transphobia. Gay people can enter government, own property, and are not compelled to drink from separate fountains or “sit at the back of the bus”.²³¹ LGBTQ+ rights activism is unnecessary because “no one else is thinking or saying” that LGBTQ+ people are inferior.²³² Transgender people are also not “segregated ... to the back of the bus” and are allowed to eat in the same restaurants as cisgender people.²³³ Transgender rights activism is unnecessary because

²²² Sargon of Akkad, “#Feminism, #BlackLivesMatter and the Failure of #Humanism”; Sargon of Akkad, “A Temporarily Embarrassed Believer”, *YouTube*, 39:05, May 23, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j4xxoLlOI1o>

²²³ Sargon of Akkad, “The Demands of #BlackLivesMatter”, *YouTube*, 38:34, August 3, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fg0rTlq0u7A>

²²⁴ Akkad Daily, “Yorkshire Tea Endorses #BlackLivesMatter”, *YouTube*, 17:00, June 9, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oLS30MfJt00>

²²⁵ Akkad Daily, “McRevolution”.

²²⁶ Sargon of Akkad, “Apologists for Black Lives Matter”, *YouTube*, 21:23, July 15, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hos7HouJ4DQ>

²²⁷ Sargon of Akkad, “#Feminism, #BlackLivesMatter and the Failure of #Humanism”.

²²⁸ Sargon of Akkad Live, “Discussing the Ideology of #BlackLivesMatter with Benjamin Dixon”, *YouTube*, 1:21:50, January 9, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z8-jR6jGBGE>

²²⁹ Sargon of Akkad, “Why Do Black People Commit More Crime?”; Akkad Daily, “#BlackLivesMatter Has No Case in Britain”, *YouTube*, 9:57, June 6, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E_BtYQEH00

²³⁰ Sargon of Akkad Live, “Discussing the Ideology of #BlackLivesMatter with Benjamin Dixon”.

²³¹ Sargon of Akkad, “Fuck the King!”.

²³² Sargon of Akkad, “The Problem With Heavy Metal Is Metalheads”, *YouTube*, 21:43, December 13, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vou_0RW5T5g

²³³ Sargon of Akkad, “Die Cis Scum”, *YouTube*, 9:49, February 3, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AKMuR1-yWAc>

“there is no one standing against it”.²³⁴ Pointing to laws criminalising homosexuality in Africa and Islamic countries, Benjamin states that LGBTQ+ rights “are under threat, but not in Western countries”.²³⁵

Overall, to Benjamin, the abolition of legal discrimination means that “none of us are oppressed”. Everyone has “individual agency” and can work to improve their lives.²³⁶ The rights and liberties associated with the Enlightenment have been extended to women and minorities, so there is no need for anyone to celebrate or mobilise group identities. Doing so is “antithetical to the Western liberal-democratic ideal of citizenship”.²³⁷

This narrative is reminiscent of aforementioned academic critiques of identity politics, in particular from authors in the liberal rather than socialist camp. Authors like Gitlin, Lilla, and Rorty also maintain that liberal ideals can deliver justice, despite the bigotry of the politicians and philosophers who conceived them. Gitlin writes of America’s Founding Fathers that “the logic of their language implied the eventual defeat of their prejudices”.²³⁸ None of these authors would endorse Benjamin’s claim that justice has already been fully achieved, but each extols women and minorities to downplay their group identities and instead make their claims in the language of shared citizenship and Enlightenment values. Gitlin implores modern activists to emulate first-wave feminists or Martin Luther King Jr. and pursue “the rights and powers guaranteed for all by the Enlightenment” by emphasising “a universal condition and universalisable rights”.²³⁹ He argues against the idea of turning “qualities once pointed to as proof of inferiority ... into the basis for positive distinction”.²⁴⁰ Lilla similarly lionises early feminist, anti-racist, and LGBTQ+ rights activists who made claims as “citizens” who were “denied their rights”.²⁴¹ He wishes that contemporary activists would “take the concept of universal, equal citizenship ... seriously”.²⁴² Amy Chua, another liberal critic of identity politics,

²³⁴ Sargon of Akkad, “This Week in Stupid (19/10/2014)”, *YouTube*, October 20, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2vON3iuqt0M>

²³⁵ Akkad Daily, “The Gay Refugees of Uganda”; Sargon of Akkad, “Islam Does Not Permit Homosexuality”, *YouTube*, 11:46, June 13, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cItgz3OpdTl>; Sargon of Akkad, “Progressive Islam”, *YouTube*, 37:16, March 6, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wnsfrx9whKI>

²³⁶ Sargon of Akkad, “A Temporarily Embarrassed Believer”.

²³⁷ Akkad Daily, “No Whites Allowed”.

²³⁸ Gitlin, *The Twilight of Common Dreams*, 88.

²³⁹ *Ibid*, 153.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 11.

²⁴¹ Lilla, *The Once and Future Liberal*, 65-66; Lilla, “A Conversation with Mark Lilla on His Critique of Identity Politics”.

²⁴² Lilla, *The Once and Future Liberal*, 66, 109.

celebrates the “group-transcending” rhetoric of first-wave feminists and civil rights leaders, who sought to be recognised as part of “universal humankind”.²⁴³ She counsels modern activists to de-emphasise “group consciousness” and emulate King’s faith in Enlightenment principles.²⁴⁴

Benjamin’s denunciation of social movements as illiberal therefore involves two related claims, which are both evocative of points made by serious academics who are otherwise on the Left. First, modern practitioners of identity politics are “collectivists” who happily violate the rights of the hated “Other”: straight white men. Second, the practitioners of identity politics do not need to affirm or mobilise group identities because no one is formally excluded from Enlightenment rights and liberties. I next evaluate these claims in order.

Jumping at shadows

Benjamin does not prove that collectivism and illiberalism are widespread traits, but instead often misrepresents innocuous behaviour to denounce these traits in their absence. Because he casts his net over the entire English-speaking Internet in search of bad behaviour, Benjamin sometimes finds it. In 2011, a feminist student journalist at a Canadian university did write that prostate cancer research funding should be curtailed because the disease only affects men.²⁴⁵ In 2016, a young BLM supporter in a debate at Harvard did say that there is “no ethical reason ... white people deserve to live”.²⁴⁶ In 2019, a Scottish schoolteacher did silence a conservative student for their “unacceptable opinion” on transgender people.²⁴⁷ However, hundreds of thousands of people participate in social movement activism. It is unrealistic to think that none will make offensive statements. Anyone can broadcast their opinion online. Any interaction can be captured and disseminated thanks to mobile phone cameras. Much more striking than Benjamin’s ability to find real malpractice is his ability to represent innocuous behaviour as “reverse”

²⁴³ Amy Chua, *Political Tribes: Group Instinct and the Fate of Nations* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 12.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 93-94, 106.

²⁴⁵ Sargon of Akkad, “Why Do People Hate Feminism #10 - #Feminism is a Supremacy Movement”.

²⁴⁶ Sargon of Akkad, “An Honest Look at the Alt Right”.

²⁴⁷ Sargon of Akkad, “Why Do People Hate Feminism #13 - Feminism is Totalitarian”, *YouTube*, 19:36, June 18, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Fjhuae_gSw

discrimination or illiberalism. He could fill his YouTube channels with videos denouncing these crimes even if no activists put a foot wrong.

Benjamin mischaracterises harmless passages from written sources. For instance, he claims that university courses about feminism, anti-racism, or LGBTQ+ rights instil an “in-group/out-group mentality”, which teaches students to see their non-activist peers as the “Other”. His evidence is an online article which (he claims) teaches lecturers to brainwash students. It catches Benjamin’s eye because the title mentions “social justice”.²⁴⁸ In reality, this is a free online resource for schoolteachers. The author recommends connecting school projects with community issues to engage children. She suggests issues like littering, not racism, sexism, homo- or transphobia. She encourages teachers to create supportive classrooms in which children see each other like family.²⁴⁹ Benjamin’s wild misrepresentation of this source as a guide for brainwashing university students into collectivism demonstrates his ability to imagine this trait. He deals similarly with a policy platform created by The Movement for Black Lives, a collection of organisations involved in fighting racism in the American criminal justice system.²⁵⁰ Benjamin takes it as an “official list of demands” from BLM.²⁵¹ In other videos he calls BLM a “supremacist” movement which wants “special treatment for black people” and therefore “should be treated like the Ku Klux Klan”.²⁵² This preconception shapes his reading of this policy platform as an effort to create a “system of racial prejudice”. Benjamin skim-reads a section about criminal justice reform., and can “only assume” that it calls for a system in which punishment “will be determined by the colour of that person’s skin” – white people will be “sent to jail as usual” and black people will not.²⁵³ The proposed policies involve nothing of the sort. The authors call for bans on corporal punishment in schools and the prosecution of teenagers for “misdemeanour” offences. These measures would apply to black and white people equally.²⁵⁴ The platform

²⁴⁸ Sargon of Akkad, “This Week in Stupid (24/04/2016) - Social Justice is a Cult Edition!”, *YouTube*, 31:17, April 24, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vN0oKIMlHyI>

²⁴⁹ Tabitha Dell’Angelo, “Creating Classrooms for Social Justice”, *Edutopia*, September 29, 2014, <https://www.edutopia.org/blog/creating-classrooms-for-social-justice-tabitha-dellangelo>

²⁵⁰ “About Us”, *The Movement For Black Lives*, August 2016, <https://policy.m4bl.org/about/>

²⁵¹ Sargon of Akkad, “The Demands of #BlackLivesMatter”

²⁵² Sargon of Akkad, “The Ideological Root of #BlackLivesMatter”, *YouTube*, 29:00, January 6, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XyUcfYsd8n0>; Sargon of Akkad, “Tomi Lahren Destroys Trevor Noah Over #BlackLivesMatter”, *YouTube*, 37:32, December 2, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fY9xGRZjUUI>

²⁵³ Sargon of Akkad, “The Demands of #BlackLivesMatter”.

²⁵⁴ “End the War on Black People”, *The Movement For Black Lives*, August 2016, <https://policy.m4bl.org/end-war-on-black-people/>

elsewhere calls for “full and free access for all Black people ... to lifetime education”. Benjamin presents this as a racist measure which denies free education to white people. However, subsequent paragraphs clarify that these measures would apply to everyone.²⁵⁵ Benjamin deals with the rest of the platform in the same manner. In a video devoted to this policy document, he seems unwilling to read it, and attributes fake goals to BLM which make it seem prejudiced against white people.²⁵⁶

Benjamin elsewhere considers it a “massive moral affront” when participants in the George Floyd protests chose to “take a knee”.²⁵⁷ This gesture echoes the 2016 and 2017 protests of NFL footballer Colin Kaepernick, who kneeled before matches to protest racialised police brutality.²⁵⁸ Benjamin reinterprets the gesture as black people asking whites to “bend the knee” as “an act of submission” or “subjugation and humiliation”. To Benjamin, this practice asks white people to sacrifice their “agency and independence” and become an unfree “vassal”.²⁵⁹ This bizarre characterisation shows Benjamin’s ability to fabricate illiberalism in its absence.

Benjamin also paints social movement activists as illiberal collectivists when they criticise hate movements. He considers feminism a “supremacy movement” which “advance[s] the privilege of women over everyone else in society”.²⁶⁰ As evidence, he notes that feminists criticise MRAs. Benjamin might “excuse” the existence of a women’s movement, if feminists tolerated an equivalent men’s movement.²⁶¹ Feminists deny men the ability even to campaign for their rights: “If feminists weren’t also supremacists, they’d be best friends with men’s rights activists”.²⁶² However, as discussed, MRAs are not innocent advocates for issues affecting men. They engage in sexist vitriol and harassment. Less hateful organisations which address men’s problems (such as Beyond

²⁵⁵ “Reparations”, The Movement For Black Lives, August 2016, <https://policy.m4bl.org/reparations/>

²⁵⁶ Sargon of Akkad, “The Demands of #BlackLivesMatter”.

²⁵⁷ Akkad Daily, “Celebrities DESTROY Racism!”.

²⁵⁸ “Black Lives Matter: Where does ‘taking a knee’ come from?”, *BBC News*, June 18, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/explainers-53098516>

²⁵⁹ Akkad Daily, “Celebrities DESTROY Racism!”.

²⁶⁰ Sargon of Akkad, “Guest-starring Laci Green”, *YouTube*, 14:19, April 30, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t5eMOKBh9js>; Sargon of Akkad “Submit, Puny Males!”, Sargon of Akkad, “What is feminism?”.

²⁶¹ Sargon of Akkad, “Feminism Needs Orthodoxy”, *YouTube*, 16:15, August 26, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=djBZn0l9kC0>; Sargon of Akkad, “Why Do People Hate Feminism #10 - #Feminism is a Supremacy Movement”.

²⁶² Sargon of Akkad, “Egalitarianism as Interpreted by a Feminist”, *YouTube*, 29:56, July 14, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=seq7EYDyIGE>; Sargon of Akkad, “Why Do People Hate Feminism #10 - #Feminism is a Supremacy Movement”.

Blue in Australia) do not receive feminist criticism.²⁶³ Benjamin acts as though feminist critics are opposed to men's rights in general, rather than specifically "Men's Rights".

Benjamin misrepresents jokes as earnest hate speech. When Michelle Obama addressed a summit about women's education in Africa in 2014, she joked that "women are smarter than men". Benjamin saw "a frighteningly totalitarian mindset" revealed.²⁶⁴ Also in 2014, expressions of "ironic misandry" became popular with some feminist Twitter users, who pretended to be man-haters fixed on male destruction as a way to parody anti-feminists who equate feminism with hatred of men. Women joining the trend used the hashtags "#misandry" and "#killallmen".²⁶⁵ Benjamin takes these tweets at face value. He interprets jocular Twitter exchanges as "organising a fascist network". Participants are "setting the groundwork" for the extermination or enslavement of men.²⁶⁶ Women who find such violent material funny must be insane.²⁶⁷ Benjamin's standards for comedy depend on who is being insulted. Jokes targeting women and minorities are "offensive and funny" and can be given the benefit of the doubt as "ironic".²⁶⁸ However, feminists tell their jokes "a little bit too enthusiastically" – they must really be intent on killing the hated male "Other".²⁶⁹

Benjamin uses hoaxes as evidence of bigotry. To support a claim that feminism revolves "exclusively around the concept of man hatred", he points to a blog post in which a "feminist" recounts aborting her pregnancy because the baby was male.²⁷⁰ The story was fake.²⁷¹ Benjamin realises this, but still uses it as evidence. He claims that "everyone" believed the story because "this is exactly what they've come to expect from

²⁶³ "Men", *Beyond Blue*, accessed October 8, 2020, <https://www.beyondblue.org.au/who-does-it-affect/men>

²⁶⁴ Sargon of Akkad, "This Week in Stupid (10/08/2014)".

²⁶⁵ Amanda Hess, "The Rise of the Ironic Man-Hater", *Slate*, August 8, 2014, <https://slate.com/human-interest/2014/08/ironic-misandry-why-feminists-joke-about-drinking-male-tears-and-banning-all-men.html>

²⁶⁶ Sargon of Akkad, "The Manifesto of the Feminist Socialist Party", *YouTube*, April 4, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5JREfIUzF4k&ab_channel=SargonofAkkad

²⁶⁷ Sargon of Akkad, "This Week in Stupid (17/08/2014)", *YouTube*, 24:03, August 17, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nkk_7qpOQKU

²⁶⁸ Sargon of Akkad, "Social Justice is Uncool", *YouTube*, 29:30, April 29, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6EICAPmdOU0>

²⁶⁹ Sargon of Akkad, "This Week in Stupid (17/08/2014)".

²⁷⁰ Sargon of Akkad, "Why Do People Hate #Feminism? #1 - Feminists Hate Men", *YouTube*, 15:04, March 14, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ua8T4nSTCWA>

²⁷¹ Anna Merlan, "That Fake 'Feminist Aborts Baby Boy' Story Fooled So Many People", *Jezebel*, February 11, 2015, <https://jezebel.com/that-fake-feminist-aborts-baby-boy-story-fooled-so-many-1685182760>

feminism”.²⁷² The hoax is valid evidence of anti-male hatred because it is the sort of thing feminists *would* do. He uses another hoax to argue that BLM activists hate white people. In 2017, four black people in Chicago kidnapped and abused an intellectually disabled white teenager.²⁷³ Watson (of InfoWars) created a fake association between this crime and BLM by referring to it on Twitter as the “#BLMKidnapping”.²⁷⁴ Benjamin realises this, but still uses it as evidence. People were “ready to accept” that BLM was responsible; the hoax is the sort of thing BLM activists *would* do.²⁷⁵ The above are just some of hundreds of possible examples in which Benjamin recoils from illiberalism and from hatred of straight white men where they do not exist.

Benjamin’s own illiberal views

Benjamin’s claim to reject identity politics because it affronts his principles is further undermined by comments which call into question his own commitment to liberalism. He has always struggled to apply his principles to opponents as well as friends. For instance, Twitter harassment of Valizadeh (the PUA) is a violation of his “freedom of speech”, but a feminist blogger who was forced out of the public eye by online harassment should simply put on her “big girl pants”.²⁷⁶ Beyond such hypocrisy, Benjamin began expressing serious doubts about liberalism in 2020.²⁷⁷

He now worries that Enlightenment thought might be too “abstract”, and impossible to implement among real people. He worries that – compared to past generations who had their “moral obligations” dictated to them by Christian doctrine or tradition – individuals under liberalism are expected to exercise their own impartial reason and think about their duties to others.²⁷⁸ Benjamin worries that most people never think about such duties.

²⁷² Sargon of Akkad, “Why Do People Hate #Feminism? #1 - Feminists Hate Men”.

²⁷³ Camila Domonoske, “4 Charged With Hate Crimes Over Beating Live-Streamed On Facebook”, *NPR*, January 5, 2017, <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2017/01/05/508331652/4-people-in-custody-in-chicago-over-beating-live-streamed-on-facebook>

²⁷⁴ Holly Han and Christina Zdanowicz, “Police: No link between Chicago torture video and Black Lives Matter”, *CNN*, January 5, 2017, <https://edition.cnn.com/2017/01/05/us/black-lives-matter-chicago-facebook-live-beating/index.html>

²⁷⁵ Sargon of Akkad, “The Ideological Root of #BlackLivesMatter”.

²⁷⁶ Sargon of Akkad, “Illiberal Progressives”; Sargon of Akkad, “The Regressive Left has Become the Religious Right”; Sargon of Akkad, “Dear Rebecca Watson who wants to keep talking about herself”, *YouTube*, 12:19, March 24, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fwnZleh_e3M

²⁷⁷ The Symposium, “What Can The Enlightenment Learn From Religion?”, *YouTube*, 18:11, March 29, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0iF-hgtzJmk>

²⁷⁸ The Symposium, “What Do We Do After The Enlightenment?”, *YouTube*, 17:37, March 24, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mfQ6QKCGUWg>

Instead, “total freedom means total self-indulgence”. Modern people have become “fat and weak and lazy and addicted”.²⁷⁹ Benjamin blames this drift on high-minded Enlightenment thinkers, who underestimated the need to appeal to the “emotive”, “animal” parts of human nature. Benjamin here compares liberal individualism negatively with religion, which can instil ideas about moral duty by targeting this non-rational part of the human psyche.²⁸⁰

He worries that modern citizens fail, in particular, in their duties to the nation. He posits a duty to “continue our civilisation”. His compatriots have an obligation to preserve “the heritage, the environment, the language – the pleasant nature of England”. Benjamin muses that – for men – this obligation might involve fighting off invaders. However, he is more concerned that modern women “shirk” their duties.²⁸¹ He states that “nature makes demands” of women. Biology makes them “responsible for the production of subsequent generations” who can carry on English culture.²⁸² It is in women’s hands to produce “wholesome families” so that “the country doesn’t have a demographic collapse[,] ... becomes weak and get taken over by somewhere else”.²⁸³ However, birth rates are declining in “societies that have made it permissible for women not to marry” and “have careers instead of families”. Benjamin considers this “a massive dereliction of duty” on the part of women, who are too lazy or selfish to raise children.²⁸⁴ Some women have abortions out of such laziness.²⁸⁵ When he muses about liberalism’s failure to instil duty to others, Benjamin therefore only identifies one undervalued duty: women should breed for the sake of the nation.

This commentary has fascistic overtones. Fascism developed as a revolt against the liberal belief that individuals should exercise their own judgement as a guide to action.²⁸⁶ Kevin Passmore notes that Italian, German, French, and British fascists believed that this cultivated the “equivalent of couch potato syndrome”.²⁸⁷ Influenced by social Darwinism, fascists viewed international relations as a domain of struggle in which only the fittest

²⁷⁹ The Symposium, “What Can The Enlightenment Learn From Religion?”.

²⁸⁰ The Symposium, “What Do We Do After The Enlightenment?”.

²⁸¹ Ibid.

²⁸² The Symposium, “What Can The Enlightenment Learn From Religion?”; The Symposium, “What Do We Do After The Enlightenment?”.

²⁸³ The Symposium, “What Do We Do After The Enlightenment?”.

²⁸⁴ The Symposium, “What Can The Enlightenment Learn From Religion?”.

²⁸⁵ Akkad Daily, “The Deplatformings Will Continue Until Morale Improves”.

²⁸⁶ Rick Wilford, “Fascism”, in *Political Ideologies: An Introduction*, ed. Vincent Geoghegan and Rick Wilford (London: Routledge, 1984).

²⁸⁷ Kevin Passmore, *Fascism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 37.

and strongest nations would prosper.²⁸⁸ They worried that liberalism disarmed the nation by allowing people to choose comfortable, decadent lifestyles which produced a weak, mediocre population.²⁸⁹ Andrew Heywood notes that fascists dismissed the liberal idea that individuals can use their reason as a the guide to right living as overly intellectual and “lifeless”. They preferred to appeal to “the soul, the emotions, the instincts”.²⁹⁰ The Fascist and Nazi regimes knowingly leant upon “non-rational” myths about a reborn Roman Empire or a return to medieval farm life to motivate their preferred behaviours.²⁹¹ Fascism is often considered a “political religion” because of its reliance on myth-making to correct anomie, and provide the sort of certainties formerly supplied by Christianity.²⁹² Moreover, Passmore notes that fascists were particularly keen to redress the “egoism” which caused modern men and women “to put comfortable living or careers before the production of healthy babies for the nation”.²⁹³ Quoting Hitler’s dictates on “the duties which nature imposes” on women, Rick Wilford notes that fascist myths and policies in Italy and Germany reduced women to “little more than nationalist wombs in service of the state”.²⁹⁴

When Benjamin complains that women made weak and lazy by excessive freedom leave the nation vulnerable to invasion or subversion, and pines for a more visceral, quasi-religious way to alert women of their duty to breed, the similarities to fascist dogma are hard to ignore. Daniel Odin Shaw notes that these concerns also animate contemporary American fascists linked to white nationalism, who desire a more “spiritual identity ... around which to mobilise” in order to boost white birth rates.²⁹⁵ Benjamin echoes fascists by stating that individual freedom is flawed because it leaves women free not to produce babies for the nation. This undermines his claims to “liberal” status.

His comments following the January 2021 attack on the United States Capitol by Trump supporters further undermined this status.²⁹⁶ Benjamin came as close as possible to

²⁸⁸ Heywood, *Political Ideologies*, 199.

²⁸⁹ Kevin Passmore, “The Ideological Origins of Fascism before 1914”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Fascism*, ed. R.J.B Bosworth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 20.

²⁹⁰ Heywood, *Political Ideologies*, 198.

²⁹¹ Wilford, “Fascism”, 147.

²⁹² Passmore, “The Ideological Origins of Fascism before 1914”, 12; Passmore, *Fascism*, 19.

²⁹³ Passmore, *Fascism*, 27.

²⁹⁴ Wilford, “Fascism”, 139.

²⁹⁵ Daniel Odin Shaw, “Something Old, Something New, Something Borrowed: The Alt-Right on Building Christendom Without Christ”, *Journal For the Study of Religions and Ideologies* 18 (2019): 87.

²⁹⁶ Lisa Mascaró, Eric Tucker, Mary Clare Jalonick, and Andrew Taylor, “Pro-Trump mob storms US Capitol in bid to overturn election”, *Associated Press News*, January 6, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/congress-confirm-joe-biden-78104aea082995bbd7412a6e6cd13818>

endorsing the attack without running afoul of YouTube’s moderators, who removed any such content.²⁹⁷ The attack was a “peaceful protest of concerned citizens”.²⁹⁸ Media descriptions of it as an “insurrection” were ridiculous.²⁹⁹ Participants “just want to be heard”.³⁰⁰ Politicians ignored their concerns about electoral fraud, and forced more drastic action.³⁰¹ Benjamin downplayed the seriousness of the attack. The “jokesters” involved were “obviously just being silly”.³⁰² The attack was a “giant prank”.³⁰³ Benjamin later denied that Trump should be impeached over the attack.³⁰⁴ He laughed at Biden for overblowing it as “an attack on the citadel of liberty”, and at Michelle Obama for stating that participants “desecrated the centre of American government”.³⁰⁵ However, Benjamin often adopts exactly this sort of highfalutin language in his guise as a defender of liberalism against social movement activists. The George Floyd protests might trigger “the end of the Republic”.³⁰⁶ All manner of things signal the imminent demise of democracy.³⁰⁷ Faced with a clear, severe violation of liberal norms – the violent storming of a parliament building to help a leader maintain power after electoral defeat – Benjamin’s political partisanship left him unable to condemn it. These comments again make it hard to credit Benjamin as a genuine liberal who rejects social movements because they violate his principles.

Benjamin’s claim that he attacks feminist, anti-racist, and LGBTQ+ rights activists thanks to their collectivist contempt for the rights of the straight white male “Other” is not justifiable. He jumps at the shadow of authoritarianism and “reverse” bigotry where

²⁹⁷ The Podcast of the Lotus Eaters, “The Storming of the Capital”, *YouTube*, 14:03, January 8, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HZWhXXkifSE>; The Podcast of the Lotus Eaters, “The Mostly Peaceful Capitol Storming”, *YouTube*, 37:57, January 9, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LPxFGKV15Hg>

²⁹⁸ The Podcast of the Lotus Eaters, “The Mostly Peaceful Capitol Storming”.

²⁹⁹ Akkad Daily, “Things Will Move Very Quickly Now”, *YouTube*, 42:25, January 8, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TFc1VTbDcMQ>

³⁰⁰ Akkad Daily, “Things Will Move Very Quickly Now”.

³⁰¹ The Podcast of the Lotus Eaters, “Why are Trump Supporters Held to Higher Standards?”, *YouTube*, 8:30, January 8, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=szjkdg7MI2E>; The Podcast of the Lotus Eaters, “The Mostly Peaceful Capitol Storming”.

³⁰² The Podcast of the Lotus Eaters, “The Mostly Peaceful Capitol Storming”.

³⁰³ Akkad Daily, “Things Will Move Very Quickly Now”.

³⁰⁴ The Podcast of the Lotus Eaters, “Impeachment 2: The Impeachening”, *YouTube*, 21:51, January 13, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=batmBnr-64Q>

³⁰⁵ The Podcast of the Lotus Eaters, “The Mostly Peaceful Capitol Storming”.

³⁰⁶ Akkad Daily, “Things Will Move Very Quickly Now”.

³⁰⁷ Sargon of Akkad, “This Week in Stupid (17/08/2014)”; Sargon of Akkad, “The Feminist Inquisition”, *YouTube*, 14:15, July 11, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dyeqlUo3jgw>; Sargon of Akkad, “Dodgeball is Oppressive”, *YouTube*, 23:17, June 9, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JtnM6pOp7ng>

it does not exist, and struggles to take seriously the idea that Enlightenment rights and liberties should safeguard women and political opponents, as well as himself and political allies. I next argue that his ostensible defence of liberal individualism can be explained as an instance of cultural imperialism.

Benjamin and critiques of liberal individualism

Cultural imperialism

In this section, I evaluate Benjamin's contention that the affirmation of group identities is insidious because Enlightenment rights and liberties have already been extended to women, non-white people, and LGBTQ+ people. The concept of "cultural imperialism" helps to explain what is happening when Benjamin advances this narrative.

Many feminist, anti-racist, and LGBTQ+ rights scholars deny that oppression has ended when women and minorities secure equal citizenship. Their arguments concern what Young called cultural imperialism. This term – which is elsewhere used to describe a similar form of oppression experienced by colonised peoples – refers to the establishment of "universal" norms which are actually derived from the experience and culture of a dominant group.³⁰⁸ In Western liberal democracies, the perspective of straight, white, middle- and upper-class men has been allowed to "parade as universal".³⁰⁹ The experiences of this group have been treated as "normal and neutral".³¹⁰ Other forms of behaviour and comportment have been constructed in terms of "deviance and inferiority".³¹¹

For women, non-white people, and LGBTQ+ people, embracing universalism and attempting to work hard and succeed as "citizens" or "individuals" means "coming into the game after the rules and standards have already been set, and having to prove oneself according to those rules and standards". People assessed against norms and standards derived from someone else's experience will struggle to measure up and will struggle to translate legal equality into social equality. Members of the dominant group will meanwhile not have to reckon with the advantages conferred when their own specific attributes serve double duty as the "universal" norm. Members of marginalised groups will feel "internal devaluation" when they mysteriously fail to get ahead despite being just another "citizen" in a world of equal "individuals".³¹²

Young argued that cultural imperialism can be overcome when marginalised people mobilise their group identities and practice "cultural politics". This can demonstrate that

³⁰⁸ Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, 59.

³⁰⁹ *Ibid*, 10.

³¹⁰ *Ibid*, 116.

³¹¹ *Ibid*, 59.

³¹² *Ibid*, 164-165.

attitudes, practices, and standards which seem “universal” or “normal” are actually specific to dominant groups. Less discriminatory replacements can then be instituted to establish genuine equality. Cultural politics involves both “politicising culture” and “the affirmation of a positive identity”.³¹³ Politicising culture involves subjecting “everyday” parts of life to “explicit reflection”. Unquestioned ways of speaking or forms of comportment should become the subject of public debate – this can reveal whether they reflect the dominant group’s perspective.³¹⁴ Affirmations of “positive difference” involve celebrating characteristics which once formed the grounds of a group’s subordination.³¹⁵ Such affirmations should precede the politicisation of culture. People must stop seeing their own experiences and perspectives as inferior before they can recognise discriminatory norms and call for their reform. When womanhood, blackness, or queerness are reframed as positive characteristics – not deviant ones – then manhood, whiteness, and heterosexuality are revealed as simply some ways of being among many, and not deserving of status as the “universal” norms.³¹⁶ Young argues that the existence of cultural imperialism necessitates cultural politics. Benjamin’s complaints about identity politics fail to account for this.

“Race-conscious” anti-racism

He does not understand the universalisation of white people’s experience and culture as a barrier to equality for non-white people. As Mills contends, it is naive of liberal individualists like Benjamin to imagine that “formal juridical equality is sufficient to remedy inequities created on a foundation of several hundred years of racial privilege”.³¹⁷ Suddenly designating non-white people “equal abstract persons” will not deliver justice in the wake of white supremacy.³¹⁸ Into living memory, “conventional white opinion casually assumed the uncontroversial validity of a hierarchy of ‘higher’ and ‘lower’ ... races”.³¹⁹ Acknowledging this history lends a “farcical air” to claims that the formal extension of individual rights and liberties is a panacea for racial injustice.³²⁰

³¹³ Ibid, 154.

³¹⁴ Ibid, 86-87.

³¹⁵ Ibid, 154.

³¹⁶ Ibid, 154-167.

³¹⁷ Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 73.

³¹⁸ Ibid, 74.

³¹⁹ Ibid, 27.

³²⁰ Ibid, 39.

More realistic approaches require non-white people to assert and celebrate their identities. This idea was central to the Black Power movement in the United States. Many liberal scholars who valorise King dismiss his more “race-conscious” contemporaries as marginal non-contributors to the cause of racial justice.³²¹ However, the concept of Black Power developed in response to the failure of civil rights legislation to alleviate the poverty and powerlessness of black Americans.³²² Liberal apotheoses of King ignore his own admission, in 1968, that black Americans who accepted his “dream” were watching it “turn into a frustrating nightmare”.³²³ Black Power theorists argued that the persistence of racist beliefs – among both white and black people – prevented black people from realising their potential as equal citizens. Kwame Ture and Charles Hamilton explained that black people were subject to “the attempt by the oppressor to have *his* definitions, *his* historical descriptions, *accepted* by the oppressed”.³²⁴ Mainstream American culture attempted to convince black people of their own laziness, ugliness, and stupidity. It denied that black Americans had a history or cultural heritage.³²⁵ People who have internalised such racist stereotypes are not poised to recognise and challenge the Eurocentrism of practices or norms which keep them in a subordinate position. The Black Power movement aimed to replace “shame in blackness” with “pride in the sense of self-acceptance, not chauvinism”.³²⁶ Positive affirmations of non-white identity allow for the politicisation of culture and redress of discriminatory norms. For instance, the affirmation “Black is Beautiful” positions black people to critique discriminatory standards under which hairstyles suited to Afro-textured hair are deemed “unprofessional”.³²⁷ Race-conscious activism is therefore a “realist” project which recognises that non-white people legally recognised as equal “individuals” are still held back by the cultural legacy of white supremacy.³²⁸

Benjamin is blind to this. His ostensibly principled opposition to race-conscious activism is grounded in cultural imperialism. This is evident in his insistence that black people

³²¹ Chua, *Political Tribes*, 92; Gitlin, *The Twilight of Common Dreams*, 133.

³²² John T. McCartney, *Black Power Ideologies: An Essay in African American Political Thought* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), 94-95.

³²³ King quoted in McCartney, *Black Power Ideologies*, 96.

³²⁴ Kwame Ture and Charles V. Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America* (Melbourne: Pelican Books, 1971), 49.

³²⁵ *Ibid*, 50-53.

³²⁶ Ture and Hamilton, *Black Power*, 12, 68.

³²⁷ Ali Rattansi, *Racism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 75; Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, 120.

³²⁸ McCartney, *Black Power Ideologies*, 124; Ture and Hamilton, *Black Power*, 54.

should meet “the standards of behaviour we expect from every other race” if they want better outcomes.³²⁹ He states outright that black people are equal before the law and therefore not prevented from “living like white people”.³³⁰ It is, of course, easier for white people to behave “like white people” than it is for non-white people. Benjamin sometimes encounters critiques of such Eurocentrism, but dismisses them. He shrugs that – if standards of behaviour and comportment are derived from a white Anglo-Saxon perspective – this is simply because this group has found “the best way to do things”. Giving equal credit to other cultural forms would cause society to go backwards.³³¹ Elsewhere, he does not even bother to rationalise the dominance of white norms. He acts as though the universalisation of white culture is simply natural in Western countries: “It has to be that the culture is controlled by the majority group”.³³² To ask Western countries not to be Eurocentric is “bizarre” – of course European people’s “structures” will “privilege themselves instead of other people”.³³³ American beauty standards might privilege European features, but this is inevitable because most Americans are white.³³⁴ Black American men might get targeted by police because of their dreadlocks or low trousers, but they are free to comb out their hair and pull up their pants.³³⁵ Benjamin here does not bother to argue that white norms are superior.

He therefore acknowledges relatively often that non-white people live in societies in which whiteness masquerades as the universal norm, and non-white characteristics and cultures are considered deviant. He avoids the obvious conclusion that this state of affairs contributes to racial inequalities. Such Eurocentrism, however, justifies the continued affirmation and mobilisation of non-white identities to challenge discriminatory norms.

Radical feminism

Benjamin also ignores the fact that Enlightenment rights and liberties were designed to address the illegitimate subordination of men, not women. Pateman and Diana Coole each

³²⁹ Akkad Daily, “Yorkshire Tea Endorses #BlackLivesMatter”.

³³⁰ Akkad Daily, “Left/Right Tribalism is Killing the Left”.

³³¹ Sargon of Akkad, “Indoctrinating Your Children”.

³³² Sargon of Akkad Live, “Discussing the Ideology of #BlackLivesMatter with Benjamin Dixon”.

³³³ Akkad Daily, “yOu CaN’t Be RaCiSt To WhItE PeOpLe”, *YouTube*, 23:09, March 10, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XKWUCE129o8>

³³⁴ Sargon of Akkad Live, “Discussing the Ideology of #BlackLivesMatter with Benjamin Dixon”.

³³⁵ Sargon of Akkad, “My call to the White Male Privilege hotline”, *YouTube*, 4:28, May 2, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fZO1057ZLQQ>

note that the Enlightenment did dismantle “classic patriarchalism”, the version of patriarchy referred to in Benjamin’s online definitions.³³⁶ In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the supposition that children are born into a natural statue of subjection to their fathers was politically important. Absolute monarchs appealed to an “analogy” in which authority over their subjects was equivalent to the natural authority of a father over his children.³³⁷ Enlightenment thinkers did challenge these ideas.³³⁸ However, feminist critics maintain that liberal philosophers and politicians replaced this form of patriarchy with a more modern one.

As Susan Moller Okin observed, Western political thought has historically been predicated on the assumption that society contains a “public sphere” and “a distinct sphere of private, family life”.³³⁹ Pateman explains that liberal theorists devised a version of the public sphere in which people exist as “citizens” who are safeguarded from oppression by their civil rights.³⁴⁰ However, this is only “half the story”.³⁴¹ These theorists conceived of the public sphere as men’s domain, and believed that women’s place was in the home. Enlightenment thinkers like Locke, Rousseau, and Kant believed that women were too irrational to manage the responsibilities of citizenship.³⁴² They imagined that women lack the intelligence or clear-headedness to identify the common good, and make emotional, partisan decisions.³⁴³ Rousseau also believed that women’s sexual immorality would prevent men from discharging their duties as citizens – if allowed into public life, lascivious women would distract men who have worked hard to control their own passions.³⁴⁴ Liberal thinkers also believed that women should be obey their husbands within the home. Pateman finds that most influential Enlightenment theorists saw a husband’s dominance within the family as a “natural institution”.³⁴⁵ Locke insisted that women should be subordinate to their “abler and fitter” husbands.³⁴⁶ Rousseau extrapolated a passive role for women in the family from their role during

³³⁶ Pateman, *The Sexual Contract*, 25; Coole, *Women in Political Theory*, 71-72.

³³⁷ Coole, *Women in Political Theory*, 71.

³³⁸ Pateman, *The Sexual Contract*, 32.

³³⁹ Okin, *Women in Western Political Thought*, 274-275, 286.

³⁴⁰ Pateman, *The Sexual Contract*, 6.

³⁴¹ *Ibid*, 112.

³⁴² *Ibid*, 5, 42.

³⁴³ *Ibid*, 168-169.

³⁴⁴ Coole, *Women in Political Theory*, 117.

³⁴⁵ Pateman, *The Sexual Contract*, 54-55.

³⁴⁶ Locke quoted in Pateman, *The Sexual Contract*, 52-53.

sex.³⁴⁷ Okin found that Rousseau, Locke, and Kant (among others) all theorised the household as a refuge in which citizens could escape from their strenuous public lives. These images of domestic bliss assumed that male citizens would dominate their wives.³⁴⁸

The liberal safeguards against oppression – civil rights and liberties – were therefore only designed to emancipate men from illegitimate subordination. Enlightenment thinkers assumed that authority and subordination within the private sphere would continue to flow from inherent characteristics. They did not aim to remedy this oppression, but instead sanctioned it. Benjamin’s attempt to characterise the Enlightenment package of rights and liberties as the final word in human emancipation therefore involves cultural imperialism. This package parades as universal, but was designed to meet the needs of men. Formal political equality does not challenge “age-old assumptions” about sex roles, and therefore cannot fully emancipate women.³⁴⁹

The affirmation of female identities is required to tackle widespread sexist attitudes which prevent gender equality. Young explained that “countless ... supposedly mundane and trivial elements” of culture carry the implication that women are best suited a subordinate position within the home.³⁵⁰ This regime does not disappear when women are granted rights which were designed to be compatible with it. Instead, affirming the “positivity and specificity of the female experience” helps women overcome their own internalised sexism, and recognise and challenge the androcentric attitudes and norms which account for persistent gender inequality.³⁵¹ A commitment to this idea separates “radical” from “liberal” feminism.³⁵²

Benjamin’s narrative does not reckon with such critiques. His opposition to a women’s movement on principle is rooted in cultural imperialism. He asks “what more could we possibly do” about gender discrimination, now that it is against the law.³⁵³ Women should “go out and make something of themselves” now that they are “free to operate in the

³⁴⁷ Coole, *Women in Political Theory*, 110.

³⁴⁸ Okin, *Women in Western Political Thought*, 278.

³⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 286.

³⁵⁰ Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, 87.

³⁵¹ *Ibid*, 161.

³⁵² Coole, *Women in Political Theory*, 235.

³⁵³ Sargon of Akkad, “Feminist Arguments Rely on Fallacies”, *YouTube*, 20:04, August 13, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pwlzxlCKWbk>

world like men”.³⁵⁴ He tells women: “If you want to be treated the same as a man, why don’t you try acting the same as a man”.³⁵⁵ Women are now free to “buckle down and put the work in, like a man”.³⁵⁶ However, it is easier for men to behave “like men” than it is for women. Benjamin dismisses critiques of such androcentrism. If workplaces reward “macho” characteristics – like competitiveness, aggression, and the suppression of emotion – “things are this way because they work”. Valuing other traits would be “less efficient”.³⁵⁷ Elsewhere, he again does not even bother to rationalise the dominance of male norms and standards. Female MPs do not need maternity leave because men have never needed it.³⁵⁸ Taxes should not subsidise “gross” menstrual products because men do not menstruate.³⁵⁹ Professional dress codes should not let women reveal “a large amount of flesh” because this is distracting to men.³⁶⁰

Benjamin therefore realises that women live in societies in which success comes to those who act “like a man”. He avoids the conclusion that this state of affairs contributes to gender inequalities. It should again be clear that such androcentrism justifies the affirmation and mobilisation of female identities to challenge attitudes and norms which signal that the public sphere is a place for men.

Gay liberation

Benjamin also fails to account for the fact that celebrations of LGBTQ+ identity address real barriers to equality. Craig Rimmerman explains that the early American gay and lesbian movement (in the 1950s and 1960s) focused on civil rights and did not affirm queer identities. The “assimilationist” approach of early homophile movement organisations “emphasised conformity” and minimised “any differences between heterosexuality and homosexuality” to avoid alienating the “heterosexual arbiters of

³⁵⁴ Sargon of Akkad, “Why Do People Hate Feminism #13 - Feminism is Totalitarian”; Sargon of Akkad, “Inside the Twisted Mind of Angela Merkel”, *YouTube*, 20:29, June 1, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d8AQtmjihI>

³⁵⁵ Sargon of Akkad, “Feminism and Men of Straw”, *YouTube*, 11:30, December 19, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kb7m_eYYyy8

³⁵⁶ Sargon of Akkad, “Are you against quotas?”.

³⁵⁷ Sargon of Akkad, “The Patriarchy”; Sargon of Akkad, “The Female Aristocracy”.

³⁵⁸ Sargon of Akkad, “Why Do People Hate Feminism #13 - Feminism is Totalitarian”.

³⁵⁹ Sargon of Akkad, “This Week in Stupid (17/08/2014)”.

³⁶⁰ Sargon of Akkad, “Feminism and Men of Straw”.

public opinion”.³⁶¹ Marc Stein explains that many activists were concerned that visible “male effeminacy” and “female masculinity” would damage the movement.³⁶² Rimmerman characterises the agenda of these groups as “rights-based” and “situated within classic liberalism”.³⁶³ For instance, the Mattachine Society fought successful legal battles against the entrapment of gay men by police and the US Post Office’s unconstitutional refusal to circulate its magazine.³⁶⁴ Despite such judicial victories, the homophile movement made limited gains. Homosexual sex remained illegal in 49 American states in 1969. No laws protected LGBTQ+ people from being fired or evicted. No politicians at any level of the American government were openly gay.³⁶⁵ The American Psychiatric Association still classified homosexuality as a “sociopathic personality disturbance”.³⁶⁶

Other strains of LGBTQ+ activism came to the forefront after a police raid on the Stonewall Inn in New York in June 1969.³⁶⁷ Police clubbed several patrons and sexually assaulted cross-dressers who would not consent to genital inspections. The raid prompted resistance from patrons and onlookers and triggered anti-police rioting and protest.³⁶⁸ The influential Gay Liberation Front was established in New York following these events. Similar organisations formed in Australia, the United Kingdom, Canada, Belgium, France, and the Netherlands.³⁶⁹ Participants in the Stonewall riots and members of the GLF were frustrated with the limited goals and incrementalism of the homophile movement. These “gay liberationist” activists emphasised the role of cultural politics. They were influenced by radical feminists and advocates for Black Power.³⁷⁰ They encouraged LGBTQ+ people to “come out” and take pride in their identity.³⁷¹ The earliest “pride” marches were organised by liberationist groups to commemorate the anniversary of the Stonewall riots. These events allowed LGBTQ+ people to affirm and celebrate

³⁶¹ Craig A. Rimmerman, *The Lesbian and Gay Movements: Assimilation or Liberation?* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2008), 5, 17.

³⁶² Marc Stein, *Rethinking the gay and lesbian movement* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 51.

³⁶³ Rimmerman, *The Lesbian and Gay Movements*, 5, 8, 14.

³⁶⁴ Stein, *Rethinking the gay and lesbian movement*, 49, 61.

³⁶⁵ Rimmerman, *The Lesbian and Gay Movements*, 19.

³⁶⁶ Stein, *Rethinking the gay and lesbian movement*, 49.

³⁶⁷ Rimmerman, *The Lesbian and Gay Movements*, 21.

³⁶⁸ Polly Thistlewaite, “Stonewall”, in *Encyclopedia of Sex and Gender*, ed. Fedwa Malti-Douglas (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), 1431-1432.

³⁶⁹ Stein, *Rethinking the gay and lesbian movement*, 82; Rimmerman, *The Lesbian and Gay Movements*, 21.

³⁷⁰ Stein, *Rethinking the gay and lesbian movement*, 63, 81; Rimmerman, *The Lesbian and Gay Movements*, 18.

³⁷¹ Stein, *Rethinking the gay and lesbian movement*, 84.

their specificity.³⁷² Gay liberationists insisted that sexual and gender diversity must be de-stigmatised so that the heteronormativity of everyday attitudes and practices can be revealed and remedied.³⁷³

Many rights and freedoms associated with citizenship have been constructed to suit heterosexuals. Diane Richardson and Johnson each note that “the normal citizen” in liberal democracies has historically been assumed heterosexual.³⁷⁴ Richardson could point to heteronormative laws on marriage, taxation, pensions, inheritance, education, parenting, employment, and housing in 1998 to argue that the United Kingdom enforced the “sexual equivalent of apartheid”.³⁷⁵ Johnson noted in 2002 that many Australian, American, and British laws were “conceived of in ways more appropriate to conventional heterosexual relationships”.³⁷⁶ It is impossible for LGBTQ+ people to highlight such heteronormativity if they accept that heterosexuality is “normal” and consider their own identities deviant and best kept “private”.³⁷⁷

Benjamin fails to understand these justifications for the affirmation of LGBTQ+ identities. He considers assertions of “pride” unnecessary because LGBTQ+ people do not experience oppression. He mocks the idea that pride marches are necessary after the legalisation of same-sex marriage.³⁷⁸ He appreciates one Twitter user’s description of pride parades as “naked degenerates flashing children”.³⁷⁹ He considers positive representations of LGBTQ+ people in media unnecessary because LGBTQ+ people are already fully accepted.³⁸⁰

In contrast to his treatment of race and gender, he denies that inequalities between heterosexual and LGBTQ+ people exist. When he comes across claims about unequal outcomes, Benjamin imagines that activists simply produce cherry-picked statistics and does not investigate them.³⁸¹ However, discrimination against LGBTQ+ people persists

³⁷² Ibid, 111.

³⁷³ Rimmerman, *The Lesbian and Gay Movements*, 14.

³⁷⁴ Diane Richardson, “Sexuality and Citizenship”, *Sociology* 32 (1998): 88; Carol Johnson, “Heteronormative Citizenship and the Politics of Passing”, *Sexualities* 5 (2002): 319.

³⁷⁵ Richardson, “Sexuality and Citizenship”, 89.

³⁷⁶ Johnson, “Heteronormative Citizenship and the Politics of Passing”, 326.

³⁷⁷ Ibid, 321.

³⁷⁸ The Thinkery, “The First Annual Straight Pride Parade in #Boston”, *YouTube*, 11:13, June 6, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LVC9zgR3eNE>

³⁷⁹ The Thinkery, “The First Annual Straight Pride Parade in #Boston”.

³⁸⁰ Sargon of Akkad, “The Conspiracy to Murder LGBT Characters is Real!”, *YouTube*, 11:54, March 31, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nSaD8-AnLE>

³⁸¹ Akkad Daily, “John Cleese vs the Twitter Trans Lobby”, *YouTube*, 11:29, November 26, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YGH8YcyMJJE>

in countries which have legalised same-sex marriage. A 2017 government survey in the United Kingdom found that discrimination in education, employment, health, and housing constitute “barriers to full participation in public life” for LGBTQ+ people.³⁸² A 2017 survey commissioned by an LGBTQ+ charity found similar results.³⁸³ One in eight LGBTQ+ people aged 18-24 had attempted suicide in the last year, compared to less than one percent of the general population.³⁸⁴ One in five LGBTQ+ people have experienced homelessness at some point, often after being kicked out by family.³⁸⁵ One in ten LGBTQ+ people experienced discrimination while looking for rental accommodation.³⁸⁶ One in five LGBTQ+ people reported discrimination while looking for work.³⁸⁷ One in ten reported missing out on promotions because of their LGBTQ+ status.³⁸⁸ A full quarter of transgender people experienced the above three harms.³⁸⁹ One in five LGB people feel unable to be open with anyone at work about their sexual orientation.³⁹⁰ One in eight trans people were physically attacked by a colleague or customer in the last year.³⁹¹ Benjamin ignores information of this sort. The affirmation or mobilisation of LGBTQ+ identities remains necessary to challenge heteronormativity and address such inequalities.

The solution to sexism, racism, homo- and transphobia championed by Benjamin therefore ignores the fact that women, non-white people, and LGBTQ+ people who possess full citizenship still experience androcentrism, Eurocentrism, and heteronormativity as barriers to equality. His perspective is grounded in cultural imperialism. As Susan Bickford notes, those who want all claims for justice to be made in the language of shared citizenship and Enlightenment values “do not address the insights of the last few decades of radical ... political thought ... about how the language of commonality can actively exclude”.³⁹² The solution to the oppression of women and

³⁸² “National LGBT Survey: Summary Report”, *United Kingdom Government Equalities Office*, July 3, 2018, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-lgbt-survey-summary-report>

³⁸³ Chaka L. Bachman and Becca Gooch, *LGBT in Britain: Health Report* (London: Stonewall, 2018), 19.

³⁸⁴ Bachman and Gooch, *LGBT in Britain: Health Report*, 8.

³⁸⁵ Chaka L. Bachman and Becca Gooch, *LGBT in Britain: Home and Communities* (London: Stonewall, 2018), 10; “National LGBT Survey: Summary Report”.

³⁸⁶ Chaka L. Bachman and Becca Gooch, *LGBT in Britain: Hate Crime and Discrimination* (London: Stonewall, 2018), 24.

³⁸⁷ Chaka L. Bachman and Becca Gooch, *LGBT in Britain: Work Report* (London: Stonewall, 2018), 10.

³⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁸⁹ Bachman and Gooch, *LGBT in Britain: Home and Communities*, 10; Bachman and Gooch, *LGBT in Britain: Hate Crime and Discrimination*, 24; Bachman and Gooch, *LGBT in Britain: Work Report*, 10.

³⁹⁰ Bachman and Gooch, *LGBT in Britain: Work Report*, 12.

³⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

³⁹² Susan Bickford, “Anti-anti-identity Politics: Feminism, Democracy, and the Complexities of Citizenship,” *Hypatia* 12 (1997): 117.

minorities cannot require them to subsume difference and make claims as undifferentiated “citizens” or “individuals”, because these mantles were designed to suit the needs of straight white men. Progress also does not entail, as Benjamin fears, some sort of “aristocracy” in which cultural norms are controlled by women and minorities, and disadvantage straight white men.³⁹³ Instead, as Young argued, we should pursue “democratic cultural pluralism” in which everyone’s differences are respected and considered equal.³⁹⁴ This goal requires cultural forms of feminist, anti-racist, and LGBTQ+ rights activism which affirm and mobilise women and minorities in groups. Benjamin’s call for an end to feminist, anti-racist, and LGBTQ+ movements would result in the preservation of norms and standards which benefit men, white people, and heterosexuals.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have shown that Benjamin is a prominent member of the alt-right/-lite who engages with preoccupations and personalities from all of its factions. He positions himself as a reluctant political commentator, forced to rebut the stupid and dangerous ideas of feminist, anti-racist, and LGBTQ+ rights activists. I began to address my central research questions by analysing his discourse and demonstrating that representations of social movement activism as collectivist and illiberal are a major theme therein. I then considered the extent to which he substantiates these constructions. Benjamin positions himself as a liberal individualist compelled to denounce activists who valorise group identities, and therefore threaten the liberties of the “Other” (straight white men). He claims that the dangerous affirmation of inherent characteristics is inexcusable because all people possess the rights and freedoms associated with citizenship in the Enlightenment tradition. I then evaluated these claims. Benjamin constantly misrepresents innocuous behaviour as hateful and discriminatory towards men, white people, heterosexuals. His comments also reveal a failure to respect the individual freedom of women or the political rights of opponents. Benjamin’s claim to reject feminism, anti-racism, and LGBTQ+ rights activism as a principled defender of liberalism is therefore not justified, and does not prove the real prevalence of collectivist

³⁹³ Sargon of Akkad Live, “Discussing the Ideology of #BlackLivesMatter with Benjamin Dixon”.

³⁹⁴ Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, 163.

or illiberal tendencies. Instead, I argue that his narrative involves cultural imperialism. Benjamin fails to understand that androcentrism, Eurocentrism, and heteronormativity still constitute barriers to equality for people who possess full citizenship. These factors justify the continued affirmation of group identities. His desire to see feminist, anti-racist, and LGBTQ+ rights movements disband, and for all people to conceive of themselves solely as “individuals” and “citizens”, would perpetuate the unearned advantages of heterosexuals, white people, and men.

In this chapter, I identified a set of complaints which comprise a major theme in Benjamin’s hostile construction of social movement activism. These criticisms were potentially valid; comparable points are made by scholars who are otherwise on the Left. However, I have found that Benjamin’s arguments do not hold water. Instead, this element of his discourse rationalises the unearned privilege of historically dominant groups. In the next chapter, I discuss another set of complaints in Benjamin’s discourse which warrant critical analysis. Like a number of scholarly critics of identity politics, Benjamin alleges that feminist, anti-racist, and LGBTQ+ rights activists are unscientific and avoid rational debate.

Chapter Four

Carl Benjamin vs. unscientific activists

In this chapter, I further shed light on my research questions by analysing Benjamin's discourse and identifying a second major theme in his hostile construction of feminist, anti-racist, and LGBTQ+ rights activism. He insists that he cannot support the Left because he is committed to reason and science, while modern social movements are irrational and anti-scientific. In evaluating these claims, I first demonstrate that Benjamin belittles or ignores research which supports feminist, anti-racist, and LGBTQ+ rights positions. To construct his own positions as "scientific", Benjamin adorns his arguments with irrelevant scientific trappings, misrepresents studies, and treats dubious sources as canonical. I next argue that Benjamin derides caricatures of worthwhile epistemological perspectives which inform feminist, anti-racist, and LGBTQ+ rights practice, namely standpoint theory and postmodern theories of knowledge. I contend that Benjamin's claim to oppose social movements as a principled lover of science is not justifiable. I argue instead that this element of his discourse is "scientism" – the invocation of "science" as a rhetorical device to make ill-founded positions seem respectable. In this chapter, therefore, I identify another potentially substantive set of complaints about identity politics in Benjamin's discourse. I argue that his claimed aversion "unscientific" activists is not substantiated and should not be interpreted as a reaction to the real prevalence of irrational tendencies in social movements.

Unscientific activism

Facts and reason vs. tricks and emotion

Benjamin characterises his own arguments as reasoned, logical, and objective. He positions himself as a careful, fearless thinker, unaffected by taboos or prevailing opinions, who follows the facts wherever they lead. Benjamin explains that he started a YouTube channel to show the "average person" that with "reason and logic, you can break down any concept, analyse it, and find out where the flaws are". He tasked himself with giving viewers the "ammunition" to see through "fallacious arguments" which might

convince a less rigorous mind.¹ Benjamin sees himself as “following in the footsteps of Socrates”. He uses the Socratic method to interrogate the ideas of intellectual “pretenders”.² He tries to emulate classical orators and “create rock-solid arguments backed up by reason, evidence, and logic”.³ He stands for “finding the truth of the matter using rational arguments backed up by evidence”.⁴ He insists on the importance of “proving and citing one’s statements” and asserts that “there is no such thing as a pedantic demand for evidence”.⁵ Benjamin insists on his own open-mindedness: “I am always willing to change my mind if I can be shown to be wrong” or if “new facts come to light”.⁶

He believes that evidence should flow almost exclusively from the natural sciences. He can be considered a social positivist. This perspective developed in the nineteenth century as the Industrial Revolution demonstrated the power of the scientific method.⁷ The use of reason and logic to interpret sensory information allowed scientists to identify apparent laws of nature and use this knowledge to create transformative new technologies.⁸ Social positivists argued that the scientific method could also reveal facts about human behaviours and societies, which would have the same status of objective “truth” as facts discovered by chemists or geologists.⁹ Such information could be used to address social problems. The transformation of politics into a “scientific discipline” would provide definitive answers about how best to regulate human conduct.¹⁰

Benjamin maintains that “hard science” on any given social or political issue should inform our views. There will always exist “facts and data that support a position”.¹¹ This position should then not be “controversial”. The best course of action will become manifest when the scientific facts are examined: “The right conclusion is self-evident”.

¹ Sargon of Akkad, “Patreon and Paypal tip email address”.

² Sargon of Akkad, “The Curse of the YouTube Socratics”, *YouTube*, 25:10, September 2, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SyaTz3p3VIQ>

³ Sargon of Akkad, “Who I Am and What I Do”.

⁴ “About”, *YouTube*, accessed March 22, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/user/SargonofAkkad100/about>

⁵ Sargon of Akkad, “Steve Shives and the Reformation of YouTube Atheism”, *YouTube*, 36:32, September 30, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gg7R6LhAcMM>

⁶ Sargon of Akkad, “Who I Am and What I Do”.

⁷ Nicola Abbagnano, “Positivism”, in *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Donald M. Borchert (Detroit: Macmillan Reference, 2006), 711.

⁸ Abbagnano, “Positivism”, 711; Frédérick Guillaume Dufour, “Positivism”, in *International Encyclopedia of Political Science*, ed. Bertrand Badie, Dirk Berg-Schlosser, and Leonardo Morlino (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2011), 2080.

⁹ Isabel DiVanna, “Positivism”, in *Encyclopedia of Research Design*, ed. Neil J. Salkind (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2010), 1054, 1056.

¹⁰ Abbagnano, “Positivism”, 712; Dufour, “Positivism”, 2081, 2082.

¹¹ Sargon of Akkad, “The Regressive Left has Become the Religious Right”.

His aim is to amass evidence and uncover “the most objective truth it is possible to reach”.¹² He denies looking at the world through any “lens”. Rather, he takes sensory experiences – “actual things that have happened” – and then applies “reason and logic to them”.¹³ Benjamin therefore paints himself as a careful researcher who unearths objective truth via examination of the facts.

In contrast, he insists that social movement activists are irrational and anti-science. He tells activists that “we are using facts and logic, and your side is in the business of denying science and reason”.¹⁴ Benjamin complains that “[s]ocial justice has become scientifically illiterate” and “logically unsound”.¹⁵ Feminist, anti-racist, and LGBTQ+ activists cannot discuss facts rationally because of fear of “hurt feelings”. Benjamin characterises them as emotional science deniers.¹⁶ His opponents are ideologues who “simply dismiss facts outright because they do not fit their worldview”.¹⁷ Deluded progressive activists “pretend that reality is something different to what it is”.¹⁸ Benjamin complains that social movement activists use “tricks” instead of arguments to “manipulate people” into joining their cause.¹⁹ Feminist, anti-racist, and pro-LGBTQ+ rights arguments are exposed as “complete nonsense” when you “break them down and look at them in a tight, logical framework”.²⁰ Benjamin draws on what seems like an encyclopaedic knowledge of various “logical fallacies” to dismiss arguments, accusing opponents (for instance) of an “argument from disbelief” or a “motte-and-bailey fallacy”.²¹ He is concerned, in particular, about a smaller number of supposed “tricks”.

¹² Sargon of Akkad, “Who I Am and What I Do”.

¹³ Sargon of Akkad, “The Regressive Left has Become the Religious Right”.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ “Suspend Social Justice Courses”, Change.org, accessed May 6, 2019, <https://www.change.org/p/universities-suspend-social-justice-in-universities>

¹⁶ Sargon of Akkad, “Why Do People Hate #Feminism? #6 - Everything is Sexist”, *YouTube*, 16:29, September 25, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tJ4tXdY_du8; Sargon of Akkad, “Egalitarianism as Interpreted by a Feminist”; Sargon of Akkad, “The Regressive Left has Become the Religious Right”.

¹⁷ Sargon of Akkad, “Who I Am and What I Do”.

¹⁸ Sargon of Akkad, “Where is the Left Going Wrong?”, *YouTube*, 1:16:47, December 15, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x_R8pFQaA94

¹⁹ Sargon of Akkad, “Jessica Valenti has some bad advice for you”, *YouTube*, 14:56, March 28, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NNKyruCuz_M

²⁰ Sargon of Akkad, “Egalitarianism as Interpreted by a Feminist”.

²¹ Sargon of Akkad, “Egalitarianism as Interpreted by a Feminist”; Sargon of Akkad, “Re: Individualism vs Collectivism, a Response to SJW Gamer 101”; Sargon of Akkad, “Rape Culture UK”; Sargon of Akkad, “Progressiveness Disappears Up Its Own Arse”, *YouTube*, 17:11 July 8, 2014, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H_cKkvNdbEw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H_cKkvNdbEw;); Sargon of Akkad, “Why Do People Hate #Feminism? #6 - Everything is Sexist”; Akkad Daily, “What Is Woke Culture”, *YouTube*, 20:58, January 25, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=guYc12MHqH4>

“Speaking as a ...”

First, Benjamin alleges that feminist, anti-racist, and LGBTQ+ rights activists connect the merit of an idea with the identity of the speaker. This undermines rational debate. Activists simply state that “I’m black, therefore ...” or “I’m gay, therefore ...” and do not form arguments.²² They value the opinions of women and minorities above those of straight white men. We are “expected to pay obsequious deference to anyone who has a legitimate claim to adopt the title of victim”, ironically making victimhood a privileged position.²³ Progressive activists decide the value of someone’s input based on “arbitrary features and factors”, not the merit of their argument.²⁴ Benjamin imagines a hierarchy in which the views of non-white people are valued the highest, then transgender people, women, homo- and bisexual people, and disabled people.²⁵ The opinion of a white man will “always be second-rate”.²⁶ This strategy allows feminist, anti-racist, and LGBTQ+ rights activists to silence white men who contradict them with “reason and facts”.²⁷

These complaints reminiscent of those commonly made (with varying emphases) by academic critiques of identity politics. As mentioned, Nagle maintains that authority among activists stems from marginalised identities.²⁸ Michaels insists that practitioners of identity politics act as though the views of marginalised people are unassailable, and any disagreement with them is prejudiced.²⁹ Chua takes issue with activists who believe that “out-group” members cannot criticise the arguments of “in-group” members. Social movement activists insist that others “can’t understand X because you are white” and “can’t speak about Z because you’re not queer”.³⁰ Lilla complains that progressive activists preface their remarks with by saying “speaking as an X ...” as a power grab which “sets up a wall against questions”. The winner of the argument is the person who can invoke “the morally superior identity”.³¹ Gitlin maintains that female and non-white practitioners of identity politics “rank their own stories higher than those of others”.³²

²² The Rubin Report, “Internet Trolls and Brexit Polls”.

²³ Sargon of Akkad, “Liberal Ideas #2 - Neo-Progressive Activists”.

²⁴ Sargon of Akkad, “Illiberal Progressives”.

²⁵ Sargon of Akkad, “The Progressive Stack Explained”, *YouTube*, 1:23, March 6, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rCP-pH3JtWA>

²⁶ Sargon of Akkad, “I need feminism because I am against equality”, *YouTube*, 10:26, February 5, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3FHLX4r7YyM>

²⁷ Sargon of Akkad, “The Regressive Left has Become the Religious Right”.

²⁸ Nagle, *Trumpland*.

²⁹ Michaels, *The Trouble With Diversity*, 178-179.

³⁰ Chua, *Political Tribes*, 11.

³¹ Lilla, *The Once and Future Liberal*, 90.

³² Gitlin, *The Twilight of Common Dreams*, 201.

The “value of thought” is determined by identity and straight white men can only cede arguments or avoid engagement.³³ Activists side-step the “difficult ... terrain where arguments are made, points weighed, counters considered, contradictions faced”.³⁴ As mentioned, Gray makes similar complaints about the “category-based epistemology” of identity politics.³⁵ Benjamin therefore claims that he has turned against identity politics because of the flaws elsewhere theorised by its academic critics. I test this claim later in this chapter.

Pesky postmodernism

According to Benjamin, postmodernism is another tactic used by feminist, anti-racist, and LGBTQ+ rights activists to avoid rational debate. He summarises postmodern theory as the assertion, made by French intellectuals in the 1970s, that “[w]e can’t be sure that anything around us is real, we don’t think science can actually yield results ... objective reality and the very concept of truth are in doubt”.³⁶ He sees postmodernism as a tactic “deliberately designed to win a debate without actually having the debate”.³⁷ He admits that he has not read influential postmodern and post-structuralist authors like Foucault or Jacques Derrida, and instead gains his knowledge from online lectures by anti-postmodern academics like Jordan Peterson and an American objectivist called Stephen Hicks. He has also read a single book (*Toward a Political Philosophy of Race* by Falguni Sheth) which analyses “race” as something constructed by state power. So informed, Benjamin surmises that postmodernism is “a tangled mess”.³⁸

He nevertheless confidently characterises postmodernism as a “diabolical” scheme cooked up by the Left to facilitate its “Machiavellian” pursuit of power.³⁹ Benjamin states (correctly) that postmodernists question the underlying presuppositions and concepts which make up an argument or claim to knowledge.⁴⁰ However, he believes that this

³³ Ibid, 209.

³⁴ Ibid, 210.

³⁵ Gray, “The fire rises”, 142.

³⁶ Sargon of Akkad, “Understanding Postmodernism with Professor Stephen Hicks”, *YouTube*, 1:01:44, June 22, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=knOwcZ0y5IE>; The Thinkery, “Liberalism, Marxism, Postmodernism and Jordan Peterson”, *YouTube*, 16:01, May 14, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nbnAWqmOcXQ>

³⁷ Sargon of Akkad, “Liberal Ideas #1 - The Cancer in the Left”.

³⁸ The Thinkery, “Liberalism, Marxism, Postmodernism and Jordan Peterson”.

³⁹ Sargon of Akkad, “Understanding Postmodernism with Professor Stephen Hicks”.

⁴⁰ Sargon of Akkad, “Liberal Ideas #1 - The Cancer in the Left”.

activity lacks any legitimate purpose. The “deconstruction” of taken-for-granted concepts is simply a rhetorical device which throws opponents “off guard” and renders them “exhausted from explaining each and every stage of their argument”.⁴¹ Benjamin considers this a strategy worthy of Sun Tsu. It allows social movement activists to avoid being cornered into a rational debate.⁴² Benjamin also portrays Jean-François Lyotard’s injunction to be incredulous towards “metanarratives” as “a devilishly clever tactic”. People who criticise the validity of the “liberal metanarrative” – which holds that history since the Enlightenment has been characterised by emancipation and progress – are simply trying to make people feel isolated, afraid, and vulnerable to manipulation. Postmodernists attack “the stories we build our civilisation on” to better manipulate people.⁴³ Benjamin insists that he found postmodernism easy to understand because he has a “really good background in military history and power tactics”, gained from strategy video games. These taught him to recognise tactics used to browbeat opponents.⁴⁴ Benjamin feels that knowledge gained from video games allows him to confidently denounce postmodernism without extensive reading.

As mentioned, liberal academic critics of identity politics also denounce postmodernism. Unlike Benjamin, they believe it undermines the effectiveness of the Left. Rorty blamed French post-structuralists like Derrida, Lyotard, Foucault, and Jean Baudrillard for the retreat of American intellectuals from public life, and the proliferation of overwrought theoretical works which are “useless to leftist politics”.⁴⁵ Gitlin mocks the impotence of postmodern academics who produce angry theoretical works while eschewing actual political engagement.⁴⁶ He alleges that postmodernists are too cynical to participate in real politics. They see all claims to knowledge as “trumped-up rationalisation[s]” of power, and therefore dismiss even worthwhile political projects.⁴⁷ Lilla complains for similar reasons that fatalistic postmodernists cast an “ironic eye” on political engagement.⁴⁸ Michaels argues (from a socialist perspective) that postmodernism hamstring the Left with its relativism. Postmodernists are reluctant to admit that one

⁴¹ Sargon of Akkad, “Understanding Postmodernism with Professor Stephen Hicks”; Sargon of Akkad, “Liberal Ideas #1 - The Cancer in the Left”.

⁴² Sargon of Akkad, “Liberalism, Marxism, Postmodernism and Jordan Peterson”.

⁴³ Sargon of Akkad, “Understanding Postmodernism with Professor Stephen Hicks”.

⁴⁴ Sargon of Akkad, “Understanding Postmodernism with Professor Stephen Hicks”; Sargon of Akkad, “Liberalism, Marxism, Postmodernism and Jordan Peterson”.

⁴⁵ Rorty, *Achieving Our Country*,

⁴⁶ Gitlin, *The Twilight of Common Dreams*, 147.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 218.

⁴⁸ Lilla, *The Once and Future Liberal*, 86-87.

political position can be “right” and another “wrong”, making it difficult to argue for positive change.⁴⁹ Benjamin complains that postmodernism makes the Left more powerful, not less, but nevertheless claims to reject identity politics for reasons not dissimilar to these authors. While less well-versed in the object of his scorn and more conspiratorially minded, Benjamin also complains that postmodernism over-complicates debate and undermines claims to knowledge.

Activism as religion

According to Benjamin, the unscientific nature of social movements makes them akin to religions. He is fond of accusing opponents of “cult behaviour”.⁵⁰ He equates social movement activism with Scientology – critiques of “the white male capitalist supremacist patriarchy” are equivalent to stories about “Xenu” and “thetan levels”.⁵¹ Benjamin insists, in particular, that “feminism is a religion”.⁵² Feminism is a dogmatic ideology which “provides spiritual comfort to many women who practice it”. It has “tenets” to follow and “evil god” to fear.⁵³ He equates the concept of patriarchy with Satan: “[A] giant unfalsifiable boogeyman that every problem can be blamed on”. He equates male privilege with “original sin”. Feminist campaigns are “crusades”. Academic feminists are “high priestesses”. Male feminists must “confess their sins”.⁵⁴ Feminist activists are “missionaries”.⁵⁵ Benjamin insists that feminism and Christian fundamentalism are “almost the same thing” because each tries to convert people to extreme views which are not based in science.⁵⁶

Academic critics of identity politics make similar analogies. To Gitlin, activists have elevated their obsession with diversity to “religious heights”.⁵⁷ Reed complains that

⁴⁹ Walter Benn Michaels, “The Shape of the Signifier”, *Critical Inquiry* 27 (2001): 275, 277; Michaels, *The Trouble With Diversity*, 173.

⁵⁰ Sargon of Akkad, “Cult Behaviour: An Analysis”, *YouTube*, 34:53, August 17, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=htqOIjzi-jE>; Sargon of Akkad, “Cult Case Studies”, *YouTube*, 23:08, August 18, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pxO_UWr43Rw; Akkad Daily, “Celebrities DESTROY Racism!”.

⁵¹ Sargon of Akkad, “A Temporarily Embarrassed Believer”.

⁵² Sargon of Akkad, “Why Do People Hate Feminism? #12 - Feminist Fundamentalists”, *YouTube*, 33:20, October 28, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CbUZEZGbqEs>

⁵³ Sargon of Akkad, “Steve Shives and the Reformation of YouTube Atheism”.

⁵⁴ Sargon of Akkad, “Jehovah's Feminists”, *YouTube*, 15:33, June 9, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SgbgxB9O6AM>

⁵⁵ Sargon of Akkad, “Why Do People Hate Feminism? #12 - Feminist Fundamentalists”.

⁵⁶ Sargon of Akkad, “Egalitarianism as Interpreted by a Feminist”.

⁵⁷ Gitlin, *The Twilight of Common Dreams*, 102.

anti-racists, who expect cultural politics to translate into concrete gains, have “faith in things ... unseen or unseeable”.⁵⁸ Michaels considers it “an article of faith” within American anti-racism that social problems can be attributed to racism.⁵⁹ Mark Fisher, another socialist critic of contemporary feminist, anti-racist, and LGBTQ+ activism, alleged that activists display “a priest’s desire to excommunicate and condemn” when they accuse others of bigotry.⁶⁰ Benjamin’s analogy between irrational activism and religion evokes similar rhetoric in academic critiques.

Benjamin’s denunciation of feminist, anti-racist, and LGBTQ+ rights activism as unscientific therefore involves a number of related claims. Irrational activists fail to support their arguments with evidence, and ignore facts which contradict them. They use tricks and manipulation, not reasoned arguments, to get their way. This makes social movements akin to religions. There is reason to take such complaints seriously; Benjamin’s allegations have analogues within critiques of social movement activism penned by serious academic authors on the Left. I next evaluate the extent to which, at least in Benjamin’s case, these complaints are justified.

Benjamin’s bad science

Dismissals of evidence

First, Benjamin often ignores research which supports feminist, anti-racist, and LGBTQ+ rights positions. When he does engage with such evidence, it is often only to belittle research without appearing to read it.

He disparages journal articles sight unseen. In one video, Benjamin reacts to another YouTuber’s comments about sexual objectification. This feminist YouTuber cited research to critique people’s tendency to perceive men as “full people”, but women as “a mishmash of sexual parts”.⁶¹ Benjamin dismisses this as unscientific nonsense – it must come from “the sort of pseudoscientific bullshit studies feminist organisations come out

⁵⁸ Adolph Reed Jr., “‘To unite the many’: An interview with Adolph L. Reed, Jr.”, interview by Gregor Baszak and Spencer A. Leonard, *The Platypus Affiliated Society*, April, 2015, <https://platypus1917.org/2015/04/04/unite-many-interview-adolph-l-reed-jr/>

⁵⁹ Michaels, *The Trouble With Diversity*, 66.

⁶⁰ Mark Fisher, “Exiting the Vampire Castle”, *openDemocracy*, November 24, 2013, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/opendemocracyuk/exiting-vampire-castle/>

⁶¹ Libertarian Socialist Rants, “My Thoughts On Feminism”, *YouTube*, 14:25, June 26, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mGfEcNO6K48>

with”.⁶² However, the feminist YouTuber linked to his source. This research was conducted by a team of psychologists from four public research universities, includes a compelling section on methods, and was published in the *European Journal of Social Psychology*.⁶³ The feminist YouTuber accurately summarises its findings.⁶⁴ He next cited research to state that men who read magazines which objectify women are less likely to respect women’s “sexual boundaries”.⁶⁵ Benjamin dismisses this as “bollocks”. He speculates that the researchers must have used a ridiculous definition of “respecting boundaries”.⁶⁶ This study in the *Journal of Sex Research* surveyed 313 undergraduates and found that exposure to men’s magazines was “associated with lower intentions to adhere to decisions related to sexual consent”.⁶⁷ The survey items – such as “I would respect my partner and stop sexual activity when asked” – do not involve any over-sensitive definition of sexual misconduct.⁶⁸ Benjamin imagines ways in which these studies must be flawed and biased because they challenge his views. He does not appear to read them. He nevertheless manages to end this video by chiding the feminist YouTuber: “I have yet to see any evidence from you at all”.⁶⁹

Benjamin elsewhere dissects a feminist blog post critiquing prevalent constructions of masculinity. He labels the author unscientific. Benjamin promises to follow the article’s hyperlinks and debunk its sources. This promise falls through as soon as the author begins citing academic research. She claims that “studies have proven ... there’s no such thing as a ‘male’ and ‘female’ brain”. Benjamin complains that this study must not be “particularly laudable”. He visibly hovers his cursor over the associated hyperlink, but does not click it.⁷⁰ The link leads to neuroimaging research published in a high-impact journal. It again includes a compelling section on methods. The feminist author has summarised its findings accurately.⁷¹ She next states that threats to a man’s sense of

⁶² Sargon of Akkad, “Fuck the King!”.

⁶³ Sarah J. Gervais *et al.*, “Seeing women as objects: The sexual body part recognition bias”, *European Journal of Social Psychology* 42 (2012): 743-753.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 746.

⁶⁵ Libertarian Socialist Rants, “My Thoughts On Feminism”.

⁶⁶ Sargon of Akkad, “Fuck the King!”.

⁶⁷ Stacey J.T. Hust, *et al.*, “Establishing and Adhering to Sexual Consent: The Association between Reading Magazines and College Students’ Sexual Consent Negotiation”, *The Journal of Sex Research* 51 (2014): 286.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 283.

⁶⁹ Sargon of Akkad, “Fuck the King!”.

⁷⁰ Sargon of Akkad, “Rambling About: Feminist Masculinity”.

⁷¹ Daphna Joel *et al.*, “Sex beyond the genitalia The human brain mosaic”, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 112 (2015): 15468-15473.

masculinity make him more likely to blame victims, rather than perpetrators, of rape and sexual assault. Benjamin laughs – he cannot imagine why these things would be connected.⁷² He does not click the relevant hyperlink to find out. This psychological study found that men were indeed more likely to “exonerate perpetrators and derogate victims” of date rape and sexual coercion if they were first assigned a feminine score on a gender survey.⁷³ The blogger next cites research about the “mental health benefits of talking about feelings” to encourage men to discuss their emotions. Benjamin does click on this hyperlink. He scrolls around for 30 seconds, before declaring: “Fuck it, it’s a study done by a bunch of feminists ... who cares”.⁷⁴ In fact, this study lacks any feminist angle. It simply uses MRI scans to demonstrate that putting feelings into words produces a diminished response in the limbic system.⁷⁵ Three times in one video, Benjamin claims that feminist arguments are unsubstantiated, but visibly baulks at the prospect of reading scientific research which might challenge his views.

He elsewhere laughs at an online magazine article which suggests that women will be harder hit financially by the COVID-19 pandemic than men. He mocks the headline – “The Coronavirus Is a Disaster for Feminism” – because irrational feminists always think that women are worst affected in any situation.⁷⁶ The article in fact includes quotations from two researchers who explain that more women than men will leave work to assume full-time childcare responsibilities when schools close because of the pandemic. Women are also disproportionately employed in casual and part-time roles, which more are vulnerable to recessions. COVID-19 will affect earnings and career trajectories of women more than men. Academic studies have observed these effects at a local level in many past epidemics.⁷⁷ Benjamin visibly loses interest in this article upon reaching these reasonable arguments and references to academic research. Without finishing the article or qualifying his initial mockery, he moves on to another topic.⁷⁸

⁷² Sargon of Akkad, “Rambling About: Feminist Masculinity”.

⁷³ Christin L. Munsch and Robb Willer, “The Role of Gender Identity Threat in Perceptions of Date Rape and Sexual Coercion”, *Violence Against Women* 18 (2012): 1134.

⁷⁴ Sargon of Akkad, “Rambling About: Feminist Masculinity”.

⁷⁵ Matthew D. Lieberman *et al.*, “Putting Feelings into Words: Affect Labelling Disrupts Amygdala Activity in Response to Affective Stimuli”, *Psychological Science* 18 (2007): 421-428.

⁷⁶ Akkad Daily, “Is the Coronavirus Racist?”, *YouTube*, 11:04, March 20, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=01SuMjJuyFA>

⁷⁷ Helen Lewis, “The Coronavirus Is a Disaster for Feminism”, *The Atlantic*, March 19, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2020/03/feminism-womens-rights-coronavirus-covid19/608302/>

⁷⁸ Akkad Daily, “Is the Coronavirus Racist?”.

In many such instances, Benjamin is unwilling to engage with research which might challenge his views. This contradicts his claim to open-mindedness. One outburst perhaps best captures Benjamin's attitude towards evidence which challenges his beliefs. Frustrated by more research showing that traditional constructions of masculinity have harmful consequences, he declares: "I'm sure you have a lot of studies that are gonna disprove what I believe ... Fuck off, I don't care anymore".⁷⁹

Misuse of science

When Benjamin attempts to ground his own positions in evidence, he attempts to lend his positions an unwarranted veneer of credibility by misrepresenting research and bandying about the trappings of science. First, he misuses statistics. For instance, Benjamin often characterises feminist campaigns against sexual violence as irrational. Denouncing feminists "obsessed with the idea of rape happening everywhere all the time", Benjamin blames them for triggering "unfounded rape hysteria" by vastly exaggerating the incidence of rape and sexual assault.⁸⁰ He tries to use empirical data to show that "there is not as much rape going on as you are suggesting".⁸¹ In one instance, Benjamin criticises an Australian YouTuber, who states that one in six women experience rape and one in three experience sexual assault. Benjamin sets out to "disprove ... hyperbole with facts". He claims to find proof that, in fact, only six percent of Australian women experience rape.⁸² Benjamin sources this figure from a Department of Social Services webpage, which aggregates statistics from several victimisation surveys. One survey, from 2004, found that six percent of participants had experienced "completed rape" by their intimate partner.⁸³ Benjamin appropriates this statistic to confidently assert that only six percent of Australian women experience rape.⁸⁴ In fact, the full report (which he does not seem to read) found that more than one in five participants had experienced

⁷⁹ The Thinkery, "The Author of the Gillette Ads Speaks", *YouTube*, 22:06, June 2, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-mzfVZ6q9yY>

⁸⁰ Sargon of Akkad, "This Week in Stupid (05/10/2014)", *YouTube*, 20:04, October 5, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aZIp7vA0EoE>; Sargon of Akkad, "Steve Shives Demolishes Rape Culture!", *YouTube*, 13:22, July 16, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z-HAbyOjYFw>; Sargon of Akkad, "TEDx: the Mangina Chronicles", *YouTube*, 50:38, May 21, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qnqInlhah6c>

⁸¹ Sargon of Akkad, "TEDx: the Mangina Chronicles".

⁸² Sargon of Akkad, "Men Need to be Women".

⁸³ "Facts & Figures", *The Australian Centre for the Study of Sexual Assault*, accessed August 1, 2019, <https://web.archive.org/web/20140702160459/www.aifs.gov.au/acssa/statistics.html>

⁸⁴ Sargon of Akkad, "Men Need to be Women".

completed or attempted rape by any perpetrator. More than one in three experienced some form of sexual violence.⁸⁵ Benjamin crows about debunking feminist hyperbole with “facts”, but actually misrepresents an isolated statistic from a study which exactly corroborates the feminist YouTuber’s claims.

Benjamin also tries to debunk the “myth” that one in five female American university students experience sexual assault.⁸⁶ He imagines that this figure emerged after “some feminist social scientist” asked her friends. He states that “you can’t trust statistics like this at all”.⁸⁷ Benjamin targets one 2015 study, which surveyed 150,072 participants at 27 universities.⁸⁸ Its numbers are apparently inflated, because the researchers included forms of sexual misconduct which are not illegal or even serious.⁸⁹ In reality, the study (which Benjamin appears not to read) does include statistics about less severe forms of sexual misconduct. However, the authors make it clear that 27.2 percent of female participants (well over one in five) experienced behaviour which meets “legal definitions of rape ... and sexual battery”.⁹⁰

Benjamin picks and chooses between studies when he prefers one set of results. This 2015 study, he jeers, is only a “survey”, not “facts”. The real “facts we can be sure of” come from a 2014 Department of Justice study, which found lower rates of victimisation.⁹¹ However, this report is also compiled from a victimisation survey.⁹² Benjamin takes two studies with similar methodologies and presents one as unreliable “social science” and the other as “hard data”.⁹³ Moreover, in the earlier Australian example, he also took his “facts” from a survey. Benjamin’s errors here have been pointed out by another YouTuber and he has added a disclaimer to this video’s description.

⁸⁵ Jenny Mouzos and Toni Makkai, “Women’s Experience of Male Violence: Findings from the Australian Component of the International Violence Against Women Survey”, *Australian Institute of Criminology Research and Public Policy Series* 56 (2004): 2-3.

⁸⁶ Sargon of Akkad, “The 1 in 5 College Sexual Assault Myth Explained”, *YouTube*, 2:48, February 17, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=paa106OqXD4>

⁸⁷ Sargon of Akkad, “Regressives Tonight”, *YouTube*, 14:04, September 20, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YUR75tVSuQE>

⁸⁸ David Cantor *et al.*, “Report on the AAU Campus Climate Survey on Sexual Assault and Sexual Misconduct”, *Westat* (2015): 4.

⁸⁹ Sargon of Akkad, “The 1 in 5 College Sexual Assault Myth Explained”.

⁹⁰ Cantor *et al.* “Report on the AAU Campus Climate Survey on Sexual Assault and Sexual Misconduct”, v, 81.

⁹¹ Sargon of Akkad, “The 1 in 5 College Sexual Assault Myth Explained”.

⁹² Sofi Sinozich and Lynn Langton, “Rape and Sexual Assault Victimization Among College-Age Females, 1995–2013”, *Bureau of Justice Statistics* (2014): 1.

⁹³ Sargon of Akkad, “The 1 in 5 College Sexual Assault Myth Explained”.

However, contrary to his claims about accepting corrections, he continues to take the lower DOJ statistics as gospel in later videos with no reasoned explanation.⁹⁴

Benjamin also relies on sensationalist reporting of science, without seeming to consult the original sources. For instance, he insists that feminists who complain about gender inequalities in the comedy industry are irrational because men – scientifically – are funnier than women. As evidence, he points to a 2013 *Daily Mail* article which claims that a recent study found that “women have evolved to appreciate humour” while “men have evolved to produce hilarity”.⁹⁵ The research in question was conducted by neuroscientists who found that, in MRI scans of twenty children, funny video clips triggered a stronger response in the brains of girls than boys. The actual researchers do not interpret their results as showing that men are funnier than women.⁹⁶ A tabloid reporter has invented this angle (when the opposite inference seems more obvious). Moreover, in their research, the neuroscientists stress that the brain differences observed could be produced by socialisation and are not necessarily hard-wired products of evolution.⁹⁷ Nevertheless, Benjamin takes this article as scientific evidence that another gender disparity is unrelated to sexism.⁹⁸

He sometimes relies on headlines alone as scientific evidence. In 2016, Benjamin highlighted a *Washington Post* headline: “How a controversial study found that police are more likely to shoot whites, not blacks”.⁹⁹ Although the headline itself signals controversy around this study, Benjamin presents it as evidence that BLM is irrational because police shootings of black people are a non-issue.¹⁰⁰ The body of this article actually criticises the research in question. The original researcher does claim to find no evidence of racial discrimination in police shootings.¹⁰¹ He assessed police reports from Houston and finds that black people are disproportionately charged with crimes such as

⁹⁴ Sargon of Akkad, “The Mattress Girl Saga”, *YouTube*, 47:21, September 6, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0pwQSnQIPrY>

⁹⁵ Sargon of Akkad, “This Week in Stupid (24/08/2014)”.

⁹⁶ Pascal Vrticka *et al.*, “Sex differences during humour appreciation in child-sibling pairs”, *Social Neuroscience* 8 (2013): 291-304.

⁹⁷ *Ibid*, 300.

⁹⁸ Sargon of Akkad, “This Week in Stupid (24/08/2014)”.

⁹⁹ Max Ehrenfreund and Jeff Guo, “How a controversial study found that police are more likely to shoot whites, not blacks”, *The Washington Post*, July 13, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2016/07/13/why-a-massive-new-study-on-police-shootings-of-whites-and-blacks-is-so-controversial/>

¹⁰⁰ Sargon of Akkad, “This Week in Stupid (05/11/2017)”.

¹⁰¹ Ronald G. Fryer, “An Empirical Analysis of Racial Differences in Police Use of Force”, *Journal of Political Economy* 127 (2019): 1214, 1259.

resisting arrest and assaulting a police officer.¹⁰² He concludes that black people get shot disproportionately often because they are disproportionately aggressive towards police.¹⁰³ The *Washington Post* article challenges the assumption that police charge black and white people with these crimes in identical ways. Other studies have shown that American police are more likely to charge black men with these crimes over harmless conduct. Studies have also indicated that police view identical behaviour as more threatening in black people. The headline therefore belongs to an article which actually disputes the finding in question.¹⁰⁴ Nevertheless, Benjamin flashes it up as though it constitutes hard proof that BLM is irrational.

Benjamin is also credulous of extremely dubious sources when they support his beliefs. For instance, he believes that gender wage gaps do not need to be addressed. Women are simply less intelligent than men on average, as shown in “scientific” evidence. Benjamin flashes up graphs which ostensibly show this. He shrugs that the “data is as the data is”. Ridiculous feminists complain that “those numbers hurt my feelings”.¹⁰⁵ These graphs purport to show that the IQ of women “tends to cluster around the mean”; there are fewer stupid women than stupid men, but also fewer smart women who can command very large salaries. Benjamin takes these graphs from the blog of a Greek student. The author provides no information about the dataset represented in them. The author in fact appears to have constructed the graphs without reference to any data, in order to demonstrate a fact which apparently “all studies show”.¹⁰⁶ Moreover, these graphs do not even support Benjamin’s point – he stresses that women are less intelligent “on average”, while the blogger actually claims the opposite.¹⁰⁷ He lends his argument scientific air by flashing up scientifically worthless graphs which actually clash with his point.

¹⁰² Ibid, 1224.

¹⁰³ Ibid, 1213.

¹⁰⁴ Ehrenfreund and Guo, “How a controversial study found that police are more likely to shoot whites, not blacks”.

¹⁰⁵ Sargon of Akkad, “Janusz Korwin-Mikke's Facts vs Piers Morgan's Feelz”, *YouTube*, 17:16, July 14, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tj2dfxDPbdc>

¹⁰⁶ “Why women will never* get paid more than men on average”, *North Michigan Avenue*, August 4, 2007, <http://nmichiganave.blogspot.com/2007/08/why-women-will-never-get-paid-more-than.html>

¹⁰⁷ Sargon of Akkad, “Janusz Korwin-Mikke's Facts vs Piers Morgan's Feelz”.

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Figure 1. Graphs referencing no dataset, which Benjamin flashes on-screen as evidence that men are more intelligent than women. Sargon of Akkad, “Janusz Korwin-Mikke's Facts vs Piers Morgan's Feelz”.

In these ways, Benjamin gives the impression that his positions are grounded in evidence. He misrepresents research and uses the trappings of science – e.g. studies, statistics, graphs – to create an illusion of rigour. Additionally, Benjamin takes evidence from highly controversial academic fields and fails to engage with debates about their legitimacy.

Sociobiology and evolutionary psychology

Benjamin often refers to sociobiology and evolutionary psychology. Scientists in these fields contend that many human behaviours and social structures are genetically evolved adaptations. They maintain that human behaviours have evolved through natural selection. Ruth Bleier notes that, because they aim to explain behaviour and culture as expressions of genes, these scientists imagine themselves “replacing” the social sciences.¹⁰⁸ Roger Lancaster agrees that these researchers work in “sublime ignorance”

¹⁰⁸ Ruth Bleier, “Sociobiology, Biological Determinism, and Human Behaviour”, in *Women, Science, and Technology: A Reader in Feminist Science Studies*, ed. Mary Wyer *et al.* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 179.

of the methods and findings of the social sciences, which seem superfluous when evolution can explain all human behaviours and relationships.¹⁰⁹

Sociobiologists maintain that human behaviours which seem similar to certain animal behaviours must have biological roots. Bleier describes this practice as “deeply flawed conceptually, methodologically, and logically”.¹¹⁰ When sociobiologists look for the roots of certain behaviours in nature, they ignore the “nearly infinite variety of ways” that humans have behaved across cultures and time. Researchers in the contemporary West make the ethnocentric assumption that familiar behaviours and characteristics (such as male promiscuity or female domesticity) are universal, and then attempt to explain them as evolutionary adaptations.¹¹¹ They highlight animal behaviours which seem analogous, and ignore other animals which “confound the stereotype”.¹¹² Moreover, Carla Fehr explains that sociobiologists use “loaded terms” to make animal behaviours seem equivalent to human ones. In circular arguments, they describe animal behaviours in human terms (such as “prostitution” or “rape”) and then “use those descriptions to argue that human behaviours are innate because they are found in animals”.¹¹³ The belief that animals can explain human behaviour also involves the pretence that modern animals lie on the “evolutionary pathway” followed by humans. Humans split off from the other great apes five million years ago and from monkeys at least 40 million years ago. Animal behaviours which can be observed today are adaptations to ecological niches which they – and not us – have occupied for millions of years.¹¹⁴ For instance, ducks are a favourite of sociobiologists who explain rape as natural, but the last common ancestor between humans and ducks existed approximately 312 million years ago (and looked nothing like a human or a duck).¹¹⁵

Evolutionary psychologists narrow their scope to approximately the last two million years.¹¹⁶ These scientists hypothesise ways in which modern human behaviours or

¹⁰⁹ Roger N. Lancaster, *The Trouble with Nature: Sex in Science and Popular Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 34.

¹¹⁰ Bleier, “Sociobiology, Biological Determinism, and Human Behaviour”, 175.

¹¹¹ Ibid, 177, 180.

¹¹² Ibid, 187.

¹¹³ Carla Fehr, “Feminist Philosophy of Biology”, in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, (Stanford, 2018), <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminist-philosophy-biology/>

¹¹⁴ Bleier, “Sociobiology, Biological Determinism, and Human Behaviour”, 189.

¹¹⁵ “Pairwise divergence time for homo sapiens and anatidae”, TimeTree, accessed April 16, 2021, <http://www.timetree.org/>

¹¹⁶ Lancaster, *The Trouble with Nature*, 22; Giordana Grossi *et al.*, “Challenging dangerous ideas: a multi-disciplinary critique of evolutionary psychology”, *Dialectical Anthropology* 38 (2014): 281.

cultures might have aided the survival of early foragers in our “ancestral environment”: the African savannah.¹¹⁷ Giordana Grossi *et al.* note that evolutionary psychologists similarly ignore the “fantastic diversity” of human activity across cultures and time. They search for the evolutionary basis of middle-class, Western behaviours and social structures.¹¹⁸ Moreover, Lancaster explains that there is no reason to think that prehistoric forager behaviours were hard-wired “adaptations” to their environment. Great diversity in cultures and behaviour exists between forager societies which survived to modernity. Similar differences likely existed between different groups of prehistoric foragers.¹¹⁹ Moreover, the archaeological record teaches us “almost nothing” about the actual social lives of early humans.¹²⁰ It is possible to dream up plausible scenarios in which our ancestors might have benefited from behaving in ways similar to ourselves, but any such speculation “purports to know more than what anyone can really know”.¹²¹ Fehr explains that evolutionary psychologists “take an aspect of human social behaviour that seems universal to a particular group of researchers ... and create a compelling but unsupported story about why that behaviour enhances the survival and reproduction of individuals exhibiting it”.¹²²

Sociobiologists and evolutionary psychologists often try to naturalise the inequalities criticised by social movements. Their work suggests, in Bleier’s words, that “we had best resign ourselves to ... the more unsavoury aspects of human behaviour”.¹²³ Hardships currently inflicted on women, non-white, LGBTQ+ and working-class people are inevitable expressions of our genes. Sociobiologists and evolutionary psychologists claim to have found (among other things) the biological basis for capitalist acquisitiveness, suspicion of other “races”, and aversion to powerful or promiscuous women.¹²⁴ As Fehr notes, these “stories” legitimise the status quo and make attempts at social change seem futile.¹²⁵

¹¹⁷ Lancaster, *The Trouble with Nature*, 50; Grossi *et al.*, “Challenging dangerous ideas”, 283-284.

¹¹⁸ Grossi *et al.*, “Challenging dangerous ideas”, 283.

¹¹⁹ Lancaster, *The Trouble with Nature*, 52.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 51.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 50, 54.

¹²² Fehr, “Feminist Philosophy of Biology”.

¹²³ Bleier, “Sociobiology, Biological Determinism, and Human Behaviour”, 175.

¹²⁴ Fehr, “Feminist Philosophy of Biology”; Bleier, “Sociobiology, Biological Determinism, and Human Behaviour”, 188.

¹²⁵ Fehr, “Feminist Philosophy of Biology”.

Benjamin often turns to these fields for evidence. As mentioned, he disseminates ideas about sex and dating from evolutionary psychology – women are attracted to hypermasculine “alpha” males who can provide for them. Moreover, Benjamin often points to animal studies to legitimate gender inequalities. These studies apparently account for the gendered division of labour. They show that men have evolved to be more competitive, unemotional, and given to technical work than women, who are naturally inclined towards “nurturing” roles like childcare and nursing because “they love to take care of people”.¹²⁶

In line with the above critiques, the specific studies that Benjamin uses as “scientific” evidence for gender roles cannot support his claims. He highlights a blog post about one study which found that male rhesus monkeys chose to spend more time interacting with wheeled toys than soft toys, whereas females showed no preference.¹²⁷ The researchers describe this as a preference for “active manipulation” over “cradling” in males.¹²⁸ They claim that their observations might explain gendered “preferences for different lifestyles and careers” in humans.¹²⁹ This study is flawed. The researchers used the terms “active manipulation” and “cradling” to describe interaction with wheeled versus soft toys because these are “the kinds of activities with which they are typically associated” in human children.¹³⁰ It is anthropomorphic to imagine that a monkey would think to “cradle” a stuffed turtle any more than a toy car. The researchers do not demonstrate that the monkeys actually interacted with the toys in these ways. The description of all interaction with the soft toys as “cradling” is called into question by the admission that one was “torn into pieces”.¹³¹ This is an example of a circular argument which maintains that animal behaviours explain human ones only after using loaded terms to make the two behaviours seem analogous. Benjamin is credulous of this unsound research (conducted on animals from which we diverged 40 million years ago).

He elsewhere points to a *National Geographic* article about a study which found that juvenile female chimpanzees in one Ugandan population carry around sticks more often

¹²⁶ Sargon of Akkad, “Go tell the Feminists, stranger passing by”, *YouTube*, 10:08, April 26, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1hwDf2CW3-4>; Sargon of Akkad, “Why Do People Hate #Feminism? #2 - The Patriarchy”; Sargon of Akkad, “Feminism is the Establishment”.

¹²⁷ Sargon of Akkad, “Why Do People Hate #Feminism? #8 - Yes All Feminists”.

¹²⁸ Janice M. Hassett, Erin R. Siebert, and Kim Wallen, “Sex differences in rhesus monkey toy preferences parallel those of children”, *Hormones and Behavior* 54 (2008): 360.

¹²⁹ *Ibid*, 363.

¹³⁰ *Ibid*, 360.

¹³¹ *Ibid*, 362.

than males.¹³² The researchers describe this behaviour as “play-mothering”.¹³³ Benjamin presents this as further evidence of women’s “nurturing” nature and predisposition to low-paid careers in childcare or nursing.¹³⁴ The description of this behaviour as “play-mothering” seems loaded, given that chimpanzees also use sticks as weapons and tools. At any rate, the researchers do not actually claim that this behaviour is inherent. Because it is present in one chimpanzee population and not others, it must be “learned socially” and have “cultural roots”.¹³⁵ Gendered behaviours are influenced by socialisation even in chimpanzees. Benjamin’s presentation of this research as “scientific” proof for natural gender roles in humans is nonsensical.

Benjamin is credulous of these contentious fields because their findings support his views. His failure to acknowledge persuasive critiques undermines his claims to rigour and open-mindedness.

Religiosity invented

His portrayals of social movement activists as religious zealots involve more misrepresentations of innocuous behaviour. For instance, Benjamin responds to footage of American university students hitting a piñata which they jokingly call “the patriarchy”. He earnestly calls this “ritual sacrifice”. When two young British women sing acoustic covers of pop songs with the lyrics altered for a feminist angle, Benjamin denounces their “hymns”.¹³⁶ Benjamin has himself collaborated on an acoustic cover of a pop song with the lyrics altered to criticise feminism.¹³⁷ This is presumably not a “hymn”. Benjamin elsewhere states that the American congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez is “like a cult leader” because her speeches resonate emotionally with audiences.¹³⁸ He does not consider emotive speeches “cult-like” if given by conservative politicians. For instance, he lauds the British politician Enoch Powell’s infamous 1968 “Rivers of Blood” speech,

¹³² Sargon of Akkad, “Feminism is the Establishment”.

¹³³ Sonya M. Kahlenberg and Richard W. Wrangham, “Sex differences in chimpanzees' use of sticks as play objects resemble those of children”, *Current Biology* 20 (2010): 1068.

¹³⁴ Sargon of Akkad, “Feminism is the Establishment”.

¹³⁵ Kahlenberg and Wrangham, “Sex differences in chimpanzees' use of sticks as play objects resemble those of children”.

¹³⁶ Sargon of Akkad, “Jehovah's Feminists”.

¹³⁷ Chris Ray Gun, “Everything is Sexist - Chris Ray Gun (Acoustic Rendition)”, *YouTube*, 2:11, September 29, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Eh_z3Z2y4M

¹³⁸ Akkad Daily, “Celebrities DESTROY Racism!”.

even though Powell did in fact draw views from his Christian faith and criticised the use of reason to justify political positions.¹³⁹ Benjamin also complains that memes depicting the Swedish environmentalist Greta Thunberg as a saint are “cult-like deification”.¹⁴⁰ Meanwhile, he disseminates memes which depict Trump as a “God-Emperor”.¹⁴¹ His comparisons with religion are hypocritical, and misrepresent innocuous behaviour.

Benjamin therefore does not handle evidence fairly when he constructs social movements as unscientific or himself as scientific. He ignores studies which substantiate feminist, anti-racist, and pro-LGBTQ+ rights positions, or belittles them sight unseen. He misrepresents research and dresses arguments in worthless trappings of science to make his own positions seem well-founded. He accepts findings from controversial fields if they accord with his views. He hypocritically dramatises innocuous behaviour to equate opponents with religious zealots.

Next, I evaluate Benjamin’s critiques of activists who apparently connect the value of ideas with the identity of the speaker, and of postmodernism. I argue that he attacks caricatures of sound epistemological practices.

Caricatures of activist epistemologies

Standpoint theory

When Benjamin complains that social movement activists listen to arguments from members of marginalised groups regardless of merit, and unfairly silence straight white men, he effectively criticises “standpoint theory”. When they make similar complaints, Gray and Gitlin mention standpoint theory by name.¹⁴² This approach to knowledge was developed in the 1970s by feminist sociologists and philosophers of science.¹⁴³

¹³⁹ Sargon of Akkad, “Was Enoch Powell Right?”, *YouTube*, 11:13, April 24, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x-AdYb6mXgA>; Paul Corthorn, *Enoch Powell: Politics and Ideas in Modern Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 14-15.

¹⁴⁰ Akkad Daily, “You Have Nothing to Fear from the Cult of Greta Thunberg”, *YouTube*, 12:12, September 26, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YvxKCaeo0M>

¹⁴¹ The Thinkery, “Why Don’t I Spend Time Criticising God-Emperor Trump?”, *YouTube*, 17:13, March 19, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zMdfgZYVHMc>

¹⁴² Gray, ““The fire rises””, 142; Gitlin, *The Twilight of Common Dreams*, 201.

¹⁴³ Amy L. Best, “Standpoint Theory”, in *The Encyclopedia of Social Problems*, ed. Vincent N. Parrillo (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2008), 897; Elizabeth Borland, “Standpoint Theory”, in *Encyclopedia of Gender and Society*, ed. Jodi O’Brien (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2009), 805-806; Tracy Bowell, “Feminist Standpoint Theory”, in *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. James Fieser and Bradley Dowden, <https://www.iep.utm.edu/fem-stan/>

Standpoint theorists start from the contention that all knowledge claims are “socially situated”. Our day-to-day experiences shape what we know, and what we are able to know.¹⁴⁴ We live in societies in which membership of certain groups influences our daily experiences. Members of these groups will cultivate different kinds of knowledge to one another, thanks to their different “social locations”.¹⁴⁵ This insight was inspired by Marx’s assertion that the proletariat’s experience of work gives them access to knowledge unavailable to capitalists.¹⁴⁶ Standpoint theorists assert that women, non-white people, and LGBTQ+ people – alongside other marginalised groups – have access to distinct knowledge which is cultivated through the experiences assigned to them in stratified societies.¹⁴⁷

Standpoint theorists then contend that marginalised people are in a unique position to understand and explain – Nancy Hartsock’s words – “the real relations of humans with each other and with the natural world”.¹⁴⁸ Marginalised people are thought to enjoy an “epistemic advantage”.¹⁴⁹ Under certain circumstances, they are less likely to produce incomplete, inaccurate knowledge about the social world.¹⁵⁰ Marginalised people are credited with “double vision” – they are likely to understand both their own perspective and the perspective of the privileged group. Marginalised people cannot avoid privileged perspectives. They must understand them to navigate daily life. However, privileged people who, lack similar immersion or motivation, are less likely to understand marginalised people’s perspectives.¹⁵¹ Terri Elliot explains, for instance, that someone in a wheelchair who looks at the front of a building and sees an insurmountable staircase without a ramp also understands that an able-bodied person would see “The Entrance”. An able-bodied person is unlikely to reciprocate.¹⁵² Moreover, as Tracy Bowell notes, privileged people enjoy easier access to sites of knowledge production. The “traditional

¹⁴⁴ Bowell, “Feminist Standpoint Theory”.

¹⁴⁵ Julia T. Wood, “Feminist Standpoint Theory”, in *Encyclopedia of Communication Theory*, ed. Stephen W. Littlejohn and Karen A. Foss (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2009), 397-398.

¹⁴⁶ Best, “Standpoint Theory”; Borland, “Standpoint Theory”; Wood, “Feminist Standpoint Theory”; Bowell, “Feminist Standpoint Theory”.

¹⁴⁷ Wood, “Feminist Standpoint Theory”; Bowell, “Feminist Standpoint Theory”.

¹⁴⁸ Nancy Hartsock, “The Feminist Standpoint: Developing the Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism”, in *Discovering Reality: Feminist Perspectives on Epistemology, Metaphysics, Methodology, and Philosophy of Science*, ed. Sandra Harding and Merrill B. Hintikka (Dordrecht: Springer, 2003), 285.

¹⁴⁹ Bowell, “Feminist Standpoint Theory”.

¹⁵⁰ Borland, “Standpoint Theory”.

¹⁵¹ Wood, “Feminist Standpoint Theory”; Borland, “Standpoint Theory”; Bowell, “Feminist Standpoint Theory”.

¹⁵² Terri Elliot cited in Bowell, “Feminist Standpoint Theory”.

starting point for knowledge is the position of the dominant”.¹⁵³ Bodies of knowledge created by privileged people are therefore likely to contain problematic assumptions and oversights. People from marginalised groups are well-positioned to make contributions which fill these gaps.¹⁵⁴

Contrary to Benjamin’s complaints, standpoint theorists do not claim that marginalised people are born with superior insight unattainable by others. They assert that a “standpoint” only arises when individuals interact with others who occupy a similar social location and recognise that their shared experiences run against the grain of existing knowledge.¹⁵⁵ For example, women who discuss a shared experience of being discouraged from pursuing an interest in mathematics or science come to realise that accounts (created by male scientists) which attribute the gendered division of labour to biology are flawed.¹⁵⁶ As Howell explains, an epistemic advantage must be “earned through the experience of collective political struggle”.¹⁵⁷ This addresses the allegation that straight white men are banned from discussing certain topics. It is easier for marginalised people to achieve a standpoint because their first-hand experience might contradict prevailing ideas, but there is no reason why someone from a privileged group cannot earn a standpoint if they undertake the “intellectual struggle” of seeking out marginalised people’s experiences.¹⁵⁸

Standpoint theorists also rebut accusations that they render all knowledge claims equally valid. They remain committed to producing the most accurate descriptions of reality possible.¹⁵⁹ Standpoint theorists aim to produce *more objective* accounts, compared to more standard epistemologies which hide the social location of the knower. This practice (which Donna Haraway calls the “God trick”) assumes that adopting a “view from nowhere” makes for more accurate results.¹⁶⁰ Standpoint theorists contend that suppressing a knower’s identity does not produce more unbiased and complete results, but instead conceals bias and allows partial accounts to masquerade as complete. Harding

¹⁵³ Howell, “Feminist Standpoint Theory”.

¹⁵⁴ Wood, “Feminist Standpoint Theory”; Borland, “Standpoint Theory”; Howell, “Feminist Standpoint Theory”.

¹⁵⁵ Kristin Intemann, “Feminist Standpoint Theory”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory*, ed. Lisa Disch and Mary Hawkesworth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 263; Wood, “Feminist Standpoint Theory”; Borland, “Standpoint Theory”; Howell, “Feminist Standpoint Theory”.

¹⁵⁶ Sandra Harding, *The Science Question in Feminism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), 82-111.

¹⁵⁷ Howell, “Feminist Standpoint Theory”.

¹⁵⁸ Wood, “Feminist Standpoint Theory”.

¹⁵⁹ Intemann, “Feminist Standpoint Theory”, 266-268.

¹⁶⁰ Howell, “Feminist Standpoint Theory”; Haraway quoted in Best, “Standpoint Theory”.

calls this “weak objectivity”.¹⁶¹ Standpoint theorists aim to recover and synthesise perspectives from a diverse set of enquirers.¹⁶² Bowell explains that the “ultimate goal of enquiry ... would be the inclusion of all standpoints, enabling the revelation of different aspects of the truth”.¹⁶³ Striving towards this goal confers what Harding calls “strong objectivity”.¹⁶⁴ A diverse collection of partial and incomplete knowledge claims will be more accurate than one knowledge claim which pretends to be impartial and complete. Standpoint theory aims to ensure that knowledge claims are more, not less, rigorous.

The theoretical justification for prioritising the perspectives of marginalised people when discussing problems like racism, sexism, homo- and transphobia is therefore more sound than Benjamin imagines. All claims to knowledge on these issues can be expected to contain blind spots and flawed assumptions which reflect the knower’s social location. These shortcomings are most easily identified and rectified by people who have direct experience of the issue at hand. People who have neither experienced these issues or listened to those who have are likely to reproduce the blind spots and flawed assumptions which marred earlier attempts to define and solve the problem.

Despite his protestations, Benjamin tacitly accepts these insights. He does not want women and minorities to produce knowledge about straight white men. He opposes academic inquiry into “whiteness” and “masculinity” because he does not want “people who aren’t white and male to sit there and analyse what it’s like to be white and male”.¹⁶⁵ He claims that female scholars of masculinity are not trustworthy – they are in no position to tell other people “what it is to be a man, what it is to be masculine”. Benjamin even insists that male academics whom he deems effeminate should not write about men’s issues because they have not “spent time being a man and bonding with men”.¹⁶⁶ He is angry when he feels that academic claims about masculinity runs against the grain of his “lived experience as a young man and then an older man and then a father”.¹⁶⁷ He approves when Yiannopoulos appeared on a BBC debate program and told female

¹⁶¹ Nancy A. Naples, “Strong Objectivity” in *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology*, ed. George Ritzer (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 4845-4846.

¹⁶² Intemann, “Feminist Standpoint Theory”; Naples, “Strong Objectivity”.

¹⁶³ Bowell, “Feminist Standpoint Theory”.

¹⁶⁴ Naples, “Strong Objectivity”; Bowell, “Feminist Standpoint Theory”; Intemann, Feminist Standpoint Theory”.

¹⁶⁵ Sargon of Akkad, “This Week in Stupid (17/05/2015)”, *YouTube*, 34:43, May 17, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A_DmIa-KEs

¹⁶⁶ Sargon of Akkad, “Rambling About: Feminist Masculinity”, *YouTube*, 37:50, February 9, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HZvo8o9kCl8>

¹⁶⁷ The Thinkery, “The Author of the Gillette Ads Speaks”.

researchers: “I’m talking about men ... since you’re not a man perhaps you’d like to give it a rest”. Benjamin agrees that the female panellists can have “no fucking idea” about the plight of modern men because they are not men.¹⁶⁸ He also tells a female YouTuber that she should not attempt to explain incel violence: “You are not a man, you cannot possibly understand what drives a man has”.¹⁶⁹ Benjamin therefore insists that members of a group have special knowledge about issues which affect them. He only considers it irrational when women, non-white people, and LGBTQ+ people take the same position.

When Benjamin claims that straight white men have been silenced in specific instances, he misrepresents the behaviour of social movement activists. He responds to footage of one American progressive demonstration in which the facilitator asks people wishing to speak to add their name to a list, and explains that people from traditionally marginalised backgrounds would be bumped up the speaking order.¹⁷⁰ Benjamin declares that straight white men at the demonstration were silenced and treated as “scum”.¹⁷¹ In fact, the facilitator clarifies (in the full clip) that “everyone gets to be heard”. She did ask people from privileged groups to “step back”, but only when “they’ve already said what they have to say”.¹⁷² She attempted to ensure that the voices of marginalised people were heard, but did not silence straight white men. Elsewhere, Benjamin is outraged by an Asian-American anti-racist activist’s comments in a *Huffington Post* interview. She told the hosts that “as a white man I don’t expect you to be able to understand what people of colour are saying”.¹⁷³ Benjamin complained that she deemed white men “not allowed to speak”.¹⁷⁴ In context, she only made these comments after it became clear that the hosts were not interested in her perspective and only intended to laugh at her “stupid opinion” about anti-Asian racism. Her comments were not a declaration that white men cannot speak about certain issues, but a frustrated reaction to their refusal to listen. Benjamin himself not only ignored her perspective, but made several racist jokes at her expense.¹⁷⁵

¹⁶⁸ Sargon of Akkad, “Feminism is the Establishment”.

¹⁶⁹ Karl Benjamin for South West England MEP, “Carl Benjamin’s ‘Feminist System’ Defence of Mass Shooter Elliott Rodger (full video)”.

¹⁷⁰ OccupyRichmond2011, “Occupy Richmond 10/6/11 Intro to ‘Progressive Stack’”, *YouTube*, 2:44, October 8, 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SCwhlZtHhWs&ab_channel=OccupyRichmond2011

¹⁷¹ Sargon of Akkad, “The Progressive Stack Explained”.

¹⁷² OccupyRichmond2011, “Occupy Richmond 10/6/11 Intro to ‘Progressive Stack’”.

¹⁷³ Minespatch, “Josh Zepp interviews Suey Park”, *YouTube*, 5:49, March 29, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MNK-e6nnFGY>

¹⁷⁴ Sargon of Akkad, “Short Round demands \$10 million and a plane or she’ll kill Stephen Colbert”, *YouTube*, 12:13, March 29, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lnk1oB1KaOk>

¹⁷⁵ Minespatch, “Josh Zepp interviews Suey Park”.

The interaction demonstrates the need for standpoint theory, rather than problems with the concept.

Elsewhere, Benjamin complains that straight white men are silenced in response to a likely parody of social movement activism. He reacts to a photograph on Twitter which shows a supposed male feminist holding a sign which reads: “My opinion matters LESS than those of Women, People of colour, trans and queer folk ... And feminism reminds us why.”¹⁷⁶ This “too perfect” formulation of a supposed feminist sin makes it seem possible that this is anti-feminist satire. Users on other reactionary forums praise the man as a troll.¹⁷⁷ However, Benjamin treats the man as a genuine feminist and launches into a rant about irrational activists who value opinions according to group identities.¹⁷⁸

Standpoint theorists make the reasonable claim that, when attempting to produce knowledge about problems which affect people in certain social groups, it makes sense to prioritise the voices of people who have discussed their first-hand experience of the issue with others in a similar position, and been excluded from earlier attempts to define and solve the problem. Practices informed by these insights attempt to ensure that earlier flawed or incomplete knowledge claims are not simply reiterated, but do not silence straight white men. To complain about this supposed epistemological crime, Benjamin routinely misrepresents the behaviour and comments of activists.

Postmodern critiques of knowledge

In the same way, Benjamin’s critiques of postmodernism attack a caricature. A major goal of postmodernism was to demonstrate that Western societies are too credulous of claims to scientific knowledge. Steven Seidman explains that post-structuralists like Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault attempted to show that many claims to intellectual authority “cannot withstand serious scrutiny”.¹⁷⁹ Foucault, in particular, investigated knowledge claims made within the human and social sciences. He criticised claims which defined elements of the “social universe” as natural. These forms of knowledge “conceal

¹⁷⁶ Sargon of Akkad, “I need feminism because I am against equality”.

¹⁷⁷ “I need feminism because I’m a white male, so my opinions matter less”, *Reddit*, accessed October 30, 2020, https://www.reddit.com/r/cringeimages/comments/1170o9/i_need_feminism_because_im_a_white_male_so_my/

¹⁷⁸ Sargon of Akkad, “I need feminism because I am against equality”.

¹⁷⁹ Steven Seidman, *Contested Knowledge: Social Theory Today* (Hoboken: Wiley Blackwell, 2016), 166.

social interests and power relations”.¹⁸⁰ As mentioned, Foucault investigated the development of “scientific” ideas about medicine, mental illness, criminality, and sexuality. He argued that “knowledge” in these fields is often “contingent upon a mix of contradictory, questionable, and sometimes illogical discourses”.¹⁸¹ He denied that “knowers” in the human and social sciences have discovered fundamental truths about human societies and behaviour. Hall explains that Foucault “historicised” knowledge – he showed that confident scientific claims are often “true” only within a specific historical context.¹⁸² Nineteenth-century doctors “knew” that various symptoms reported by women were attributable to “hysteria”. Twentieth-century psychiatrists “knew” that same-sex attraction stemmed from mental illness.¹⁸³ Kathleen Kiernan *et al.* note that knowledge in the human and social sciences can be “completely reconstructed time and time again with touching faith that each successive construction constitute[s] truth”.¹⁸⁴

Postmodern theorists argued further that science has often served to legitimate social hierarchies of class, race, gender, and sexuality.¹⁸⁵ The language and methods of modern science have been used to insist upon the innate superiority of powerful people.¹⁸⁶ In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, “scientific” knowledge about race held that skin colour, hair texture, facial features, and skull shape could be used to categorise humans into a hierarchy of “races” with Europeans at its apex.¹⁸⁷ In the same period, it was considered a scientific fact (especially in the United States) that social problems such as alcoholism, crime, prostitution, and unmarried motherhood were attributable to the inherited deficiencies of poor and non-white people. Middle-class white eugenicists forcibly sterilised tens of thousands of people in an effort to improve the American stock.¹⁸⁸ Respected psychologists in the late nineteenth century could insist that education drained girls of the “vital life forces” needed for reproduction.¹⁸⁹ Respected physicians could insist (as late as 1910) that women needed to wear corsets because they

¹⁸⁰ Ibid, 177.

¹⁸¹ Bischooping and Gazso, *Analysing Talk in the Social Sciences*, 133.

¹⁸² Hall, “Foucault: Power, Knowledge and Discourse”, 74.

¹⁸³ Ibid, 73-74.

¹⁸⁴ Kathleen Kiernan *et al.* quoted in Carabine, “Unmarried Motherhood 1830-1990”, 274.

¹⁸⁵ Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, 128.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid, 125.

¹⁸⁷ Rattansi, *Racism: A Very Short Introduction*, 35-36.

¹⁸⁸ Rebecca M. Kluchin, *Fit to Be Tied: Sterilisation and Reproductive Rights in America, 1950-1980* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 11-19; “Eugenics” in *The Gale Encyclopedia of Psychology*, ed. Jacqueline L. Longe (Farmington Hills: Gale, 2016), 383-386.

¹⁸⁹ S.K. Murnen and R. Seabrook, “Feminist Perspectives on Body Image and Physical Appearance”, in *Encyclopedia of Body Image and Human Appearance*, ed. Thomas Cash (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2012), 440.

were less adapted to bipedalism than men.¹⁹⁰ The postmodern theorist Zygmunt Bauman contends that the Holocaust would not have been possible if German scientists and bureaucrats were not convinced that the history of modern science constituted “the long and victorious struggle of reason over superstition and rationality”.¹⁹¹ This made them credulous of exterminatory Nazi “science” and dismissive of their own ethical impulses.¹⁹² The positive impact of scientific inquiry on the modern world has obviously been transformative, but the “normalising discourse of science and medicine” has also endowed prejudices and power relations with “the authority of objective truth”.¹⁹³ Criticism of this tendency was a major goal of postmodernism.

Benjamin’s output should demonstrate to critics of postmodernism that such insights are still relevant. He is a positivist who characterises his own views on people and society as objective facts. To construct them as such, he attempts to give his arguments a veneer of scientific authority in the ways described above. His discourse makes elements of the current social status quo, such as police brutality or the gender wage gap, seem natural. This is the sort of discourse which postmodernism developed to challenge. Lancaster contends that the hyper-confident discourse of sociobiologists and evolutionary psychologists still “resonates to the ideas of nineteenth-century scientific racism, eugenics, and phrenology”.¹⁹⁴ The same is true of much of Benjamin’s output. He may be frustrated by postmodern injunctions to deconstruct the concepts and assumptions which underlie “authoritative” knowledge claims, but his own discourse demonstrates that such practices remain necessary.

Overall, Benjamin’s claim to reject feminism, anti-racism, and LGBTQ+ rights as a lover of science who opposes their unscientific tendencies does not hold water. He misrepresents opponents, and is himself unable to handle evidence fairly.

¹⁹⁰ R.M. Sentilles and K. Callahan, “Beauty over the Centuries – Female”, in *Encyclopedia of Body Image and Human Appearance*, ed. Thomas Cash (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2012), 44.

¹⁹¹ Zygmunt Bauman, “Modernity and the Holocaust” in *Contemporary Sociological Theory*, ed. Craig Calhoun *et al.* (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2012), 527.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, 518, 527.

¹⁹³ Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, 129.

¹⁹⁴ Lancaster, *The Trouble with Nature*, 20, 24.

Scientism, atheism, and the preservation of privilege

Scientism

The concept of “scientism” helps to explain what is happening when Benjamin constructs himself and his opponents in the above ways. Scientism is the invocation of “science” as a rhetorical device to shield ill-substantiated positions from criticism.¹⁹⁵ Martin Ryder describes scientism as a “doctrinaire stance” which occurs when adoration of science veers into “irrational dogma”.¹⁹⁶ Susan Haack notes that “scientistic” people exhibit “an exaggerated kind of deference towards science” and a readiness to see “anti-scientific prejudice” everywhere.¹⁹⁷ Their arguments are often adorned with “[i]nappropriately borrowed scientific trappings” (such as tables and graphs).¹⁹⁸ These are superfluous and “disguise a lack of real rigour”.¹⁹⁹ Scientistic people liberally use the word “science” and its cognates as honorifics. The achievements of the natural sciences over the last few centuries have lent the words “science” and “scientific” a large amount of prestige. People who are insecure about their methods and findings use these words “emphatically and often” in the hope that readers interpret them to mean “reliable”, “established”, and “solid”. Scientistic people are also credulous when others claim findings are “scientific”, and fail to handle them with appropriate caution.²⁰⁰ Credulity towards “science” among scientistic people is propped up by a “preoccupation with delineation”.²⁰¹ Scientistic people like to decree what does and does not count as “science”. This allows them to dismiss research as “not science” without specifying its faults, and to praise other research as “science” without specifying its merits. Acknowledging that disliked research nevertheless constitutes “science” would undermine their ability to use “scientific” status as a shortcut to respectability.²⁰² As demonstrated in the above sections, Benjamin demonstrates all of these traits.

¹⁹⁵ Eli Massey and Nathan J. Robinson, “Being Mr. Reasonable”, *Current Affairs*, October 12, 2018, <https://www.currentaffairs.org/2018/10/being-mr-reasonable>

¹⁹⁶ Martin Ryder, “Scientism” in *Ethics, Science, Technology, and Engineering : A Global Resource*, ed. J. Britt Holbrook (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2015), 109.

¹⁹⁷ Haack quoted in Rene van Woudenberg, Rik Peels, and Jeroen de Ridder, “Introduction” in *Scientism: Prospects and Problems*, ed. Jeroen de Ridder, Rik Peels, and Rene van Woudenberg (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 2.

¹⁹⁸ Susan Haack, “Six Signs of Scientism”, *Logos & Episteme* 3 (2012): 80.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 83.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 79-80.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 83.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, 86-87.

Ian James Kidd outlines more “epistemic vices” exhibited by scientistic people.²⁰³ A belief in the superiority of their own worldview inhibits serious engagement with other ideas. Real open-mindedness requires a willingness to temporarily “disengage” from one’s “default cognitive standpoint” to consider alternatives.²⁰⁴ Scientistic people cannot do this because they insist that, as followers of “Reason”, they do not hold a distinctive stance. Disengaging from their position would be a “wilful lapse into irrationality”.²⁰⁵ Scientistic people are also “epistemically arrogant”: they expect to master new fields of knowledge quickly and easily thanks to their familiarity with the natural sciences. They “hold forth confidently” on topics covered by the humanities and social sciences without engaging with existing methods or literature.²⁰⁶ Benjamin claims to unearth objective truth as a self-styled “rationalist” who does not see the world through any “lens”, and claims to easily understand postmodernism thanks to his time playing and designing video games.²⁰⁷ These descriptions fit him to a tee.

New Atheism

Benjamin appears to be heavily influenced by an earlier scientistic movement: “New Atheism”. This brand of atheism emerged in the mid-2000s. It began as a publishing phenomenon. Four prominent authors are considered the “Four Horsemen” of New Atheism. Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Daniel Dennett, and Sam Harris all published best-selling anti-religion books between 2004 and 2007.²⁰⁸ New Atheism also became a rank-and-file movement. These authors triggered what Amaranth Amarasingam calls “a kind of atheist social revival”.²⁰⁹ As the Four Horsemen achieved celebrity status, communities of atheists emerged online and the membership of atheist organisations grew.²¹⁰

²⁰³ Ian James Kidd, “Is Scientism Epistemically Vicious?” in *Scientism: Prospects and Problems*, ed. Jeroen de Ridder, Rik Peels, and Rene van Woudenberg (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 149.

²⁰⁴ Ibid, 156-157.

²⁰⁵ Ibid, 157.

²⁰⁶ Ibid, 162.

²⁰⁷ Sargon of Akkad, “The Rationalists”, *YouTube*, 8:42, September 1, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YdXSCU0lcPs>

²⁰⁸ Steven Kettell, “What’s really new about New Atheism?”, *Palgrave Communications* 2 (2016): 2.

²⁰⁹ Amarnath Amarasingam, “Introduction: What is the New Atheism?” in *Religion and New Atheism: A Critical Appraisal*, ed. Amarnath Amarasingam (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 2.

²¹⁰ Katja Guenther, Kerry Mulligan and Cameron Pap, “From the Outside In: Crossing Boundaries to Build Collective Identity in the New Atheist Movement”, *Social Problems* 60 (2013): 458-459.

The valorisation of science is integral to New Atheism. Steven Kettell explains that it is “based on a naturalist worldview and places a strong emphasis on the use of reason, rationality, and science as the best (or only) means of understanding reality”.²¹¹ Dawkins, Dennett, Hitchens, and Harris think of religions as packages of outdated, incorrect explanations for natural phenomena. Hitchens described religion as “a babyish attempt to meet our inescapable demand for knowledge”.²¹² James Taylor notes that each author considers religion unnecessary “since science can now explain what theism was formerly thought to be required to explain”.²¹³ They believe that there are no questions which the scientific method cannot answer and that, as Dawkins puts it, “the existence of God is a scientific hypothesis” which can be tested “like any other”.²¹⁴ The Four Horsemen even offer scientific explanations for the existence of religion. They embrace sociobiology and evolutionary psychology to speculate that faith is a by-product of some other evolutionary trait which has survival value.²¹⁵ American researchers note that this positivist worldview is also common among rank-and-file New Atheists. Katja Guenther and Jesse Smith each describe the frequent invocation and celebration of science as integral to the wider movement.²¹⁶

However, New Atheism is often more scientistic than scientific. William Stahl maintains that, despite their pretensions, the books of Dawkins, Hitchens, and Harris are “shockingly unscientific”. Each “sweep[s] through history and across cultures collecting anecdotes of religious people behaving badly” and ignores contrary examples.²¹⁷ They explain away atheist villains of history (such as Robespierre or Pol Pot) as devotees of “political religions”. They insist that the American civil rights movement was “not really religious”.²¹⁸ Christopher Cotter argues that the Four Horsemen are not open-minded; by

²¹¹ Kettell, “What’s really new about New Atheism?”.

²¹² Hitchens quoted in Amarasingam, “Introduction: What is the New Atheism?”, 1.

²¹³ James Taylor, “The New Atheists”, in *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. James Fieser and Bradley Dowden, <https://www.iep.utm.edu/n-athxxx/>

²¹⁴ Dawkins quoted in William A. Stahl, “One-Dimensional Rage: The Social Epistemology of the New Atheism and Fundamentalism” in *Religion and the New Atheism: A Critical Appraisal*, ed. Amarnath Amarasingam (Boston: Brill, 2010), 99.

²¹⁵ Stephen LeDrew, “Atheism Versus Humanism: Ideological Tensions and Identity Dynamics” in *Atheist Identities: Spaces and Social Contexts* ed. Lori Beaman and Steven Tomlins (Springer, 2014): 57; Taylor, “The New Atheists”.

²¹⁶ Katja Guenther, “Secular sexism: The persistence of gender inequality in the US New Atheist Movement”, *Women’s Studies International Forum* 72 (2019): 50-51; Jesse Smith, “Creating a Godless Community: The Collective Identity Work of Contemporary American Atheists”, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 52 (2013): 85-86.

²¹⁷ Stahl, “One-Dimensional Rage”, 103.

²¹⁸ Ibid, 103-104.

focusing on extremists, they only engage with “caricatures” of opposing views.²¹⁹ They also presume to provide easy answers to questions dealt with extensively by other disciplines. Stephen LeDrew contends that Dennett’s “reductionist” effort to provide an evolutionary origin for religion ignores a “vast amount” of social scientific research on the topic.²²⁰ Whitney Kaufman criticises Harris for his attempt to provide a secular basis for moral values. While “dropping the words ‘science’ and ‘scientific’ ad nauseam throughout”, Harris purports to “finally and decisively resolve [a] 2,000-year-old debate”.²²¹ Harris lands on a version of utilitarianism, but is oblivious to foundational critiques of utilitarianism because he ignores the “vast literature” on the topic within moral philosophy.²²² Rory Dickson notes that Harris also “scientifically” characterises Islam as a “cult of death”, despite his “profound unfamiliarity with the traditions, beliefs, and culture of its followers”.²²³ Because of its hypocritical lack of rigour and arrogant invocations of “science” to defend shaky positions, many authors consider New Atheism scientific.²²⁴

Benjamin is invested in New Atheism. He venerates Dawkins, Hitchens, and Harris. He has “a great deal of admiration” for Dawkins and praises his “contributions to science, reason, and secularism”.²²⁵ He thinks that the “agile mind” of Hitchens should make him a model to us all.²²⁶ Benjamin loves listening to Hitchens debate. He is liable to “get stoned and listen to Hitchens demolish people all day”.²²⁷ Dawkins and Hitchens are Benjamin’s idols “when it comes to intellectual honesty and debunking nonsense”.²²⁸ He considers Harris “phenomenally intelligent”, and defends him from criticism from the

²¹⁹ Christopher Cotter, “New Atheism, Open-Mindedness, and Critical Thinking”, in *New Atheism: Critical Perspectives and Contemporary Debates*, ed. Christopher Cotter, Philip Andrew Quadrio and Jonathan Tuckett (Cham: Springer, 2017), 41.

²²⁰ LeDrew, “Atheism Versus Humanism”, 57.

²²¹ Whitley R.P. Kaufman, “Can Science Determine Moral Values? A Reply to Sam Harris”, *Neuroethics* 5 (2012): 57.

²²² Ibid, 58, 60.

²²³ Rory Dickson, “Religion as Phantasmagoria: Islam in *The End of Faith*”, in *Religion and New Atheism: A Critical Appraisal*, ed. Amarnath Amarasingam (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 53.

²²⁴ Massimo Pigliucci, “New Atheism and the Scientistic Turn in the Atheism Movement”, *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 37 (2013): 142-153; Taylor, “The New Atheists”; LeDrew, “Atheism Versus Humanism”, 57.

²²⁵ Sargon of Akkad, “Richard Dawkins No-Platformed by Atheism+”, *YouTube*, 12:38, January 28, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W1bI7S0LCos>

²²⁶ Sargon of Akkad, “Progressiveness Disappears Up Its Own Arse”.

²²⁷ Sargon of Akkad, “The Regressive Left has Become the Religious Right”.

²²⁸ Sargon of Akkad, “Richard Dawkins No-Platformed by Atheism+”.

Left.²²⁹ Benjamin has also commented on obscure goings-on within New Atheism and expressed opinions on public figures little-known outside the movement.²³⁰ He has tried his hand at producing his own anti-religious videos. Benjamin mocks Christians for advocating “intelligent design” and for fretting about the “evil agendas” of atheists.²³¹ He instructs Republicans to keep their “invisible friend in the sky” out of politics.²³²

Benjamin sometimes explicitly positions his criticism of social movement activism as equivalent to the Four Horsemen’s attack on religion. He lauds the way that Hitchens crushed the religious Right with facts and logic, and states that “we’re going to do it to the progressive Left”.²³³ He claims that the American religious Right was “destroyed” by “people like Dawkins and Hitchens” and coaches viewers that “this is what you ... have to do” to social movement activists.²³⁴ His aforementioned construction of feminist, anti-racist, and LGBTQ+ rights activism as religions facilitates the analogy between his own work and that of his New Atheist heroes.

This analysis contributes to previous work observing a link between New Atheism and the alt-right/-lite. Shaw describes New Atheism as part of the “intellectual heritage” of the white nationalist alt-right.²³⁵ Nagle notes that some anti-feminist YouTube videos are “made with much the same style” as earlier New Atheist ones, and calls New Atheism “one of the predecessors” of the alt-lite.²³⁶ Aisling McCrea observes (in a non-scholarly article) that reactionary men online who claim to “love logic” are often also interested in New Atheism. She pinpoints “smugness” as a common thread between the two movements. People who enjoyed feeling smart when mocking creationists later turned this sensibility onto apparently stupid feminist, anti-racist, and LGBTQ+ rights

²²⁹ The Thinkery, “King of the Fascists”, *YouTube*, 10:44, March 16, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ldtI5Mj9Zug>; The Thinkery, “Sam Harris vs Jordan Peterson Review”, *YouTube*, 8:56, July 16, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R08HUwWZJLY>

²³⁰ Sargon of Akkad, “Why Do People Hate #Feminism? #7 - Male Feminists”, *YouTube*, 14:59, October 27, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=by0spgMrbl0>; Sargon of Akkad, “Explaining Steve Shives to The Thinking Atheist”, *YouTube*, 11:23, December 9, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ei66ZNbAVvg>

²³¹ Sargon of Akkad, “God: Great at creation, poor at planning”, *YouTube*, 2:08, May 14, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J2LrSeYzwgU>; Sargon of Akkad, “Atheists Are Evil”, *YouTube*, 7:50, December 8, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q9MXc3h7G38>

²³² Sargon of Akkad, “God Has No Place in Politics”, *YouTube*, August 22, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UoHx20hUSc0>

²³³ Sargon of Akkad, “The Regressive Left has Become the Religious Right”.

²³⁴ Sargon of Akkad, “Illiberal Progressives”.

²³⁵ Shaw, “Something Old, Something New, Something Borrowed”, 81.

²³⁶ Nagle, *Kill All Normies*, 78.

activists.²³⁷ Benjamin's case further demonstrates that New Atheism and the alt-right/-lite often appeal to the same people. This cohort seems to enjoy feeling smart by imagining that "science" provides easy answers to complex social questions, which others are too stupid or irrational to perceive. Two of the Four Horsemen themselves have gone down this path. As mentioned, Harris is one of the academics associated with the Intellectual Dark Web. Dawkins has flirted with the alt-lite. On Twitter in 2016, he shared one of Benjamin's videos, which equated feminists and Islamists.²³⁸ Again equating feminist, anti-racist, and LGBTQ+ rights activism with religion, he has tweeted a meme showing his book *The God Delusion* mocked-up to read *The Social Justice Delusion*.²³⁹

Through scientism, Benjamin claims that social problems which affect women, non-white people, and LGBTQ+ people have easy answers. Specifically, the answer is to do nothing about these problems, because they are "natural". Benjamin's scientism allows him to simultaneously defend inequalities which fall in the favour of white people, heterosexuals, and men, and portray himself as non-prejudiced.

Science and sexism

Finally, as well as being scientific, Benjamin's characterisation of social movement activists as unscientific can be situated within an ancient tradition which positions men as more rational than women. As Guenther notes, Western culture "maintains a gendered dichotomy between science, reason, rationality, and critical thinking on the one hand and faith, irrationality, emotionality, and superstition on the other[,] wherein science and reason are association with ... men ... and irrationality and emotionality are associated with women".²⁴⁰ Genevieve Lloyd's analysis of canonical Western philosophers (including Plato, Augustine, Aquinas, Rousseau, Kant, and Hegel) finds that "our ideals of Reason have historically incorporated an exclusion of the feminine, and ... femininity

²³⁷ Aisling McCrea, "The Magical Thinking of Guys Who Love Logic", *The Outline*, February 15, 2019, <https://theoutline.com/post/7083/the-magical-thinking-of-guys-who-love-logic?zd=1&zi=5wfppgsz>

²³⁸ Olivia Blair, "Richard Dawkins dropped from science event for tweeting video mocking feminists and Islamists", *The Independent*, January 29, 2016, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/richard-dawkins-vdeo-twitter-necss-event-feminism-a6841161.html>

²³⁹ Brendan Gauthier, "Never tweet, Richard Dawkins: Famed atheist now signal-boosting Nazi propaganda", *Salon*, February 2, 2016, https://www.salon.com/test/2016/02/01/never_tweet_richard_dawkins_famed_atheist_now_signal_boosting_nazi_propaganda/

²⁴⁰ Katja Guenther, "Secular sexism", 50-51.

itself has been partly constituted through such a process of exclusion”.²⁴¹ Western philosophers have metaphorically characterised traits which must be transcended, destroyed, or left behind to develop “culturally prized rationality” – such as passion, sensuality, and embodiment – as feminine.²⁴² In addition to this symbolic manoeuvre, many influential Western philosophers and politicians (as discussed in the last chapter) have justified women’s second-class status by insisting that women are literally less rational than men. Karen Jones notes that “women’s assumed deficiency in rationality has been used to justify their exclusion from full ethical standing and from full participation in education, politics, and the professions”.²⁴³ Benjamin states outright that women are less intelligent than men, and are less suited for work (such as in STEM fields) which requires rational thinking. He evidently believes in this ancient stereotype. His constant denunciations of “irrational” feminist activists – who are predominantly women – invoke it. Moreover, I argue that his accusations of irrationality against all social movement activists – not only feminists, and not only women – can be situated within this tradition. This is because he paints social movement activism as an effeminate activity. Male activists are womanly, and therefore irrational like women. This effort to feminise men involved in progressive activism is further discussed in the next chapter.

Benjamin’s invocation of this trope is made ironic by his screen name. The real Sargon of Akkad’s daughter, Enheduanna, is the earliest author known by name in human history.²⁴⁴ We possess devotional poems penned in her capacity as the High Priestess of two Mesopotamian gods circa 2300 BC.²⁴⁵ Enheduanna’s poems suggest that her duties involved astronomy and surveying. These qualifications would also make her the earliest known scientist and mathematician, and feminist scientists have celebrated her as such.²⁴⁶ Benjamin’s brief mention of Enheduanna in a video about the historical Sargon makes

²⁴¹ Genevieve Lloyd, *The Man of Reason: ‘Male’ and ‘Female’ in Western Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), x.

²⁴² *Ibid.*, 2-3.

²⁴³ Karen Jones, “Gender and Rationality”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Rationality*, ed. Alfred R. Mele and Piers Rawling (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 301.

²⁴⁴ Sarah Glaz, “Enheduanna: Princess, Priestess, Poet, and Mathematician”, *The Mathematical Intelligencer* 42 (2020): 31-46.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁶ Glaz, “Enheduanna”, 38, 40, 44; Joan Schmelz, “En'hedu'anna - Our First Great Scientist”, *Women in Astronomy*, May 6, 2013, <http://womeninastronomy.blogspot.com/2013/05/enheduanna-our-first-great-scientist.html>

no mention of this.²⁴⁷ His failure to include this information again calls into question his merit as a researcher.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I further shed light on my central research questions by analysing Benjamin's discourse and demonstrating that representations of social movements as unscientific are a major theme in Benjamin's hostile construction of anti-racist, feminist, and LGBTQ+ activists. I then considered the extent to which he substantiates the claims which make up this construction. He positions himself as a lover of science who is compelled to denounce irrational activists who ignore facts and use manipulation instead of reason to advance their cause. I then evaluated these claims. Benjamin often ignores or belittles research (sight unseen) which substantiates feminist, anti-racist, and LGBTQ+ rights positions. He misrepresents research and abuses the trappings of science to make his own unsound positions seem "scientific". I next defended epistemological perspectives which inform social movement activism as well-founded, not manipulative "tricks". Benjamin's own refusal to listen to marginalised perspectives and pseudoscientific justifications of oppression demonstrate the continued relevance of standpoint theory and postmodern theories of knowledge. I therefore argue that Benjamin's claim to oppose feminist, anti-racist, and LGBTQ+ rights activism because their unscientific nature offends him as a lover of science is not justified. Instead, I argue that this theme in his discourse constitutes scientism. His admiration for "science" is a rhetorical device which facilitates the claim that social inequalities are natural. His earlier investment in New Atheism appears to have shaped this approach. Overall, I argue that the element of his discourse identified in this chapter does not reflect the prevalence of unscientific tendencies in social movements, but rather works to preserve social inequalities which fall in the favour of white people, heterosexuals, and men.

In this chapter, therefore, I identified a second set of complaints which comprise a major theme in Benjamin's claim that flawed social movement activism has turned him to the Right. His grievances again warranted consideration; analogous points are made by academics who are otherwise on the Left. I have found that Benjamin's claims here are

²⁴⁷ Sargon of Akkad, "Heroes of History: Sargon of Akkad, the First Emperor".

largely unsupported. This element of his discourse instead rationalises the subordinate position of women and minorities vis-à-vis straight white men. In the next chapter, I identify and evaluate the final constituent part of Benjamin's hostile construction of identity politics. Like a number of scholars, he mocks the apparently freakish behaviour of social movement activists and the lame incorporation of anti-racist, feminist, and LGBTQ+ rights themes in cultural products.

Chapter Five

Carl Benjamin vs. uncool activists

In this chapter, I further illuminate my research questions by analysing Benjamin's discourse and identifying the third and final major theme in his hostile construction of feminist, anti-racist, and LGBTQ+ rights activism. He insists that he cannot support the Left because social movement activism is uncool. He intimates that activists can be dismissed because they are contemptible oddballs and killjoys who ruin the hobbies of ordinary people by making them politically correct. In evaluating these claims, I first demonstrate that Benjamin ridicules activists for traits which he exhibits himself and applauds in ideological allies. I then argue that his avowed reasons for considering social movement activists uncool fail to hold water because the real object of his scorn is their failure to embody traditional ideals of gender. I argue that this element of his discourse amounts to an instance of "complicit masculinity": a defence of "hegemonic masculinity" and a concomitant ideal of "emphasised" femininity. With reference to the related concept "geek masculinity", I contend that Benjamin's derision of cultural products with feminist, anti-racist, and LGBTQ+ themes works to ensure that traditional ideals of gender continue to be central within his favourite genres and franchises. In this chapter, I therefore identify another important and potentially valid set of complaints in Benjamin's hostile construction of social movement activism. I argue that his claimed reasons for considering social movement activism uncool are not substantiated and that his flawed judgements need not be shared by people with different ideas about gender.

Uncool activism

Earnestness and "cringe"

Benjamin characterises feminist, anti-racist, and LGBTQ+ rights activism as uncool practices for weird people. He deems social movement activists "completely lame".¹ They "tend to be giant fucking losers". In social movements, "the losers have banded together".² Constructions of activists as over-earnest and overwrought are a major part of

¹ Sargon of Akkad, "Social Justice is Uncool".

² Sargon of Akkad, "Social Justice Losers", *YouTube*, 15:42, April 8, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e3ofna1Mtl0>

this characterisation. Benjamin often includes footage of activists in his videos as an invitation to laugh at the people depicted. He includes clips which show people in an impassioned or agitated state, either at demonstrations or on social media. He laughs at people “busy making dramatic points about the terrible oppression under which they live”.³ The failure of “hysterical” activists to keep their cool makes them look ridiculous.⁴ Playing on stereotypes of autism, Benjamin uses the label “autistic” as an insult to suggest that activists embarrass themselves by screaming and acting out in public.⁵ He characterises the earnest or impassioned behaviour of activists as “cringe” – online slang for cringeworthy.⁶ He laughs at denunciations of sexism, racism, homo- and transphobia which are passionate and “totally unironic”.⁷

To Benjamin, the “fucking embarrassing” behaviour of social movement activists explains the fact that YouTube is “filled with SJW and feminist cringe compilations”.⁸ As implied by their names, “cringe compilations” are video compilations of people behaving in ostensibly embarrassing ways. Not all such compilations are political. Many showcase the social media posts of untalented signers and comedians, or people who show off their unusual predilections and hobbies.⁹ Anti-feminist and “anti-SJW” cringe compilations invite viewers to laugh at the behaviour of impassioned activists who, like other figures of fun, are supposed to lack self-awareness. Many such videos have attracted millions of views. Many successful channels produce such content exclusively.¹⁰ Benjamin has tried his hand at this genre, cutting together footage of activists in full flight and forgoing his usual commentary.¹¹ More often, he splices such clips into videos which focus on other points, as an apparent reminder to viewers that social movement activism is uncool.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Sargon of Akkad, “Meet the Rutgers Protesters”, *YouTube*, 14:59, February 17, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yix7x7mjpQ0>

⁵ Sargon of Akkad, “This Week in Stupid (04/09/2016)”, *YouTube*, 42:07, September 4, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nzBWuQ3vqRM>; Sargon of Akkad, “#Feminists4Autism”, *YouTube*, 11:33, September 2, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SMWUrJdR9FA>

⁶ Akkad Daily, “The Revolution Has Arrived”.

⁷ Sargon of Akkad, “Social Justice is Uncool”.

⁸ Sargon of Akkad, “Social Justice is Uncool”.

⁹ Rebecca Jennings, “When ordinary people go viral, where’s the line between comedy and cruelty?”, *Vox*, November 20, 2020, <https://www.vox.com/the-goods/21575707/tiktok-cringe>; Fernando Alfonso, “The dark side of Reddit’s cringe culture”, *The Daily Dot*, March 2, 2020, <https://www.dailydot.com/irl/reddit-cringe-cringepics-bullying/>

¹⁰ For example, the popular channels “SJWCentral” and “50 Shades” produce this content exclusively.

¹¹ Sargon of Akkad, “Why Do People Hate #Feminism #9 - Feminists Say the Darndest Things”, *YouTube*, 7:57, July 7, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qf_mNiMKNIE

Some academic critics of identity politics indulge in similar mockery. Nagle's *Kill All Normies* is shot through with contempt for over-earnest activists. She opines that cringe compilations expose the "absurdities" of contemporary social movements.¹² Her descriptions of demonstrations (especially at universities) drip with disdain for young activists who are "convinced of the racism, misogyny and hetero-normative oppression of the world outside".¹³ She mocks young women who claim to be "triggered" by "mention of anything distressing".¹⁴ Commenting on the sort footage which Benjamin includes in his videos, Nagle considers such scenes "embarrassing"; they turn the Left into a "laughing stock".¹⁵ The "earnestness" and "humourlessness" of social movement activists was ripe to become "a source of comedy and ridicule".¹⁶ By contrast, she seems to possess grudging respect for "darkly funny" alt-right/-lite content, in which "[e]very statement is wrapped in layers of faux-irony, playfulness and multiple cultural nods and references".¹⁷ She also praises socialists (like the hosts of the dirtbag Left podcast *Chapo Trap House*) who filter their commentary through "irony-saturated online culture".¹⁸ Lilla also sympathises with the Right's impulse to mock "cartoonish moments" at progressive demonstrations.¹⁹ Gitlin denounces "overwrought" student activists and attributes to them "a new generational norm of fragility".²⁰ These characterisations by academics who are otherwise on the Left encourage me to "hear out" Benjamin's own splenetic critiques.

Sanctimony and anger

Benjamin further claims that feminist, anti-racist, and LGBTQ+ rights activists become so agitated thanks to their belief that opponents are immoral. To such activists, "right-wing values are not only wrong, they are immoral, and only immoral people hold them".²¹ Activists are therefore rude and aggressive. They think of themselves as "inherently better", and believe they possess the right to abuse "intrinsically immoral"

¹² Nagle, *Kill All Normies*, 35.

¹³ Ibid, 10.

¹⁴ Ibid, 57.

¹⁵ Ibid, 83.

¹⁶ Ibid, 6, 7, 10.

¹⁷ Ibid, 35, 46.

¹⁸ Ibid, 10.

¹⁹ Lilla, "A Conversation with Mark Lilla on His Critique of Identity Politics".

²⁰ Todd Gitlin, "Please Be Disturbed: Triggering Can Be Good For You, Kids", *Tablet*, September 22, 2016, <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/news/articles/trigger-warnings-on-campus>

²¹ Sargon of Akkad, "Illiberal Progressives".

conservatives.²² For instance, Benjamin routinely replays footage of one Canadian feminist activist, Chanty Binx, who was filmed arguing with attendees at an MRA event in 2013. She yelled at MRAs and told them to “shut the fuck up”. Benjamin characterises her as “the apotheosis of a feminist activist”. She “embodies” feminism. He decrees that it is “unusual to find a feminist activist who is polite and respectful”.²³ Social movement activists are “not only wrong, [but] not even nice about being wrong”.²⁴ He claims, moreover, that such behaviour delegitimises activism, even where its practitioners might have a point. It is “perfectly reasonable” for people to reject arguments made so angrily. Even if activists do have “moral authority in [a] situation, they lose it by losing their temper”.²⁵ Benjamin denounces aggressive social movement activists who have holier-than-thou attitudes and find “emotional gratification in bullying people”.²⁶

Benjamin’s argument here is reminiscent of those made (with differing emphases) by academic critics of identity politics. To Lilla, a belief among activists that their opponents are all racist, sexist, homo- and transphobic “sanctions a conviction of moral superiority”.²⁷ He accuses them of “scolding” people and “casting opponents as immoral monsters, rather than simply as fellow citizens with opposing views”.²⁸ Chua writes that progressive Americans “often don’t realise how judgemental they are”. Anyone who questions elements of progressive “orthodoxy” is dismissed as bigoted: “You can’t talk to him, you can’t compromise, and you certainly can’t suggest that he might be a decent person”. Activists are guilty of “relentless berating, shaming, and bullying”, which turns people to the Right.²⁹ Gitlin also accuses feminist, anti-racist, and LGBTQ+ rights academics and activists of “bullying” people who question them.³⁰

For their part, socialist authors also critique such incivility, but attribute it to a tendency to account for injustices like racism, sexism, homo- and transphobia at the individual level. Reed and Merlin Chowkwanyun refer to a “psychologistic reflex” among American anti-racists, who think of racism as a pathology which resides in the minds of racist

²² Sargon of Akkad, “Liberal Ideas #2 - Neo-Progressive Activists”.

²³ Sargon of Akkad, “Why Do People Hate Feminism? #12 - Feminist Fundamentalists”.

²⁴ Sargon of Akkad, “Why Do People Hate #Feminism? #3 - The Gender Pay Gap (#EqualPayDay)”, *YouTube*, 29:54, April 29, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T09Bx6xoHSQ>

²⁵ Sargon of Akkad, “Why Do People Hate Feminism? #12 - Feminist Fundamentalists”.

²⁶ Sargon of Akkad, “Egalitarianism as Interpreted by a Feminist”.

²⁷ Lilla, “The End of Identity Liberalism”.

²⁸ Lilla, *The Once and Future Liberal*, 112-113.

²⁹ Chua, *Political Tribes*, 8, 98.

³⁰ Gitlin, *The Twilight of Common Dreams*, 207-208.

individuals.³¹ Reed criticises contemporary activists for failing to recognise racism as a structural problem linked to capitalism.³² Michaels agrees that American activists see racism as “some kind of moral failing” and ignore “the political economy behind it”.³³ Fraser contends that sexism, racism, homo- and transphobia are too often positioned at the level of “individual psychology”. Inequalities are attributed to “hatred in the oppressor’s mind”.³⁴ To Fisher, practitioners of identity politics never focus on “anything except individual behaviour”. They behave as though “condemning individuals is always more important than paying attention the impersonal structures”.³⁵

This mindset supposedly results in the hectoring of opponents. People who position injustices at the individual level must take a dim view of their compatriots, in order to account for major inequalities between groups. Fraser argues that people who account for societal problems at the individual level must dismiss swathes of the population as “tied to obsolete, parochial values”.³⁶ Addressing injustices then “seems to require policing their beliefs”.³⁷ “[G]rossly exaggerating the extent to which the trouble is inside people’s heads” leads to hectoring and “moralising condescension”.³⁸ Reed condemns anti-racists who make “sweeping generalisations” about racist white people.³⁹ He argues that, when activists ignore structural issues, “behaviour modification of a defective population” presents itself as the solution to racism.⁴⁰ This leads to “moralistic” scolding which makes the Left unpopular.⁴¹ These critiques give reason to take seriously Benjamin’s (less sophisticated) claim to reject identity politics because its practitioners are too angry and judgemental.

³¹ Reed and Chowkwanyun, “Race, class, crisis”, 157.

³² Reed, “Marx, Race, and Neoliberalism”, 53.

³³ Michaels, “Walter Benn Michaels on how liberals still love diversity and ignore inequality”.

³⁴ Fraser, “Social Justice in the Age of Identity Politics”, 25.

³⁵ Fisher, “Exiting the Vampire’s Castle”.

³⁶ Fraser, “From Progressive Neoliberalism to Trump and Beyond”.

³⁷ Fraser, “Social Justice in the Age of Identity Politics”, 26.

³⁸ Fraser, “From Progressive Neoliberalism to Trump and Beyond”.

³⁹ Reed and Chowkwanyun, “Race, class, crisis”, 150.

⁴⁰ Adolph Reed, “Nothing Left”, *Harper’s*, March 2014, <https://harpers.org/archive/2014/03/nothing-left-2/>

⁴¹ Reed, “Marx, Race, and Neoliberalism”, 53.

Lame media and progressive killjoys

As well as deriding activists, Benjamin insists that pop culture artefacts with feminist, anti-racist, or LGBTQ+ themes are cringeworthy. He declares that “social justice warriors are terrible at creating their own cultural output, and nobody likes it because it’s fucking lame”. He insists that “pick any genre you like, and you will find progressive cultural items that are just the worst”. This media is “the opposite of cool”.⁴² Benjamin believes in a “rapidly forming stereotype of far-Left entertainment being composed entirely of preachy, self-important, elitist horseshit”.⁴³ He mocks specific pop culture artefacts. He laughed at Israel’s feminist-themed entry in the 2018 Eurovision Song Contest and derided the “fat feminist” singer.⁴⁴ Popular web comics are “infused with the preachy ... rhetoric of social justice”. A comedy skit about cultural appropriation pushes its message in “the most cringey, uncool fucking way possible”.⁴⁵ Benjamin also ridicules more avant-garde media. He provides mocking narration of performance art pieces in which women urinate on stage and paint with menstrual blood or using their genitalia. He laughs at this “feminist contribution to art”: “God only knows what this degeneracy is meant to represent”.⁴⁶

The bulk of Benjamin’s attacks on uncool media, however, are directed at what he sees as attempts to “co-opt other people’s cultural products”.⁴⁷ He complains that “social justice doesn’t create anything, it just co-opts and destroys”. Benjamin often claims to perceive efforts by feminist, anti-racist, or LGBTQ+ rights activists to infiltrate existing franchises and genres. They are always looking to “conquer a new industry” and turn it into “an ideologically driven heap of shit”.⁴⁸ He frets above all that social movement activism will ruin video games. Benjamin brags about being “involved in Gamergate from the very beginning to the end”.⁴⁹ As discussed, Benjamin made dozens of videos

⁴² Sargon of Akkad, “Social Justice is Uncool”.

⁴³ Sargon of Akkad, “Gender Wars: The Last Snowflake”, *YouTube*, 29:26, December 20, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LPSRp7uUXUk>

⁴⁴ Sargon of Akkad, “This Week in Stupid (13/05/2018)”, *YouTube*, 21:54, May 13, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=74B7KrI1cb4>

⁴⁵ Sargon of Akkad, “Social Justice is Uncool”.

⁴⁶ Sargon of Akkad, “Vaginal art expose - now with extra nudity!”, *YouTube*, 4:01, April 25, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LSGjC82xw3k>; Sargon of Akkad, “Splat!, Narrated”, *YouTube*, 4:26, March 24, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nFLl88OMWOY>

⁴⁷ Sargon of Akkad, “Social Justice is Uncool”.

⁴⁸ Sargon of Akkad, “This Year in Stupid 2017”, *YouTube*, 1:06:42, December 21, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AvrPD6MKF38>

⁴⁹ Akkad Daily, “Captain Marvel 2 Looks Lit”, *YouTube*, 12:00, January 12, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3ItIp5SbPYs>

denouncing “the incursion of social justice warriors trying to change the culture of gaming artificially”.⁵⁰ He saw himself pitted against developers, journalists, critics, and academics who wanted to “push feminism and social justice on the gaming industry, when nobody wanted it and nobody needed it”.⁵¹ This cohort would make games politically correct and “destroy gaming if we let them”.⁵²

Benjamin also worries about the co-optation of other media. He proclaims that social movement activist have “taken over” the comic book industry and purged their ideological opponents.⁵³ Activists have “infected, radicalised, and ruined comics”.⁵⁴ In new “cringeworthy” comics produced by Marvel, beloved characters such as Thor or Captain America are shoehorned into stories with progressive themes. Marvel’s staff “shit on [our] favourite heroes”.⁵⁵ Benjamin also attacks cinema adaptations of comics. The feminist content in *Captain Marvel* makes Benjamin want to tear his eyes out.⁵⁶ *Black Panther* – a vehicle to promote “black identity politics” – puts the “political first and entertainment second”.⁵⁷ Benjamin worries about “what the far Left is doing to *Star Wars*”. He criticises 2017’s *The Last Jedi* for its apparent “focus on celebrating SJW far-Left politics”.⁵⁸ *Ghostbusters*, *Ocean’s Eleven*, and *Doctor Who* have also been ruined by feminist takeovers.⁵⁹ Benjamin fretted about a takeover of Games Workshop, the company which manufactures the tabletop miniature game *Warhammer*, when it stated an intention to diversify its cast of characters.⁶⁰ He worried that “progressive moralisers” had conquered the collectible card game *Magic: The Gathering* when several cards were removed because of their racist connotations.⁶¹ Benjamin believes that “there

⁵⁰ Akkad Daily, “Twitch Gets Woke”.

⁵¹ Sargon of Akkad, “Social Justice is Uncool”.

⁵² Sargon of Akkad, “A Philippic Against Matt Lees and Social Justice in Gaming #GamerGate #NotYourShield”, *YouTube*, 29:56, September 12, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LXBYXW5qUiA>

⁵³ Akkad Daily, “Captain Marvel 2 Looks Lit”.

⁵⁴ Sargon of Akkad, “This Year in Stupid 2017”.

⁵⁵ Sargon of Akkad, “Social Justice is Uncool”.

⁵⁶ Akkad Daily, “Captain Marvel 2 Looks Lit”.

⁵⁷ Sargon of Akkad, “The Politics of Black Panther”, *YouTube*, 38:42, February 15, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-k0AST2sQRI>

⁵⁸ Sargon of Akkad, “Gender Wars: The Last Snowflake”.

⁵⁹ Sargon of Akkad, “Social Justice is Uncool”; Sargon of Akkad, “This Week in Stupid (06/03/2016)”, *YouTube*, 25:20, March 6, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c31yeQ8AMNQ>

⁶⁰ Akkad Daily, “WarhammerGate”.

⁶¹ Akkad Daily, “Magic: the Gathering is Racist”, *YouTube*, 14:02, June 11, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aeTenraCYS0>

is nothing that social justice warriors and radical feminists don't want to come and fuck up".⁶²

Left-wing researchers and writers have also criticised the inclusion of feminist, anti-racist, and LGBTQ+ themes in similar media. Nagle criticises the harassment dished out during Gamergate, but agrees that the game which triggered it (Zoe Quinn's *Depression Quest*) "looked like a terrible game featuring many of the fragility- and mental illness-fetishising characteristics of the kind of feminism that has emerged online".⁶³ Reed disparages people who imagine that participating in the "commercial hype machine" around *Black Panther* constitutes political engagement.⁶⁴ W. Richard Benash also disparages pronouncements of *Black Panther*'s importance, and alleges that it borrows cultural trappings from the Black Power movement without engaging with its substance (lest box office returns be affected).⁶⁵ Zoë Heller sniffs at the idea that 2017's *Wonder Woman* was a significant feminist event. The film "eradicate[s] any hint of bossiness or anger" from its heroine. Heller labels it a "dispiriting exercise in allaying male fears about powerful women".⁶⁶ Eileen Jones similarly derides anyone who considered the release of 2016's *Ghostbusters* remake "important". The idea that women should see the film in an "act of feminist solidarity" was a marketing gimmick.⁶⁷ This work provides reason to think that justified criticism can be levelled at the apparently feeble incorporation of feminist, anti-racist, and LGBTQ+ themes into pop culture.

Benjamin's construction of social movements as uncool therefore involves a number of claims. The failure of activists to keep their cool or exhibit ironic detachment makes them cringeworthy. Sanctimonious activists bully their political opponents as immoral monsters. Cultural products with feminist, anti-racist, or LGBT themes are lame. Activists like to co-opt and ruin franchises and genres which others enjoy. Again, there is reason to take such complaints seriously, given their similarity to points made by academic critics of identity politics. I next evaluate the merit of Benjamin's claims.

⁶² Sargon of Akkad, "The Problem With Heavy Metal Is Metalheads".

⁶³ Nagle, *Kill All Normies*, 19.

⁶⁴ Adolph Reed, "The Trouble With Uplift", *The Baffler*, September, 2018, <https://thebaffler.com/salvos/the-trouble-with-uplift-reed>

⁶⁵ W. Richard Benash, "Black Panther and Blaxploitation: Intersections", *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 38 (2020): 48, 55.

⁶⁶ Zoë Heller, "God's Gift to Men", *The New York Review of Books*, August 17, 2017, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2017/08/17/wonder-woman-gods-gift-to-men/>

⁶⁷ Eileen Jones, "Fake Controversy, Terrible Comedy", *Jacobin*, July 20, 2016, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/07/ghostbusters-paul-feig-feminism-mccarthy-murray/>

Hypocrisy and double standards

The importance of being earnest

I first examine Benjamin's assertion that earnest, unironic forms of political engagement are cringeworthy. It is obviously a matter of personal taste whether or not someone finds earnest behaviour embarrassing. I am personally sometimes averse to the sort of impassioned, unselfconscious behaviour which Benjamin ridicules. I feel more comfortable with forms of political expression which, in Rosalind Gill's words, use irony "as a way of establishing a safe distance between oneself and particular sentiments or beliefs".⁶⁸ The earnest activists Benjamin mocks do sometimes cause me second-hand embarrassment. Social psychologists argue that this "vicarious embarrassment" occurs because, when someone else flouts the norms of a surrounding crowd, it can elicit our own "fear of social rejection".⁶⁹ As mentioned in Chapter Two, sincere displays of conviction and vulnerability flout the norms of sarcastic and ironic Internet culture.

However, unlike Benjamin, I recognise that both ironic and earnest forms of political action are required to remedy social problems. R. Jay Magill defends a posture of "ironic detachment" as conducive to positive change.⁷⁰ He contends that earnestness has been abused by political leaders (especially in the United States) and is now considered suspect by a cynical population. Heartfelt statements which turn out to have been made by hypocrites have left people averse to "calls to believe".⁷¹ Irony and sarcasm can puncture the hypocrisy of faux-idealists. Irony and sarcasm can help activists reach a population which "disbelieve[s] anything thrown at it directly".⁷² However, Magill himself concedes that ironists have difficulty championing any alternative way of life. They can only hint at "a vision of what counts as the good society" because further detail would be "cheesy".⁷³ The author David Foster Wallace argued that irony only serves a "negative function". It can "illuminate and explode hypocrisy", and serve as a "ground-clearing"

⁶⁸ Rosalind Gill, "Postfeminist media culture: Elements of a sensibility", *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 10 (2007): 159.

⁶⁹ Melissa Dahl, *Cringeworthy: A Theory of Awkwardness* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2018).

⁷⁰ R. Jay Magill, *Chic Ironic Bitterness* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2007), 230.

⁷¹ *Ibid*, 227, 230.

⁷² *Ibid*, 21, 27.

⁷³ Magill, *Chic Ironic Bitterness*, xiii, 233.

which critiques (or destroys) the status quo. However, articulating a better alternative requires a level of earnestness which can elicit “rolled eyes” and “nudged ribs”.⁷⁴

Internet-users enamoured with ironic detachment could use this lesson. While currently under-researched, the term “irony poisoning” has recently been popularised by social media users to describe the negative effects of their own aversion to sincerity.⁷⁵ One Reddit user summed up the phenomenon: “I can’t help but cringe at pretty much everything[,] ... this fucking sucks”. Other users reported similar experiences and counselled this user to escape the “fortress of ironic detachment” by spending less time online and engaging with family and community.⁷⁶ Earnest displays of political conviction should therefore not be considered flaws within feminist, anti-racist, and LGBTQ+ rights activism.

Moreover, despite his mockery, Benjamin’s own style is often extremely earnest. He admires the alt-right/-lite’s ironic provocateurs, but is rarely able to emulate them. Many of his videos are earnest, unironic diatribes. I discuss Benjamin’s sincere, incessant anger below. Additionally, a streak of unironic grandiosity runs through his videos. He makes straight-faced comparisons between Gamergaters and “Martin Luther nailing his reform against the door”, or Shakespeare’s *Henry V* denouncing traitors in his midst.⁷⁷ In a video about “fake geek girls” ruining comic book conventions, he compares himself to the Spartans at the Battle of Thermopylae.⁷⁸ He equates insults directed at himself by comedians on a BBC panel show with the “two minutes of hate” in George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.⁷⁹ He named one of his channels “The Symposium” (after one of Plato’s major texts) and uses it to upload rhapsodies about the “sanctity of canon” in *Star Wars*, or the political themes in the Nickelodeon cartoon *The Last Airbender*.⁸⁰ He uses the same grandiose style when speaking at conservative rallies. To the possible

⁷⁴ David Foster Wallace, “E Unibus Pluram: Television and US Fiction”, *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13 (1993): 194.

⁷⁵ Max Fisher and Amanda Taub, “Should We All Be Taking ‘Irony Poisoning’ More Seriously?”, *The New York Times*, August 23, 2018, https://static.nytimes.com/email-content/INT_4981.html

⁷⁶ “How to deal with irony poisoning??”, *Reddit*, accessed January 7, 2021, https://www.reddit.com/r/redscarepod/comments/dyt5si/how_to_deal_with_irony_poisoning/

⁷⁷ Sargon of Akkad, “This Week in Stupid - XL #GamerGate #NotYourShield Edition!”, Sargon of Akkad, “Why #GamerGate is so Important to Me”.

⁷⁸ Sargon of Akkad, “Go tell the Feminists, stranger passing by”.

⁷⁹ Sargon of Akkad, “Dear Jo Brand”, *YouTube*, 16:05, June 13, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=66Ej1KmxZZU>

⁸⁰ The Symposium, “The Sanctity of Canon”, *YouTube*, 36:23, April 2, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kG1DS2bfK2U>; The Symposium, “Fire Lord Azula”, *YouTube*, 9:30, May 10, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N0LzawtNl_o

bemusement of a raucous pro-Brexit crowd in 2019, he questioned whether the European Union was a “moral good” and quoted Oliver Cromwell to call Remainers “intolerably odious”.⁸¹ On the campaign trail for UKIP, he pondered the flaws in Labour’s “philosophical convictions” and “set of axioms”.⁸² As Gitlin noted in 1995, conservative critics of political correctness “humourlessly ... decry the humourless of others”.⁸³ Benjamin continues this tradition, displaying the earnestness he criticises in others.

Evil activists and anger

Despite claiming that angry feminist, anti-racist, and LGBTQ+ rights activists delegitimise their movements, Benjamin himself often becomes apoplectic with rage. He directs profane abuse at political opponents. He calls feminist Twitter users a “humourless bitch”, a “histrionic wench”, and a “self-centred whore”. He shouts: “You guys can go and fuck yourselves, right up the arse, and I will provide the fist”.⁸⁴ He elsewhere shouts about other feminist Twitter users: “Fuck these idiots, they are literally all fucking idiots, fuck them”.⁸⁵ In one video, he calls a feminist YouTuber a “fucking dumbass” and a “little fucking airhead” and tells her to shut her “annoying fucking face”.⁸⁶ He labels two BLM activists “entitled fucking ... cunts”.⁸⁷ He pauses halfway through reading an online feminist column to attack the author:

That is just the most ridiculous, stupid, retarded shit I have ever heard. ... [Y]ou’re a fucking moron. You are some sort of brainwashed half-wit ... Get that through your fucking moronic skull. I’m so angry about this.⁸⁸

⁸¹ Paul ‘Flakie’ Jones, “Sargon of Akkad’s Speech”, *YouTube*, 6:06, March 30, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=koqCyVGv-cg>

⁸² Sargon of Akkad, “Why does the Left Promote Mass Immigration?”, *YouTube*, 6:10, May 31, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aaPOieFHk1U>

⁸³ Gitlin, *The Twilight of Common Dreams*, 199.

⁸⁴ Sargon of Akkad, “I need feminism because some piglets are more equal than others”.

⁸⁵ Sargon of Akkad, “I need feminism because I have brain damage”, *YouTube*, 9:43, January 25, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RTPTQNZQkhE>

⁸⁶ Karl Benjamin for South West England MEP, “Carl Benjamin’s ‘Feminist System’ Defence of Mass Shooter Elliott Rodger (full video)”.

⁸⁷ Akkad Daily, “Left/Right Tribalism is Killing the Left”.

⁸⁸ Sargon of Akkad, “This Week in Stupid (24/11/2014)”, *YouTube*, 50:17, November 24, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JTUvUDEnn4I>

Such screaming routinely caused Benjamin's microphone to break up before he switched to better equipment.⁸⁹ These examples are taken from hundreds of such instances. Benjamin displays the anger he criticises in others.

Moreover, he sometimes attempts a principled defence of political anger. He responded in 2016 when Trevor Noah of *The Daily Show* described the Fox News pundit Tomi Lahren as "so angry". Benjamin attacked Noah's "tone policing" and defended Lahren as "strident and direct". He criticised Noah for insinuating that people "don't have any right to be so angry" about political correctness. They "can and ... should be angry".⁹⁰ Benjamin elsewhere admits that he enjoys making his own points "quite stridently", but insists that "[a]ggression in and of itself is not a bad thing, when it's appropriate".⁹¹ Benjamin may get "fired up pretty easily", but angry outbursts are a healthy "outlet to stress".⁹² His own anger, and that of ideological allies, is righteous and healthy.

Despite his criticism of sanctimonious social movement activists, Benjamin's anger is clearly linked a belief that opponents are immoral people. His concessions that feminist, anti-racist, and LGBTQ+ rights activists might be "well-meaning people" are so rare as to be jarring.⁹³ Much more often, he indulges in grandiose flourishes about the evil of opponents. Anti-racist activists protesting structural racism are "morally reprehensible" and in possession of "an evil perspective".⁹⁴ Feminist academics advocating for more diversity in video games are "the poisoned spring from whence ... evil flows".⁹⁵ In 2019, when the razor company Gillette released a commercial criticising "toxic masculinity", Benjamin produced three videos in response.⁹⁶ He called the commercial "an evil thing to do" and informed its creator that "what you're doing is a form of evil". The commercial would help erode gender roles, threaten the institution of marriage, lower birth rates, and open the door to mass immigration and social disintegration. Justifications for the

⁸⁹ Sargon of Akkad, "This Week in Stupid (24/11/2014); Sargon of Akkad, "This Week in Stupid (20/07/2014)"; Sargon of Akkad, "Fuck the King!".

⁹⁰ Sargon of Akkad, "Tomi Lahren Destroys Trevor Noah Over #BlackLivesMatter".

⁹¹ Karl Benjamin for South West England MEP, "Carl Benjamin's 'Feminist System' Defence of Mass Shooter Elliott Rodger (full video)".

⁹² Sargon of Akkad, "This Week in Stupid - XL #GamerGate #NotYourShield Edition! (31/08/2014)".

⁹³ Sargon of Akkad, "Liberal Ideas #2 - Neo-Progressive Activists".

⁹⁴ Akkad Daily, "'Ash Sarkar' Trends on Twitter", *YouTube*, 17:58, March 9, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SS6dWczijj8>

⁹⁵ Sargon of Akkad, "How DiGRA Caused the End of Gamers, #Gamergate and #NotYourShield".

⁹⁶ Sargon of Akkad, "The Best Men Can Be: An Autopsy", *YouTube*, 15:40, January 18, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zPYotczyopU>; The Thinkery, "The Author of the Gillette Ads Speaks Pt 2", *YouTube*, 15:35, June 2, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Ve7Gztpy4g>; The Thinkery, "The Author of the Gillette Ads Speaks".

commercial were “the sort of thing Goebbels would have said”.⁹⁷ Benjamin judges his own opponents as immoral people.

Benjamin’s disapproval of angry social movement activists is not a reaction to overly individualistic interpretations of inequality. He portrays critiques of oppression as mean-spirited criticism of individuals, even when activists are making structural points. He criticises a podcast in which a socialist commentator critiques racism in Britain. She defines racism as a “technology of governance” which was “invented at a particular point in history”. She states that racism in modern Britain works through “institutions” which produce “racialised outcomes”. She is explicitly not talking about “interpersonal” racism. Benjamin first protests that she is not using “standard English definitions” of racism. He substitutes one of Merriam-Webster’s definitions, in which “racism” constitutes a belief in the “inherent superiority of a particular race”. Benjamin then complains that – because she calls Britain racist – this commentator believes that “most people hold and act upon racist beliefs”. He is offended that she would throw around “one of the most damning accusations that can be levelled against a person in British society”.⁹⁸ To be so offended, Benjamin first had to substitute her structural definition of racism for a different one. Elsewhere, he reacts to the same woman when she characterises racism as a system in which white Britons “benefit somehow from their whiteness”. She goes out of her way to make her point with “love and all kindness” to white people. Benjamin still protests that she is offensively claiming that “all white people are racist”.⁹⁹ Even responding to socialists who describe racism as a systemic correlate of capitalism, Benjamin manages to interpret critiques of inequality as nasty personal criticism. He chooses to be personally offended by critiques of structural problems.

Benjamin’s claim to consider social movement activists uncool because they are too earnest, angry, and judgemental is not justified. He exhibits these characteristics himself and approves of them in ideological allies. I argue that this element of his discourse instead functions as a defence of traditional ideals of gender. The biggest predictor of whether Benjamin deems someone cool or uncool is their attitude towards masculinity and femininity.

⁹⁷ The Thinkery, “The Author of the Gillette Ads Speaks”.

⁹⁸ Akkad Daily, “What Is Woke Culture”.

⁹⁹ Akkad Daily, “‘Ash Sarkar’ Trends on Twitter”.

Effeminate men and masculine women

Hegemonic masculinity

Benjamin characterises feminist, anti-racist, and LGBTQ+ rights activism as feminine activities and paints men who participate in them as effeminate. The concept of hegemonic masculinity helps to explain what is happening when Benjamin deems certain men uncool. Several Australian research groups developed this concept in the 1980s.¹⁰⁰ It is most associated with the sociologist R.W. Connell. The concept builds upon the earlier “social role” theory of sex difference. Social role theorists maintained that stereotypes about male and female behaviour and characteristics – while often accurate – are not attributable to inherent differences between the sexes. Rather, social role theorists maintained that observable differences stem from society’s distribution of men and women into distinct social roles. People then develop the characteristics required for success in the roles assigned to them.¹⁰¹ Theorists of hegemonic masculinity accepted the “sound points” of this literature, but noted that it tended to posit one “homogenised” role for each gender. Moreover, it had little to say about power relations between men and women – that is, the fact that roles and attendant characteristics associated with men are more valued and rewarded than those associated with women.¹⁰²

Hegemonic masculinity theorists account for gender roles and stereotypes differently. They stress that multiple “masculinities” exist within one society. These versions of masculinity exist in a hierarchy, which serves to legitimise and perpetuate the subordination of women by men. “Hegemonic masculinity” refers to a society’s ideal of manhood. It is a set of characteristics and practices which constitute that society’s most honoured way of being a “real man”. This ideal is “hegemonic” in the sense developed by Antonio Gramsci; it is a cultural project which attempts to garner subordinate people’s consent for the leading position enjoyed by another group in social life.¹⁰³ Hegemony is not attained through “brute power”, but through “religious doctrine and practice, mass

¹⁰⁰ R.W. Connell and James Messerschmidt, “Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept”, *Gender & Society* 19 (2005): 830-831.

¹⁰¹ Alice H. Eagly, Wendy Wood, and Amanda B. Diekmann, “Social Role Theory of Sex Differences and Similarities: A Current Appraisal”, in *The Developmental Social Psychology of Gender*, ed. Thomas Eckes and Hanns Martin Trautner (Mahwah: Psychology Press, 2000).

¹⁰² R.W. Connell, *Gender and Power* (Cambridge: Polity, 1987), 184; Connell and Messerschmidt, “Hegemonic Masculinity”, 831.

¹⁰³ R.W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Sydney: Allan & Unwin, 2005), 76-79.

media content, wage structures, the design of housing, welfare/taxation policies, and so forth”.¹⁰⁴ The dissemination of a “culturally exalted” ideal of manhood serves to persuade both men and women that patriarchy is natural and legitimate.¹⁰⁵

The traits and behaviours which constitute hegemonic masculinity are not fixed.¹⁰⁶ Many authors agree, however, that the “ideal man” in industrialised Western countries is stoic and unemotional, rational and intelligent, ambitious and competitive, strong and athletic, brave, independent, assertive, and successful in his sexual relationships with women.¹⁰⁷ To Connell, the “most important feature of contemporary hegemonic masculinity is that it is heterosexual, being closely connected to the institution of marriage”.¹⁰⁸ The ideal man provides for his wife and children. Connell and James Messerschmidt also remind later scholars that society’s ideal of masculinity is positive, and not “an assemblage of toxic traits” such as violence or aggression.¹⁰⁹ These characteristics might create “domination”, but “would hardly constitute hegemony”.¹¹⁰

Only a tiny proportion of men actually embody this ideal. However, most men still receive what Connell calls the “patriarchal dividend” of hegemonic masculinity.¹¹¹ They benefit from positive stereotypes about men, and the implication that, whatever their own shortcomings, patriarchy is natural. Most men are “complicit” with the hegemonic masculinity. They fail to embody it, but still accept the validity of the ideal. Connell lists, for instance, men who avoid the dangers of contact sport while revering professional footballers on television as “real men”.¹¹² Few men resemble Sylvester Stallone, but “many collaborate in sustaining those images”.¹¹³ Their complicity legitimises the hegemonic ideal and upholds the current gender order.

Hegemonic masculinity also creates “subordinate masculinities”.¹¹⁴ Men who fail to embody the ideal threaten to expose positive stereotypes about men as false, and therefore

¹⁰⁴ Connell, *Gender and Power*, 184.

¹⁰⁵ Connell, *Masculinities*, 77.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid*, 76.

¹⁰⁷ Ami Lynch, “Hegemonic Masculinity”, in *Encyclopedia of Gender and Society*, ed. Jodi O’Brien (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2009), 412-413; Daniel Chandler and Rod Munday, *A Dictionary of Media and Communication* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Linda L. Lindsey, *Gender Roles: A Sociological Perspective* (Boston: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2011), 246-250.

¹⁰⁸ Connell, *Gender and Power*, 186.

¹⁰⁹ Connell and Messerschmidt, “Hegemonic Masculinity”, 854.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid*, 841.

¹¹¹ Connell, *Masculinities*, 79.

¹¹² *Ibid*, 79, 114.

¹¹³ Connell, *Gender and Power*, 185.

¹¹⁴ Connell, *Masculinities*, 79.

undermine patriarchal rule. Men who display their emotions challenge the ability of men as a whole to claim authority on the grounds of innate rationality. Gay men challenge the ability of men as a whole to claim authority as providers for wives and children.¹¹⁵ Men who are better able to approximate hegemonic masculinity are incentivised to punish deviant men, who risk giving the game away. Such men cannot be accepted or credited as “real men” – this would delegitimise men’s dominant position over women. Instead, they are labelled “effeminate” and subordinated, in order to preserve the integrity of the hegemonic ideal.¹¹⁶ Most men develop strategies to avoid this fate. They engage in a “constant performance” to approximate the ideal.¹¹⁷ This might involve emphasising the particular aspects of hegemonic masculinity which they are able to embody, or signalling their approval for the ideal by accessing the experience of “manlier” men through fantasy.¹¹⁸

Benjamin is heavily invested in this ideal of manliness. As mentioned in Chapter Four, he champions assertiveness, competitiveness, and rationality as masculine attributes. As mentioned in his advice to incels, he equates masculinity with physical strength. Muscular men sit “right at the top of the totem pole” – viewers should therefore lift weights and eat protein.¹¹⁹ Benjamin values unemotionality and believes that “[m]asculinity is about control over your emotions”.¹²⁰ He states that “it’s not masculine to cry” and that “crying is a sign of weakness”: “You’re not a girl, ... show some self-control”.¹²¹ He insists that men should provide for their children and wives. He warns viewers that “[i]f you allow yourself to become a ‘house husband’ it will be the end of your marriage”. He believes that women want a “provider”, and will lose sexual interest in a stay-at-home father. Such men enter a “depressing spiral” because they are “not fulfilling the masculine role”.¹²² He insists that couples “with traditional gender roles and

¹¹⁵ Lynch, “Hegemonic Masculinity”; Connell and Messerschmidt, “Hegemonic Masculinity”, 831-832.

¹¹⁶ Connell, *Masculinities*, 78-79.

¹¹⁷ Lynch, *Hegemonic Masculinity*.

¹¹⁸ Lynch, *Hegemonic Masculinity*.

¹¹⁹ Akkad Daily, “Women Don’t Sleep With Soyboys”, *YouTube*, 10:01, January 13, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gqj3jT1iYFY>; Akkad Daily, “Women Don’t Want a Stay-At-Home Husband”, *YouTube*, 11:48, January 26, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VpEFJmb0p-I>

¹²⁰ Karl Benjamin for South West England MEP, “Carl Benjamin’s ‘Feminist System’ Defence of Mass Shooter Elliott Rodger (full video)”.

¹²¹ Sargon of Akkad, “This Week in Stupid (24/11/2014); The Podcast of the Lotus Eaters, “The SJW Destruction of Beauty”, *YouTube*, 9:24, December 4, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HnFZqlnZ0G0>

¹²² Akkad Daily, “Women Don’t Want a Stay-At-Home Husband”.

the man as bread-winner” are happier and have more sex.¹²³ When “men take on female roles”, women “do not see them as men”.¹²⁴

The avatars Benjamin chooses to represent himself on-screen make his conception of the masculine ideal especially obvious. His fans submit artworks, which then appear in many videos while he speaks.¹²⁵ Most of these images depict the Mesopotamian emperor Sargon of Akkad. Benjamin himself is below average height, has a round face, and is overweight. However, many of his chosen illustrations give Sargon the towering physique of a bodybuilder and stereotypically masculine “chiselled” features. Many give Sargon an imperious expression – Benjamin “adore[s]” an “Ozymandian sneer of cold command”.¹²⁶ Some illustrations anachronistically give Sargon modern trappings of manliness, such as a cigar or whiskey tumbler. Many show him dispensing wisdom and judgement from his throne, or looking out over his vast domain. When he uses such pictures to represent himself, Benjamin demonstrates his belief in traditional conceptions of masculinity and his eagerness to be viewed as their embodiment.

¹²³ Akkad Daily, “Women Don’t Sleep With Soyboys”.

¹²⁴ Sargon of Akkad, “I need feminism because some piglets are more equal than others”.

¹²⁵ Sargon of Akkad, “Unsafe Speech on Ora.tv Art Competition”, *YouTube*, 10:24, April 16, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VJxaaiU0a6M>

¹²⁶ Sargon of Akkad, “Sargon Art Competition Winners”, *YouTube*, 12:29, June 9, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OhUracyHdJ4>

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Figure 2. Hypermasculine fan artworks which Benjamin uses to represent himself.
Sargon of Akkad, "Art Competition Winners"; Sargon of Akkad, "The Natural Enemies of
YouTube", *YouTube*, 31:31, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hz1dfDTH6Dk>

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Figure 2 cont.

Unmanly activists

Accusations from Benjamin that male feminist, anti-racist, or LGBTQ+ rights activists are uncool are very often accusations that they fail to embody or honour hegemonic masculinity. When he mocks footage of American university students at a 2016 anti-Trump demonstration, he focuses on the skinny bodies of two male participants. This “pussy” and “little twerp” look ridiculous next to Trump supporters, who are “physically their betters”. Benjamin uses nicknames for these two protestors which were coined by other members of the alt-right/-lite: “AIDS Skrillex” implies that one has the emaciated body of an AIDS patient, while “Carl the Cuck” implies that the other is destined to be cuckolded by a more masculine man.¹²⁷ He elsewhere highlights a photograph of a man wearing eyeliner at another demonstration.¹²⁸ When he mocks footage of a 2016 anti-Brexit demonstration as “the cringiest thing in the world”, Benjamin highlights the participation of the comedian Eddie Izzard, who wore lipstick and a pink beret. Benjamin highlights Izzard as an effeminate man supposedly typical of Remainers. He also mocked the “doughy” bodies of other male demonstrators.¹²⁹ In 2020, he laughed at participants in the George Floyd protests as “very sensitive” because they were not stoic enough when shot with rubber bullets. Benjamin called these men “soy boys”.¹³⁰ This term references a belief that consuming soy products feminises men. Paul Joseph Watson popularised this idea in 2017 when he contended that phytoestrogen in soy beans “reduces testosterone and reduces male sperm count” and produces “effeminate-acting straight guys” with small penises and breast tissue.¹³¹ According to an endocrinologist consulted by the *Guardian*, this falsehood is based on “complete misunderstanding of how hormones work”.¹³² Benjamin nevertheless refers to male opponents as “little soy boys” to imply that they are effeminate. He maintains that as “soy-soaked” men become “weaker and weaker in their own physical stature” and lose the ability to get erections, they also “become far more left-wing”.¹³³

¹²⁷ Sargon of Akkad, “Social Justice Losers”.

¹²⁸ Sargon of Akkad, “Liberal Ideas #2 - Neo-Progressive Activists”.

¹²⁹ Sargon of Akkad, “This Week in Stupid (04/09/2016)”.

¹³⁰ Akkad Daily, “McRevolution”.

¹³¹ Paul Joseph Watson, “The Truth About Soy Boys”, *YouTube*, 8:07, November 16, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FTSvLKY7HEk>

¹³² Sam Wolfson, “Looking for Mr T: the politicisation of testosterone”, *The Guardian*, 28 July, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/global/2019/jul/28/looking-for-mr-t-the-politicisation-of-testosterone-and-toxic-masculinity>

¹³³ Akkad Daily, “Women Don’t Sleep With Soyboys”.

Benjamin attacks male feminists, in particular, for their unmanliness. They “aren’t very good at being men, they’re effeminate, they’re very camp, they’re not masculine”. They are “soft types who are afraid of asserting themselves”.¹³⁴ Benjamin laughs that they cannot grow beards.¹³⁵ He insists that their wives will always cheat on them.¹³⁶ He calls male feminist Twitter users a “eunuch” and a “dickless wonder”.¹³⁷ He laughs at male feminist academics who fail to seem sufficiently masculine in their researcher profile pictures or TED Talks.¹³⁸ He insists that a male feminist on television has small testicles, and questions whether he should even call himself a man.¹³⁹

This attack is often homo- and transphobic. Connell notes that stereotypes about gay men within patriarchal ideology are “the repository of whatever is symbolically expelled from hegemonic masculinity”.¹⁴⁰ When he does not want to credit them as real men, Benjamin aligns opponents with homosexuality. The nickname “AIDS Skrillex” intimates that this protestor is gay. Alex Green explains that the name emerged amongst 4chan users who joked about catching HIV if they assaulted “gay Skrillex”.¹⁴¹ Elsewhere, Benjamin mocks the “faggy music” used by in a video by a male feminist.¹⁴² He calls Obama a “giant faggot” for crying during his State of the Union address.¹⁴³ In multiple videos, he highlights one male feminist who admits to enjoying his girlfriend’s strap-on dildo. Benjamin opines that “your girlfriend pinning you down to the bed and fucking your arsehole is not manly”.¹⁴⁴ He associates social movement activism with sodomy and therefore homosexuality. Benjamin also laughs at trans women as though they represent the extreme in progressive men’s effeminacy. He focuses on trans women who do not “pass” as cisgender. Despite Benjamin’s claim to be “pretty permissive” about gender identity, he only uses trans women’s preferred pronouns in the case of post-operative

¹³⁴ Sargon of Akkad, “Why Do People Hate #Feminism? #7 - Male Feminists”.

¹³⁵ PowerfulJRE, “Joe Rogan Experience #979 - Sargon of Akkad”.

¹³⁶ Sargon of Akkad, “Why Do People Hate #Feminism? #7 - Male Feminists”.

¹³⁷ Sargon of Akkad, “I need feminism because some piglets are more equal than others”.

¹³⁸ Sargon of Akkad, “Rambling About: Feminist Masculinity”.

¹³⁹ Sargon of Akkad, “Regressives Tonight”.

¹⁴⁰ Connell, *Masculinities*, 78.

¹⁴¹ Alex Green, “Cucks, Fags and Useful Idiots: The Othering of Dissenting White Masculinities Online”, in *Online Othering: Exploring Digital Violence and Discrimination on the Web*, ed. Karen Lumsden and Emily Harmer (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 69, 80.

¹⁴² Sargon of Akkad, “Regressives Tonight”.

¹⁴³ Sargon of Akkad, “Rambling About: Feminist Masculinity”.

¹⁴⁴ Sargon of Akkad, “Why Do People Hate #Feminism? #7 - Male Feminists”; Sargon of Akkad, “I need feminism because I have brain damage”.

women who “you couldn’t tell” are transgender.¹⁴⁵ Otherwise, he ridicules activist trans women as “a six-foot-two burly guy who wants to dress as a woman” or “a fat man in a wig and a dress”.¹⁴⁶ He wields trans women to show how far contemptible progressive men have strayed from hegemonic masculinity.

Benjamin also ridicules the supposed effeminacy of men who do not deviate from normative masculinity in any obvious way. He laughs at the unmanliness of YouTubers, academics, Twitter users, and demonstrators whose appearance and comportment are not dissimilar from that of himself or his collaborators. These instances demonstrate the usefulness to patriarchy of – in Connell’s words – “models of masculinity which are quite specifically fantasy figures”.¹⁴⁷ Faced with almost any male opponent, Benjamin is able to portray him as either too fat or too thin, too sexually inexperienced or too hen-pecked, too high-pitched, too bald, or too bespectacled to be a “real man”. In one instance, Benjamin flashes up a collage of men and dismisses them as “betas” because they apparently smile in an effeminate way.¹⁴⁸ Because it is almost impossible to embody all aspects of the hegemonic ideal, virtually any man who withdraws his support for women’s subordination is vulnerable to accusations of effeminacy. Benjamin effectively acknowledges this when he mocks one male feminist, who critiques prevailing constructions of masculinity. Despite this feminist’s “everyman” appearance, Benjamin ridicules his “inability to live up to” masculine standards. Benjamin then clarifies that this man does not “even need to do anything” to be manlier, other than “stop being such a cuck”.¹⁴⁹ As Benjamin effectively acknowledges, he marginalises this man as effeminate for no other reason than that he criticises the hegemonic ideal, rather than honours it.

Benjamin’s characterisation of male social movement activists as uncool very often punishes them for deviance from gender norms. Men, like Benjamin, who are complicit with hegemonic masculinity are incentivised to subordinate others who fail to embody or value the ideal, because they risk de-legitimising men’s leading position in social life.

¹⁴⁵ Sargon of Akkad, “The Nadir of Western Civilization”, *YouTube*, 11:51, December 12, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0e2KJ7tpQ88>

¹⁴⁶ Sargon of Akkad, “The Nadir of Western Civilization”; Sargon of Akkad, “Ricky Gervais Shows Everyone How to Deal with SJWs”, *YouTube*, 12:19, November 16, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BCv5lDIP-Hw>

¹⁴⁷ Connell, *Gender and Power*, 184.

¹⁴⁸ Akkad Daily, “Women Don’t Sleep With Soyboys”.

¹⁴⁹ Sargon of Akkad, “Regressives Tonight”.

Emphasised femininity

Benjamin deems women in social movements uncool when they deviate from a certain ideal of womanhood. Many feminist scholars have described the “ideal woman” in modern Western societies. For their part, hegemonic masculinity theorists contend that the behaviours and characteristics which constitute our ideal of femininity are those which are excised from our ideal of masculinity. Our conception of what “real” women are like cedes to men all of the attributes and attendant privileges claimed in the hegemonic ideal of masculinity. The feminine ideal is “oriented to accommodating the interests and desires of men”.¹⁵⁰ To naturalise male dominance, it emphasises the devalued counterparts of supposed male virtues. Women are fragile rather than strong, sociable rather than technically competent, content with “the private realm of the home and the bedroom” rather than ambitious for work and independence.¹⁵¹ Moreover, Connell writes that our feminine ideal is organised around “sexual receptivity” in youth to facilitate the heterosexual prowess of men, and around motherhood in later life to facilitate men’s role as breadwinners and patriarchs.¹⁵² Hegemonic masculinity theorists refer to this ideal as “emphasised femininity”. Connell chose this term to recognise the fact that this role is “performed” by women for the benefit of men.¹⁵³ Because it is “focused on compliance to patriarchy”, this form of femininity is “given most cultural and ideological support” in Western societies.¹⁵⁴ As discussed below, many other feminist scholars have analysed specific behaviours expected of women in patriarchal societies, as well as the “uneasiness, confusion, fear, and hostility” triggered by women who transgress them.¹⁵⁵

Benjamin is invested in this conception of femininity. As mentioned in chapters Four and Five, he believes that women are predisposed to childrearing and low-stress careers in “nurturing” fields, and ill-suited for STEM jobs or competitive leadership positions. Benjamin states that, whatever their feminist convictions, all women eventually want to “fall back into the traditional female role”. A woman wants to find a man to “provide”

¹⁵⁰ Connell, *Gender and Power*, 183.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid*, 187.

¹⁵² *Ibid*.

¹⁵³ *Ibid*, 188.

¹⁵⁴ Connell and Messerschmidt, “Hegemonic Masculinity”; 848; Connell, *Gender and Power*, 187.

¹⁵⁵ Alisha Huntoon, “Gender Stereotypes”, in *Encyclopedia of Gender and Society*, ed. Jodi O’Brien (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2009), 376.

for her, so that she can “build a nest for her children”.¹⁵⁶ “[B]eing a mother and caring a child to term” is “the very purpose and the apex point of being a woman”.¹⁵⁷ Because “women have expected resources from men since the dawn of time”, both parties are happiest when a man secures “sexual monopoly over the woman’s reproductive processes” by providing for her.¹⁵⁸ Benjamin insists that “it’s okay to be a tradwife”.¹⁵⁹ The term “tradwife” (i.e. “traditional wife”) comes from the white nationalist alt-right. Kirsty Campion explains that it refers to the alt-right’s “desired gendered identity” for women. Tradwives are celebrated as “archetypes of a supposedly endangered or lost form of womanhood”.¹⁶⁰ Kelly also notes the proliferation of social media accounts on which young tradwives rhapsodise about staying at home, obeying their husbands, and raising lots of (white) children. They adopt “hyperfeminine aesthetics” and emulate the “domestic bliss” depicted in 1950s advertisements showing happy white families.¹⁶¹ Benjamin insists that this term’s origins within white nationalism are irrelevant; it still denotes a “wholesome” lifestyle and “a nice dream”.¹⁶²

Unwomanly activists

Benjamin ridicules women who do not embody or honour this ideal. He laughs at younger social movement activists who fail to prioritise sexual attractiveness to men. He wants them to meet Western feminine beauty standards, which contribute to women’s oppression. Conceptions of the ideal female body change over time and across cultures.¹⁶³ However, as Susan Bordo explains, these changing ideals constitute “an amazingly durable and flexible strategy of social control”.¹⁶⁴ Bordo notes that “culture enjoins the aid of our bodies in the reproduction of gender”; beauty ideals exaggerate the physical

¹⁵⁶ Akkad Daily, “Women Don’t Want a Stay-At-Home Husband”.

¹⁵⁷ Akkad Daily, “Transgender Science vs Transgender Ideology”, *YouTube*, 12:03, October 29, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yugbx3yjrww>

¹⁵⁸ Akkad Daily, “Simping”, *YouTube*, 9:37, May 11, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PdQtdgjHX30>

¹⁵⁹ Akkad Daily, “It’s Okay to be a #Tradwife”.

¹⁶⁰ Kristy Campion, “Women in the Extreme and Radical Right: Forms of Participation and Their Implications”, *Social Sciences* 9 (2020): 150.

¹⁶¹ Annie Kelly, “The Housewives of White Supremacy”, *The New York Times*, June 1, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/01/opinion/sunday/tradwives-women-alt-right.html>

¹⁶² Akkad Daily, “It’s Okay to be a #Tradwife”.

¹⁶³ Sentilles and Callahan, “Beauty over the Centuries – Female”, 43.

¹⁶⁴ Susan Bordo, “The Body and the Reproduction of Femininity”, in *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory*, ed. Katie Conboy, Nadia Medina, and Sarah Stanbury (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 91.

difference between women and men. Women are encouraged to wear makeup, remove body hair, avoid muscularity, or artificially create “hourglass” figures through corsets, modern “shaper” garments, or cosmetic surgery.¹⁶⁵ Exaggerating the physical difference between the sexes makes the existence of separate male and female roles seem more natural.¹⁶⁶ Many ideals of beauty, such as a face which shows no signs of wear or the combination of large breasts and a thin waist, are unattainable for most women. Body dissatisfaction among women is therefore so common as to seem normative.¹⁶⁷ Bordo contends that the pursuit of elusive ideals drains women’s energy. Daily beauty routines give women “the conviction of lack, of insufficiency, of never being good enough”.¹⁶⁸ She laments the fact that criticism of beauty standards has been downplayed within feminism since the 1960s and 1970s.¹⁶⁹ Some more recent feminists characterise traditional beauty practices as empowering.¹⁷⁰ Sheila Jeffreys also argues against the practice, which is only possible because Western “beauty work”, such as wearing makeup or sexualised clothing, is so normalised in the eyes of Western feminists, who could easily recognise less familiar customs (such as foot binding) as “harmful cultural practices” performed for the benefit of men.¹⁷¹

Benjamin presents a certain type of supposedly unattractive woman as typical of participants in movement activism. Social justice warriors are “a rather homogenous group”.¹⁷² The archetypal female activist is overweight, white, wears glasses, and has short hair which is dyed an artificial colour. Benjamin sometimes adds untamed body hair to this picture. He makes use of a handful of stock characters to reinforce this image. Binx, the Canadian activist who shouted at MRAs in 2013, is his favourite stand-in for all feminists. Binx has glasses, short hair which is dyed red. Mocking her weight, Benjamin refers to Binx as “Big Red” (a nickname coined by other anti-feminists online).¹⁷³ Ging notes that Binx had become “ubiquitous in anti-feminist memes” by

¹⁶⁵ Ibid, 105.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid, 103.

¹⁶⁷ Murnen and Seabrook, “Feminist Perspectives on Body Image and Physical Appearance”, 440, 442-443.

¹⁶⁸ Bordo, “The Body and the Reproduction of Femininity”, 91.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid, 104.

¹⁷⁰ Murnen and Seabrook, “Feminist Perspectives on Body Image and Physical Appearance”, 439.

¹⁷¹ Sheila Jeffreys, *Beauty and Misogyny: Harmful Cultural Practices in the West* (London: Routledge, 2005), 1-3.

¹⁷² Sargon of Akkad, “Liberal Ideas #2 - Neo-Progressive Activists”.

¹⁷³ Sargon of Akkad, “Why Do People Hate Feminism? #12 - Feminist Fundamentalists”.

2019, and serves as one of several popular “monstrous archetypes of feminists”.¹⁷⁴ Benjamin uses decontextualised images of Binx to represent feminists in general. He also uses literal caricatures of Binx to the same end (one of which he commissioned from an artist).¹⁷⁵ Benjamin highlights other women who share some of these characteristics. He uses decontextualised images of a participant at a 2016 anti-Trump demonstration (who has short hair and glasses) in the same way.¹⁷⁶ When sharing footage of a 2019 demonstration in London, Benjamin isolates several seconds featuring an overweight woman with short dyed hair, and pauses on an unflattering close-up of her face.¹⁷⁷ While delivering another denunciation of “social justice warriors” in general, he flashes up decontextualised images as visual accompaniment, and chooses many pictures of women with short hair and glasses. Many are rank-and-file protest attendees, picked out of crowds thanks to their appearance.¹⁷⁸ Elsewhere, Benjamin jokes that glasses and short, coloured hair act “as the Western woman’s version of a burqa”. He states: “If you want to drive men away, dress like this”.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁴ Debbie Ging, “Bros v. Hos: Postfeminism, Anti-feminism and the Toxic Turn in Digital Gender Politics”, in *Gender Hate Online: Understanding the New Anti-Feminism*, ed. Debbie Ging and Eugenia Siapera (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 55.

¹⁷⁵ Sargon of Akkad, “Feminists Love Islamists”, *YouTube*, 2:02, January 9, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ecJUqhm2g08>; Sargon of Akkad, “Diversity in Space”, *YouTube*, 20:29, September 16, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tOG3exyb_aY

¹⁷⁶ Akkad Daily, “The Deplatformings Will Continue Until Morale Improves”.

¹⁷⁷ Sargon of Akkad, “Dear Jo Brand”.

¹⁷⁸ Sargon of Akkad, “Liberal Ideas #2 - Neo-Progressive Activists”.

¹⁷⁹ Akkad Daily, “Captain Marvel 2 Looks Lit”.

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Figure 3. Images and caricatures of Binx which Benjamin uses as stand-ins for all feminists. Akkad Daily, "Women Don't Sleep With Soyboys"; Sargon of Akkad, "Feminists Love Islamists"; Sargon of Akkad, "Diversity in Space".

He further complains that feminist, anti-racist, and LGBTQ+ movements make formerly attractive women unattractive. Benjamin scrolls through “before and after” photographs of young women who were raised in conservative families and later became involved in progressive activism, which apparently “robbed them of their beauty”. Pretty girls that “you’d definitely have wanted to date” now have glasses and short hair.¹⁸⁰ Benjamin is upset that social movements not only contain women who fail to be sexually attractive to men like himself, but decrease the stock of such women in the world.

This narrative is also homo- and transphobic. He includes “before and after” photographs of “out” lesbians, and asks “how is it an improvement” that girls that “I would like to go on a date with” now have short hair and masculine clothes.¹⁸¹ He makes similar complaints about transgender men. A “very feminine, ... attractive person” becomes a “loser” upon transitioning.¹⁸² Benjamin looks at “before and after” photographs, and complains that attractive young women who “would have been a girl that you have a crush on” have “mutilated” their bodies and now look “hideous”.¹⁸³ He sneers at lesbians and trans men because they have failed to remain sexually attractive to heterosexual men.

In keeping with his mockery of earnestness and anger, Benjamin intimates that women in social movements appear especially freakish when making impassioned points. He combs over an interview of Binx, and instructs viewers to observe her “alarmed and exasperated” expressions, or to “how incensed and excitable she becomes”. Benjamin plays “pop psychologist” and judges her expressions symptomatic of mental illness.¹⁸⁴ His preferred image of the aforementioned anti-Trump demonstrator is a single misleading frame in which she appears wide-eyed and aggressive, taken from a video in which she talks calmly with a reporter.¹⁸⁵ Benjamin emulates the tactics of turn-of-the-century tabloid journalists who (as Amy Erdman Farrell explains) campaigned against women’s suffrage by claiming that photographs “taken close-up and from odd angles” showed the various psychopathologies of suffragists.¹⁸⁶ His emphasis

¹⁸⁰ The Podcast of the Lotus Eaters, “The SJW Destruction of Beauty”.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² Lotuseaters Dot Com, “The Riddle of Mr. Elliot Page”, *YouTube*, 16:53, December 4, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QLsmOkq4gvU>; The Podcast of the Lotus Eaters, “Are Celebrities Okay?”, *YouTube*, 15:41, March 20, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vQVmuVJ9-Q0>

¹⁸³ The Podcast of the Lotus Eaters, “The SJW Destruction of Beauty”.

¹⁸⁴ Sargon of Akkad, “Why Do People Hate Feminism? #12 - Feminist Fundamentalists”.

¹⁸⁵ Sam, “Ficki Fiona - Triggered Liberal Video”, *YouTube*, 0:48, December 29, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tzlWtzn6is4>

¹⁸⁶ Amy Erdman Farrell, *Fat Shame: Stigma and the Fat Body in American Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 91.

on these images ridicules women for displays of emotion which transgress the expectation that women should be reserved and demure. Feminist authors often note this double standard when women enter politics. Bordo notes that women who “step outside the boundaries of appropriately contained feminine behaviour ... are likely to be perceived as unstable, shrill, overly aggressive, or overly emotional”.¹⁸⁷ Johnson agrees that female politicians walk a “tightrope of gender expectations”, and are punished for displays of emotion which would be desirable signs of strength and toughness in men.¹⁸⁸ When he presents images of angry-looking women as especially unattractive, Benjamin punishes women for deviance from emphasised femininity.

Benjamin’s contempt for fat women makes his conflation of “coolness” and sexual attractiveness obvious. Joan Chrisler argues that fat women in Western societies are condemned as more deviant from aesthetic ideals than fat men. The muscle-bound masculine ideal is larger and heavier than the average man – therefore, fat men can be interpreted as strong and manly. However, because the feminine ideal is smaller than the average woman, even marginally overweight women are considered “too fat”.¹⁸⁹ Chrisler also highlights feminist theories which contend that self-control and constraint of desire are valued feminine traits in Western culture. Fat women are considered “bad” women because they fail to control their appetites.¹⁹⁰ Farrell agrees that “women continue to bear the particular brunt of our culture’s disgust with fatness”.¹⁹¹ Compared to men, North American women suffer disproportionately from weight discrimination in employment, education, dating, and healthcare.¹⁹²

Benjamin intimates that fat women are uncool simply for existing. His criticism of the body positivity movement is an expression of disgust towards fat women. He responds to one fat activist’s Ted Talk by calling her a “landwhale” and joking that fat women’s value lies in their “ambergris”. He judges her “cringeworthy” because he dislikes the way her arms move when she gesticulates.¹⁹³ Benjamin laughs at the “fat chicks” who present

¹⁸⁷ Susan Bordo, *The Destruction of Hillary Clinton* (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2017), 37.

¹⁸⁸ Carol Johnson, “From Obama to Abbott: Gender Identity and the Politics of Emotion”, *Australian Feminist Studies* 28 (2013): 14, 16.

¹⁸⁹ Joan C. Chrisler, ““Why Can’t You Control Yourself?” Fat Should Be a Feminist Issue”, *Sex Roles* 66 (2012): 610-611.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid*, 612.

¹⁹¹ Farrell, *Fat Shame*, 19.

¹⁹² Janna L. Fikkan and Esther D. Rothblum, “Is Fat a Feminist Issue? Exploring the Gendered Nature of Weight Bias”, *Sex Roles* 66 (2012): 587.

¹⁹³ Sargon of Akkad, “TEDx: the Beluga Chronicles”.

a documentary about representations of overweight people in pop culture, and tries to undercut their message by flashing up “disgusting” images of obese women in revealing outfits. He insists that their “monstrous” bodies come from lack of “self-control”.¹⁹⁴ Benjamin sometimes tries to cheer up viewers by including unrelated mockery of fat women at the end of gloomy videos. He concludes one video with footage of “the world’s fattest pole dancer”.¹⁹⁵ Elsewhere, he chuckles “let’s end with some fatties” and makes disgusted noises while scrolling through images of scantily clad fat women associated with an American body positivity campaign.¹⁹⁶ Another of Benjamin’s favourite proxies for all progressive women is a very fat American university student.¹⁹⁷ As above, these women are “uncool” in Benjamin’s eyes because they fail to meet beauty standards which might make them attractive to heterosexual men.

Benjamin’s derision of older women involved in feminism, anti-racism, and LGBTQ rights is centred around contempt for both their unattractiveness and failure to prioritise motherhood. Feminist scholars argue that age discrimination affects women earlier and more severely than men. Margaret Cruikshank observes that “[d]isdain for old women’s bodies” is pervasive in societies in which all women are judged in comparison to omnipresent media depictions of “[y]oung naked female bodies”.¹⁹⁸ Derogatory names for old women (such as “hag”, “shrew”, and “crone”) denote much more contempt than names for old men (such as “geezer”).¹⁹⁹ Signs of age on a man’s face are often considered positive indicators of character and experience. Benjamin himself happily uses depictions of Sargon which show a man older than himself. As Susan Sontag noted, however, a “double standard of ageing” sees women more heavily penalised for the normal signs of age.²⁰⁰ Many women who are “no longer very young” experience ageing as “a humiliating process of gradual sexual disqualification”.²⁰¹ Sontag wrote (in line with Connell’s view that emphasised femininity for older women is organised around

¹⁹⁴ Sargon of Akkad, “Michelle Obama hunts fat people with a shotgun”, *YouTube*, 9:34, April 22, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EBcRcccOI38>

¹⁹⁵ Sargon of Akkad, ““This Week in Stupid (03/08/2014)”, *YouTube*, 13:58, August 2, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gxlCwG2eD8M>

¹⁹⁶ Sargon of Akkad, “This Week in Stupid (17/08/2014)”.

¹⁹⁷ Sargon of Akkad, “What is a Social Justice Course?”, *YouTube*, 26:15, May 3, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rUEgTaM28ls>

¹⁹⁸ Margaret Cruikshank, *Learning to be Old: Gender, Culture, and Aging* (Lanham : Rowman & Littlefield, 2013), 128, 130, 133.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid*, 120.

²⁰⁰ Susan Sontag, “The Double Standard of Aging”, in *The Other Within Us*, ed. Marilyn Pearsall (New York: Routledge, 1997), 23.

²⁰¹ *Ibid*, 20.

motherhood) that because “women are expected to have much more limited lives than men, a woman who has never married is pitied”.²⁰² It is assumed that unmarried women have tried and failed to secure husbands. There is no male equivalent to “the humiliating condition of being an old maid”.²⁰³

Benjamin laughs at older women as women as unattractive and as failed mothers. A feminist woman’s fate is to end up “all on her own with her cats, old and unattractive”.²⁰⁴ Middle-aged women who criticise sexual objectification are “frumpy old feminists who feel insecure about their looks and their fading attractiveness”.²⁰⁵ Benjamin intimates that unmarried women go mad from loneliness, and can be dismissed. Bachelors are often happy and envied by their married friends, but women are “terrified of dying alone” and “start to get really distressed” if unmarried by middle age. The American feminist Gloria Steinem’s failure to marry until her sixties constitutes a “strange and unusual” lifestyle which has turned her into a “crazy woman” with “evident senility”.²⁰⁶ Germaine Greer is a “lonely old feminist” whose analysis must be wrong because she is unmarried and therefore “doesn’t understand men or women”.²⁰⁷ An obscure middle-aged feminist YouTuber is “really sad and lonely” and “feeling the void where a husband and children should be”.²⁰⁸ Benjamin laughs along to a Fox News segment in which Gavin McInnes (founder of the Proud Boys) tells a middle-aged feminist that her career is a “mistake” and that she would be happier as a housewife. Benjamin chimes in to call this woman a “harpy” and a “miserable bitch”. He implies that she is only single because she cannot attract a man.²⁰⁹ He considers older women funny and contemptible when they fail to fulfil or honour their role as wives and mothers. Benjamin again emulates British and American opponents of women’s suffrage from a century prior, who dismissed suffragists as “embittered spinsters who were unable to find or keep a man”.²¹⁰

²⁰² Ibid, 20.

²⁰³ Ibid, 21.

²⁰⁴ Sargon of Akkad, “I need feminism because I have brain damage”.

²⁰⁵ Sargon of Akkad, “Feminists Will Ban Everything You Love”, *YouTube*, 11:33, July 27, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NZDOTAKS_JQ

²⁰⁶ Sargon of Akkad, “Gloria Steinem’s Mental Health Problems”, *YouTube*, 51:35, March 7, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TrjFJWhd9Bo>

²⁰⁷ Sargon of Akkad, “Germaine Greer on how women abuse men”, *YouTube*, 14:59, April 1, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fMfRgtOSEUw>

²⁰⁸ Sargon of Akkad, “The Tale of Mickey, the abusive husband”.

²⁰⁹ Sargon of Akkad, “Sean Hannity vs Women’s Declining Happiness”, *YouTube*, 20:25, May 19, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a1Zh1cHt32E>

²¹⁰ Farrell, *Fat Shame*, 86.

As with men, Benjamin's characterisation of female social movement activists as "uncool" punishes them for deviance from gender norms which are compatible with patriarchy. In an especially revealing moment, he grasps mid-sentence for a way to elaborate on his characterisation of progressive women as "losers", and states: "They tend to be ... disgusting obese lesbians".²¹¹ Women unavailable to men as sex objects, wives, and mothers cannot be cool. When he shows pictures of "cool" anti-feminist women taken from Twitter, Benjamin chooses young, thin, long-haired, busty women wearing makeup. He asks "[i]s it just me, or are all these women who are opposed to feminism really attractive?"²¹² His mockery punishes deviance from traditional gender roles and rewards adherence. For all his claimed sophistication, Benjamin's judgements about coolness align exactly with those detected by Massanari and Chess in crude "anti-SJW" memes. Massanari and Chess found that alt-right/-lite memes depicted social movement activists as "unambiguously repulsive, perhaps even 'monstrous' by the Western beauty standards" because their "bodies do not properly exhibit hegemonic feminine or masculine ideals".²¹³ Although much more long-winded, Benjamin does the same. People not invested in hegemonic masculinity or emphasised femininity need not accept his construction of feminist, anti-racist, and LGBTQ+ rights activists as "uncool".

Progressive killjoys and geek masculinity

Hegemonic masculinity also helps to explain Benjamin's aversion to media with feminist, anti-racist, or LGBTQ+ themes. Given his commitment to traditional masculine ideals, it is noteworthy that Benjamin frets about the impact of activists on video games and comic books, fantasy card games and science-fiction miniatures, not on football or motorsport. He is a self-styled "nerd" and a devotee of "geekdom".²¹⁴ Benjamin reminisces about staying indoors making *Doom* levels while his childhood friends played at the park.²¹⁵ He studied computer science at university and coded his own video game about

²¹¹ Sargon of Akkad, "Social Justice Losers".

²¹² Sargon of Akkad, "This Week in Stupid (20/07/2014)".

²¹³ Massanari and Chess, "Attack of the 50-foot social justice warrior", 532.

²¹⁴ Akkad Daily, "WarhammerGate".

²¹⁵ Sargon of Akkad, "In thanks to my viewers", *YouTube*, 5:02, May 5, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xU-1AXmZ5ko>

zombies.²¹⁶ He likes to relax by polishing a replica sword from *The Lord of the Rings*.²¹⁷ He is the “Dungeon Master” of a long-running *Dungeons & Dragons* game, which he broadcasts on a side-channel.²¹⁸

Researchers have analysed the relationship between male geeks and hegemonic masculinity. Some tenets of the hegemonic ideal result in the subordination of stereotypical geeks. Men who are unathletic, weak, timid, and unsuccessful with women are vulnerable to marginalisation because they fall short of the hegemonic ideal.²¹⁹ Connell references “nerds” and “geeks” to show that heterosexual masculinities can be subordinated.²²⁰ T.L. Taylor and Leigh Fine each note that, compared to more hegemonic boys and men, geeks can be accepting of LGBTQ+ people because (hetero)sexuality is less present in their day-to-day lives.²²¹ However, other authors have described, to use Anastasia Salter and Bridget Blodgett’s phrase, a brand of “toxic geek masculinity”.²²² Exhibiting “complicit” rather than fully “subordinate” masculinities, some geeks embrace hegemonic masculinity as best they can in pursuit of the “patriarchal dividend”.²²³

These men and boys make their “geek” status central to their masculine self-esteem. Masculinity and technology have long been conflated in Western culture. Michael Salter observes “a widespread stereotype that men have greater skill and affinity with technology than women”.²²⁴ Cynthia Cockburn notes that “to feel technologically competent is to feel manly”.²²⁵ Through technology, men can showcase attributes of the masculine ideal. Technology allows men to display “highly refined skills and mastery”.²²⁶

²¹⁶ Sargon of Akkad, “In thanks to my viewers”; The Thinkery, “The CTH Subreddit is Always Angry With Me”.

²¹⁷ Sargon of Akkad, “A Temporarily Embarrassed Believer”.

²¹⁸ The Thinkery, “D&D Crusaders #39 - They Mostly Come at Night, Mostly...”, *YouTube*, 3:03:20, April 11, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O9LT3xRKjos>

²¹⁹ Almog and Kaplan, “The Nerd and His Discontent”, 29-30; T.L. Taylor, *Raising the Stakes: E-sports and the Professionalisation of Computer Gaming*, (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2012), 113; Adrienne Massanari, “#Gamergate and The Fappening: How Reddit’s algorithm, governance, and culture support toxic technocultures”, *New Media & Society* 19 (2017): 332.

²²⁰ Connell, *Masculinities*, 79.

²²¹ Taylor, *Raising the Stakes*, 113; Leigh Fine, “The McElroy Brothers, New Media, and the Queering of White Nerd Masculinity”, *The Journal of Men’s Studies* 27 (2019): 135.

²²² Anastasia Salter and Bridget Blodgett, *Toxic Geek Masculinity in Media: Sexism, Trolling, and Identity Policing* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

²²³ Connell, *Masculinities*, 79.

²²⁴ Michael Salter, “From geek masculinity to Gamergate: the technological rationality of online abuse”, *Crime Media Culture* 14 (2018): 248.

²²⁵ Cynthia Cockburn quoted in Lori Kendall, ““Oh No! I’m a Nerd!”: Hegemonic Masculinity on an Online Forum”, *Gender & Society* 14 (2000): 261.

²²⁶ Taylor, *Raising the Stakes*, 111.

Computer technologies in particular allow men to display raw intellect and rationality, rather than “feminine” social or emotional intelligence.²²⁷ By the 1980s, an affinity for computers was firmly coded as “masculine” in advertising, pop culture, educational contexts, software design, and in computer-related professions and hobbies.²²⁸ For instance, Amanda Cote notes that, throughout the 1990s, “press sources, marketing materials, and other related paraphernalia present [video] games as something for boys and gamers as male”.²²⁹ “Geekdom”, inhabited by men locked out of traditional masculine domains which prioritise athletic and heterosexual prowess, became “a highly masculine space[,] but with different requirements for entry”.²³⁰

The health of the hegemonic ideal among geeks is demonstrated by “hypermasculine” heroes in geek media, who rescue and romance female characters who are “designed for the masculine gaze and built ... for sexualised consumption”.²³¹ In anime and comics, Joseph Reagle explains, “gratuitous titillation” is so common in female character design that it is considered a staple of the genre.²³² These characters allow geeks to inhabit, through fantasy, the role of muscle-bound men who have access to sexy women. Geek masculinity is a strategy pursued by men and boys who use their involvement in the “masculine” domain of technology to approximate the hegemonic ideal and avoid subordination. It provides “an alternative pathway to masculine identification”.²³³

This strategy has been threatened in recent years by the popularisation of geek culture. During the 2010s, superhero films dominated the global box-office, alongside regular *Star Wars* and *Star Trek* offerings. America’s most popular sitcom, *The Big Bang Theory*, starred a quartet of geeks. Video games rose in popularity and esteem. Conventions such as Comic-Con grew in size and consequence. The consumer side of geek culture exploded, with “fandoms” purchasing merchandise to display their love for a franchise. Salter and Blodgett refer to this a “geek cultural revolution”.²³⁴ Computers and smartphones are ubiquitous – no special level of technological competence is required to

²²⁷ Massanari, “#Gamergate and The Fappening”, 332.

²²⁸ Salter, “From geek masculinity to Gamergate”, 249.

²²⁹ Amanda C. Cote, “Writing ‘Gamers’: The Gendered Construction of Gamer Identity in Nintendo Power (1994-1999)”, *Games and Culture* 13 (2018): 480.

²³⁰ Salter and Blodgett, *Toxic Geek Masculinity in Media*, 4.

²³¹ *Ibid*, 145.

²³² Joseph Reagle, “Geek Policing: Fake Geek Girls and Contested Attention”, *The International Journal of Communication* 9 (2015): 2874.

²³³ Salter, “From geek masculinity to Gamergate”, 251.

²³⁴ Salter and Blodgett, *Toxic Geek Masculinity in Media*, 4.

participate in geek culture.²³⁵ These developments have diversified geekdom. A large number of women have entered the subculture as fans and creators. For some men, this perforation of the “geekdom/mainstream boundary” has triggered a crisis.²³⁶ Salter explains that “[g]eek masculinity ... requires, for its coherence, the maintenance of gendered stereotypes about male technological skill and female ineptitude”.²³⁷ When the conflation of geekdom and manhood breaks down, the strategies used by some men and boys to approach hegemonic masculinity are no longer viable.

Some scholars consider the backlash triggered by *Star Wars* films with female protagonists, or video games about LGBTQ+ issues, a form of “border policing” intended to reclaim “geek” as a masculine category.²³⁸ Franchises and genres in the process of diversification are attacked by men who have latched onto geekdom as their best opportunity to approximate and experience hegemonic masculinity. This border policing can manifest as harassment of people who tell stories within geekdom which are not strictly for and about straight men. Rank-and-file female fans also face harassment because their existence undermines the conflation between “geek” and “man”. As Salter and Blodgett explain, “the bullied have become the bullies”.²³⁹ Male geeks often react to criticism of their bad behaviour with scepticism, because their experience of exclusion and derision in the wider world leads them to identify as victims who lack the power to victimise others.²⁴⁰ To these men, criticism of geek media’s androcentrism and sexism is another “form of abuse” from the mainstream, which now wants to deny them the ability to satisfy desires even in fantasy.²⁴¹

Toxic geek masculinity helps explain Benjamin’s contempt for media with feminist, anti-racist, or LGBTQ+ themes. His participation in Gamergate, first, was an attempt to retain “gamer” as a masculine identity. Benjamin tried to maintain that Gamergate was a battle between “gamers” and “non-gamers”, not men and women.²⁴² He stated that “anyone from any walk of life” can be a “gamer”.²⁴³ However, in practice, he performed

²³⁵ Salter, “From geek masculinity to Gamergate”, 251.

²³⁶ Reagle, “Geek Policing”, 2874.

²³⁷ Salter, “From geek masculinity to Gamergate”, 250.

²³⁸ Salter, “From geek masculinity to Gamergate”; Salter and Blodgett, *Toxic Geek Masculinity in Media*; Reagle, “Geek Policing”.

²³⁹ Salter and Blodgett, *Toxic Geek Masculinity in Media*, 9.

²⁴⁰ Massanari, “#Gamergate and The Fappening”, 332.

²⁴¹ Salter and Blodgett, *Toxic Geek Masculinity in Media*, 201.

²⁴² Sargon of Akkad, “Why Gamers Had To Die: Part 1 - Gamers Don't Need Diversity”.

²⁴³ Sargon of Akkad, “A Philippic Against Matt Lees and Social Justice in Gaming #GamerGate #NotYourShield”.

mental gymnastics to exclude women from the identity. To opponents of Gamergate, the diversification of “games culture” was a straightforward consequence of the fact that an increasing number of women had become gamers. To Benjamin, these newcomer women had “no right to be meddling in games” because they were not *real* gamers.²⁴⁴ Because research shows that women are less likely to play competitive multiplayer games, Benjamin decreed that the term “gamer” applies “specifically ... to people who play ... competitive, player-versus-player games”. However, later in the same video he lists two single-player franchises as the purview of real gamers.²⁴⁵ His own tastes also tend towards single-player games.²⁴⁶ Elsewhere, he claimed that gamers are people who spend a lot of time playing games.²⁴⁷ When confronted with a researcher’s observation that women might spend hours playing mobile phone or Facebook games, Benjamin pivoted – now “it doesn’t matter how much you play, it matters what you are playing”. Only people who play “high-octane” games like shooters count as “gamers”.²⁴⁸ He moved the goal posts in the search for criteria which preserved people like himself as “gamers” and excluded women.

In less guarded moments, Benjamin simply stated that games are men’s domain. The “video games industry was created by straight white men”. As consumers, this group is “the most important commercial demographic of all time”. They are “entitled to the culture they have built by paying for it”.²⁴⁹ Journalists and critics who question sexism or androcentrism in games will “alienate the very people who make their jobs possible”.²⁵⁰ High-profile games might indeed be designed for “teenage boys”, but other groups should accommodate themselves to this state of affairs.²⁵¹ Video games simply suit “the people who built the gaming industry into what it is today”.²⁵² It is “too fucking

²⁴⁴ Sargon of Akkad, “This Week in Stupid - XL #GamerGate #NotYourShield Edition!”, Sargon of Akkad, “Why #GamerGate is so Important to Me”.

²⁴⁵ Sargon of Akkad, “Lies, Damned Lies and the Video Game Press #GamerGate #NotYourShield”.

²⁴⁶ Sargon of Akkad, “Chronicles of Sargon the Chaos Lord, Part 3”, *YouTube*, 1:11:50, July 22, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pjzbUQswsWI>; The Thinkery, “Sun, Sand and Jihad #7 - The Siege of Antioch”, *YouTube*, 47:37, July 27, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UwKqqApwn7c>; The Thinkery, “Bannerlord Captain Mode”, *YouTube*, 3:02:18, April 7, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ysEAPoxWnEI>

²⁴⁷ Sargon of Akkad, “Why Gamers Had To Die: Part 3 - Pseudo-Academics and Lazy Journalists”.

²⁴⁸ Sargon of Akkad, “Why Gamers Had To Die: Part 2 - The Industry Must Change For Diversity”.

²⁴⁹ Sargon of Akkad, “This Week in Stupid - XL #GamerGate #NotYourShield Edition! (31/08/2014)”; Sargon of Akkad, “Lies, Damned Lies and the Video Game Press #GamerGate #NotYourShield”.

²⁵⁰ Sargon of Akkad, “Lies, Damned Lies and the Video Game Press #GamerGate #NotYourShield”.

²⁵¹ Sargon of Akkad, “A Philippic Against Matt Lees and Social Justice in Gaming #GamerGate #NotYourShield”.

²⁵² Sargon of Akkad, “This Week in Stupid - XL #GamerGate #NotYourShield Edition! (31/08/2014)”.

bad” if other groups feel that “games aren’t made for them”.²⁵³ Calls for the diversification of games come from people who were “on the outside” while straight men developed the industry. Now they are “knocking on the clubhouse door, loudly and repeatedly screaming ‘Let me in!’”.²⁵⁴ Benjamin evidently imagines this clubhouse adorned with a sign reading “No Girls Allowed”.

Benjamin values the “gamer” identity because it allows him to approach and honour hegemonic masculinity. He uses games to display “masculine” competitiveness. Player-versus-player games allow one to show an “ability to manipulate and control the situation to your advantage using your own God-given ability and well-honed skills”. Benjamin muses that “there’s really no other activity like it”, but this seems an obvious geeky alternative to participation in competitive sport.²⁵⁵ He uses games to display mastery. The “point of a game [is] the challenge”, and the best games are difficult ones that only an “exclusive” few can beat. Poor skill at video games is emasculating. Benjamin watches footage of a “progressive” male journalist playing *Doom* and laughs that “it’s like watching my mum play[,] ... I could do this better”.²⁵⁶ He also mocks male opponents of Gamergate as effeminate, in order to cement “real gamers” as comparatively manly. One progressive games journalist has been through “castration”.²⁵⁷ Another is a giant fucking beta” and a “cuck”, who writes about diversity in games while another man is presumably “nailing his wife”.²⁵⁸ Benjamin likes characters who allow for virtual embodiment of the hegemonic ideal. The muscle-bound Kratos from *God of War* “makes you feel powerful and terrifying”. The “tall, dark, and handsome” Nathan Drake from *Uncharted* is someone “that women ... find attractive”.²⁵⁹ He defends sexualised female characters. He chuckles that Lara Croft from *Tomb Raider* is “wearing a really tight top for a reason” and denies that “it’s wrong to look at these tits”.²⁶⁰ Developers include “sexy

²⁵³ Sargon of Akkad, “A Philippic Against Matt Lees and Social Justice in Gaming #GamerGate #NotYourShield”.

²⁵⁴ Sargon of Akkad, “This Week in Stupid - XL #GamerGate #NotYourShield Edition! (31/08/2014)”.

²⁵⁵ Sargon of Akkad, “Why #GamerGate is so Important to Me”.

²⁵⁶ The Thinkery, “Game Journos Can’t Play Games”, *YouTube*, 12:23, October 14, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UFQGsQtZLhc>

²⁵⁷ Sargon of Akkad, “A Philippic Against Matt Lees and Social Justice in Gaming #GamerGate #NotYourShield”.

²⁵⁸ Sargon of Akkad Live, “Cucks vs Shitlords”, *YouTube*, 3:12:47, October 5, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L Yf9yyP0uJw>

²⁵⁹ Sargon of Akkad Live, “Buttcheeks vs Shitlords”, *YouTube*, 3:07:30, January 30, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GHGI-JexwSs>

²⁶⁰ PowerfulJRE, “Joe Rogan Experience #979 - Sargon of Akkad”.

women” because “sex sells” and their audience is “people who like attractive women”.²⁶¹ Benjamin does not want to play as unsexualised women – he is angered by the prospect of female protagonists in future *Assassin’s Creed* or *The Legend of Zelda*.²⁶²

Not all men who play games attach importance to the “gamer” label, but – to Benjamin – criticism of “gamer” culture is “attacking people on ... a fundamental and extreme level”.²⁶³ Advocates of progressive causes in gaming are “stripping other people’s identity away from them”.²⁶⁴ Benjamin challenges them: “Do you think you are going to take my identity away from me?”²⁶⁵ This sensitivity is explained by the fact that Benjamin uses “gamer” identity as a component of his masculine self-esteem. It allows him to honour and embody elements of hegemonic masculinity. His participation in Gamergate was a defence of this strategy.

Other authors have applied the concept of geek masculinity to Gamergate. Braithwaite looks at posts on Reddit, 4chan, 8chan, Tumblr, Twitter, and YouTube, and characterises Gamergate as “a misogynist claim to games and gamer identity” and “an iteration of geek masculinity”.²⁶⁶ Massanari describes Gamergate activity on Reddit as driven by “a particular kind of geek masculinity ... with problematic assumptions about who can enter these spaces”.²⁶⁷ Salter and Blodgett provide an overview of Gamergate from secondary sources and consider the controversy a prime example of “toxic geek masculinity”.²⁶⁸ Michael Salter does the same, and explains Gamergate with reference to “geek masculinity” and “the masculine impulse to defend ... video games ... from perceived encroachment by women”.²⁶⁹ My analysis further demonstrates the strength of the concept. The participation of one of Gamergate’s most high-profile campaigners can also be explained with reference to toxic geek masculinity.

Games aside, Benjamin wants to retain other geeky identities as masculine. He claims that “women had no part” in creating comic book culture. Comic “fandom” is a male domain in the same way that a “sewing circle” might be for women.²⁷⁰ Comic book

²⁶¹ Sargon of Akkad Live, “Buttcheeks vs Shitlords”.

²⁶² Sargon of Akkad, “This Week in Stupid - XL #GamerGate #NotYourShield Edition! (31/08/2014)”.

²⁶³ Ibid.

²⁶⁴ Sargon of Akkad, “Why Gamers Had To Die: Part 1 - Gamers Don't Need Diversity”.

²⁶⁵ Sargon of Akkad, “This Week in Stupid - XL #GamerGate #NotYourShield Edition! (31/08/2014)”.

²⁶⁶ Braithwaite, “It’s About Ethics in Games Journalism?”.

²⁶⁷ Massanari, “#Gamergate and The Fappening”, 330, 342.

²⁶⁸ Salter and Blodgett, *Toxic Geek Masculinity in Media*, 73-99.

²⁶⁹ Salter, “From geek masculinity to Gamergate”, 248.

²⁷⁰ Sargon of Akkad, “Fake piglets will ruin comic books”.

companies make their money from “straight, white, teenage boys” and should prioritise this demographic.²⁷¹ Benjamin tells women that comic book culture is “not yours to change” – “build your own if you want it to be different”.²⁷² He likes for comics to honour hegemonic masculinity and emphasised femininity. Benjamin prefers “very gendered” character designs in which “the men very much look like men and the women very much look like women”.²⁷³ He likes for male superheroes to defend or avenge female characters.²⁷⁴ Some female characters indeed exist for “sexual gratification” – they are “drawn by men for the titillation of other men”. “[T]ough fucking shit” to anyone critical of such designs.²⁷⁵ Benjamin again constructs comic book writers who deviate from this tradition as effeminate, in order to make “normal” comic fans seem comparatively manly. One Marvel writer is “a skinny guy, balding, mid-30s, tiny body, hunched over ... he’s not an intimidating man, he’s probably afraid of physicality”.²⁷⁶ Comics produced by such writers are lame because they threaten the association between reading comics and manliness. In comic book universes, successions of different characters often take up the mantle of one superhero. However, it is “absolutely cringeworthy” when a female character is handed the reins to Thor or Iron Man.²⁷⁷ Newer “de-gendered” characters, LGBTQ+ characters, and overweight female characters are also contemptible.²⁷⁸ Benjamin also attacks female comic fans, whose existence threatens the conflation of “geek” and “man”. He rails against “fake geek girls” who bring up their gender at conventions or in online discussions.²⁷⁹ Benjamin’s mockery of comic books with feminist, anti-racist, or LGBTQ+ themes encompasses anything which threatens his ability to use comic appreciation as a component of his masculine self-esteem.

Elsewhere, male characters in recent *Star Wars* films are “soy boys”, because “all the top positions are held by women” in these films. It is “emasculating” that Oscar Isaac’s swashbuckling character takes orders from “an old woman” (49-year-old Laura Dern) who “bitches” at him. A fight scene in which a woman Jedi saves a man from peril is “the cringiest” Benjamin has ever seen. The more vulnerable, not-violent role given to Mark

²⁷¹ Sargon of Akkad, “This Week in Stupid (20/07/2014)”.

²⁷² Sargon of Akkad, “Go tell the Feminists, stranger passing by”.

²⁷³ Akkad Daily, “Marvel Reaches Peak SJW”, *YouTube*, 23:13, March 19, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DfQTt3rR2sw>

²⁷⁴ Sargon of Akkad, ““Anita Sarkeesian Doesn’t Understand Words (Feminist Frequency)”.

²⁷⁵ Sargon of Akkad, “Go tell the Feminists, stranger passing by”.

²⁷⁶ Akkad Daily, “Marvel Reaches Peak SJW”.

²⁷⁷ Sargon of Akkad, “This Year in Stupid 2017”.

²⁷⁸ Akkad Daily, “Marvel Reaches Peak SJW”.

²⁷⁹ Sargon of Akkad, “Fake piglets will ruin comic books”.

Hamill is a “eunuch-friendly version of Luke Skywalker”.²⁸⁰ Benjamin gives no reason for being “outraged” by the eleventh season of *Doctor Who* other than the franchise’s switch to a female protagonist.²⁸¹ His judgement that 2016’s *Ghostbusters* “certainly wasn’t fucking funny” (based on a two-minute trailer) stemmed from aversion to its female cast. He could not laugh when “I felt like I was watching ... my mum do it”.²⁸²

In one 2014 rant, Benjamin summed up his aversion to women’s incursion into geekdom:

I started playing *Warhammer 40,000* when I was 12 years old, I fucking loved it, I started buying comics at the same age, I fucking loved it, I went to numerous wargames clubs, comic clubs, computer clubs. Not fucking once has a man at any one of those things said, ‘I wish there was more girls here’. ... [W]e don’t want girls there”.²⁸³

The presence of women who want to create and consume media which does not facilitate the veneration or embodiment of the hegemonic ideal is “uncool” to Benjamin because it undermines his ability to approximate and honour hegemonic masculinity. Unlike left-wing critics mentioned above, Benjamin’s distaste for “progressive” pop culture is not a critique of the ways in which feminist, anti-racist, and LGBTQ+ themes are included in media. Benjamin does not want these topics to be handled differently, he wants them to be absent.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I addressed my key research questions by analysing Benjamin’s discourse and demonstrating that representations of social movement activism as uncool are a major theme in his hostile construction of anti-racist, feminist, and LGBTQ+ activists. I considered the extent to which he substantiates this construction. He laughs at earnest activists who fail to keep their cool or to exhibit ironic detachment. He paints activists as sanctimonious bullies whose aggression delegitimises their arguments. He describes media with feminist, anti-racist, or LGBTQ+ themes as cringeworthy, and complains that social movement activists ruin cool franchises and genres. I then evaluated these claims. Benjamin’s critiques of earnestness and anger fail to hold water. He exhibits these traits

²⁸⁰ Sargon of Akkad, “Gender Wars: The Last Snowflake”.

²⁸¹ Sargon of Akkad, “This Year in Stupid 2017”.

²⁸² Sargon of Akkad, “This Week in Stupid (06/03/2016)”.

²⁸³ Sargon of Akkad, “Fake piglets will ruin comic books”.

himself and approves of them in ideological allies. His contempt is also not a response to overly individualistic interpretations of oppression. I argued that his characterisation of activists as uncool is instead an instance of complicit masculinity: he venerates ideals of hegemonic masculinity and emphasised femininity which support patriarchy, and punishes men and women who fail to honour these ideals. His mockery effectively shores up a hierarchy of gender with straight men at its apex. I also argued that Benjamin's hostility towards feminist, anti-racist, or LGBTQ+ themes in media is an instance of toxic geek masculinity. He lashes out at anything which threatens his ability derive masculine self-esteem from his investment in geekdom. Overall, I argued that people who are not invested in traditional ideals of gender need not share Benjamin's judgements about uncool feminist, anti-racist, and LGBTQ+ rights activists.

I have now identified the main components in Benjamin's discursive construction of social movement activism and considered, point by point, the extent to which he can substantiate this construction. I have found that, despite their frequent similarity to points which appear (often with different emphases and greater sophistication) in scholarly critiques of social movements launched from parts of the Left, Benjamin's claims cannot stand up to critical analysis. Despite his position at the "moderate" end of YouTube's radicalisation pipeline and avowed opposition to sexism, racism, homo- and transphobia, Benjamin's ostensibly principled critiques are directed at caricatures of social movement activism and can be more coherently explained as rationalisations of a desire to preserve the unearned privilege of historically dominant groups. My analysis therefore goes some way towards discrediting the aforementioned narrative (disseminated by Nagle and others) which attributes alt-right/-lite's existence to the malpractice of social movement activists. In the coming chapters, I examine the dirtbag Left sensibility which Shanks displays and analyse the make-up and validity of his construction of social movement activism. To address an important unanswered research question, I consider the extent to which his treatment of the topic overlaps with Benjamin's.

Chapter Six

Jordan Shanks: political content and style

This is the first of two chapters in which I address my remaining research questions by analysing discourse produced by the Australian YouTube personality Jordan Shanks, a.k.a. “friendlyjordies”. In this chapter, I analyse his adoption of a dirtbag Left sensibility. I demonstrate that Shanks is a frequent critic of the right-wing Liberal and National parties, and the corporations which benefit from their policies. He supports trade unions and the social democratic Labor Party. I also detail his discursive construction of identity politics, which focuses on supposed ways in which the mainstream media takes up anti-racist, feminist, and LGBTQ+ rights issues to benefit corporations and the rich. I then analyse the myriad ways in which Shanks tailors his output to help these messages resonate with potential and actual members of the alt-right/-lite. I argue that he creates the sort of “darkly funny” online discourse which Nagle believes can counter the appeal of the alt-right/-lite.¹ In the next chapter, I evaluate the extent to which Shanks pulls off the manoeuvres described here.

Shanks and Australian politics

Biography and income

Shanks was born in 1989 and lives in Sydney.² He worked as a model before becoming a YouTuber and studied politics at university.³ As of December 2021, he has uploaded over 700 videos to his main YouTube channel, which has over 600,000 subscribers. These videos have attracted over 155 million views.⁴ Since June 2017, Shanks has also operated a smaller YouTube channel on which he dispenses life advice gleaned from

¹ Nagle, *Kill All Normies*, 35.

² Jordan Shanks, “Neel + Jordan: Mindfulness”, *YouTube*, 54:00, August 25, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U1ZzTart1d8>

³ Jordan Shanks, “Should You Go To University?”, *YouTube*, 14:32, July 13, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oRZU9ZkXPiM>; friendlyjordies, “Life as a Male Model”, *YouTube*, 11:32, March 10, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QouJiyHnsRM>

⁴ “About”, *YouTube*, accessed March 9, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/user/friendlyjordies/about>

self-help books and gurus.⁵ This channel has another 89,000 subscribers and 5 million views.⁶ While Shanks is best-known as a YouTuber, he also hosts two podcasts: the *Friendlyjordies Podcast*, which he hosts with two friends, and *Neel + Jordan*, which he hosts with the comedian Neel Kolhatkar.⁷ He has also toured sold-out live shows around Australia since 2016.⁸

Shanks is a professional political commentator. He launched a Patreon account in 2015.⁹ He does not disclose his exact revenue from this source. As of December 2021, if his 4,064 patrons each donated at the lowest rate available, his Patreon would attract over AUD \$70,000 per month.¹⁰ Shanks pays a small team of employees.¹¹ In 2020, he described a team comprised of three editors, a researcher, and a social media manager.¹² Unlike Benjamin, his YouTube videos remain monetised.¹³ Shanks also sells branded merchandise.¹⁴ He attributes most of his personal income to ticket sales from his live shows.¹⁵

Criticism of the Liberal-National Coalition and corporations

Shanks is a constant critic of the right-wing Liberal and National parties, large corporations, and prominent businesspeople. He paints the federal Liberal-National

⁵ Jordan Shanks, “Goals Are Important DAMMIT!”, *YouTube*, 10:12, June 16, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xxwjZwQnQUk>

⁶ “About”, *YouTube*, accessed March 9, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCaoxFlhy4oGz3EvkTGhWvkA/about>

⁷ Jordan Shanks, “Neel + Jordan: Evolution (NEW PODCAST)”, *YouTube*, 48:05, August 18, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KmdZJDMqtAo>; Jordan Shanks, Tom Montefiore, and Robbie Armfield, “EPISODE 1 - QLD ELECTION, LEADERSHIP SPILL AND ANDREW BOLT.”, *The Friendlyjordies Podcast*, February 7, 2015, <https://friendlyjordies.podbean.com/e/episode-1-qld-election-leadership-spill-and-andrew-bolt/>

⁸ friendlyjordies, “Chin Up, Stooge!”, *YouTube*, 5:37, September 12, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AysyswwUlpc>; friendlyjordies, “Malcolm Turnbull: A Life”, *YouTube*, 1:48, February 14, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=60wjnkO64IM>; friendlyjordies, “Liberal Myths BUSTED!”, *YouTube*, 3:29, April 23, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y3fmbNsN4vtg>; friendlyjordies, “Cancel Culture KILLS Artists (Yours and Owls)”, *YouTube*, 35:19, April 16, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yx47B5a8zK0>

⁹ friendlyjordies, “FIGHT AGAINST SANITISED MEDIA”, *YouTube*, 6:21, August 19, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1tfKS_jTOaU

¹⁰ “Friendlyjordies”, *Patreon*, accessed December 1, 2021, <https://www.patreon.com/friendlyjordies>

¹¹ friendlyjordies, “FIGHT AGAINST SANITISED MEDIA”.

¹² Jordan Shanks, “Neel + Jordan: False Identity”, *YouTube*, 1:13:29, February 4, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gZ69mCZ9eU0>

¹³ “friendlyjordies”, *Social Blade*, accessed October 19, 2021, <https://socialblade.com/youtube/user/friendlyjordies>

¹⁴ friendlyjordies, “The Friendly Jordies Range”, *YouTube*, 0:34, July 26, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tsp3t1IsVo>; friendlyjordies, “THIS SEASON'S COLLECTION”, *YouTube*, 0:36, March 21, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nQXfrqg4H7w>

¹⁵ Jordan Shanks, “Neel Kolhatkar, Friendlyjordies, Isaac Butterfield Podcast”, *YouTube*, 2:01:18, April 25, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=agynF1QEgnU>

Coalition (as well as state Liberal and National parties) as servants of rich people and corporations. The main purpose of his channels, Shanks insists, is to tell viewers that “you don’t want the Liberal Party in power”.¹⁶ He sometimes clarifies that his criticisms apply equally to the Nationals (who are simply “Liberals for people who think shepherd’s pie is too ethnic”).¹⁷

Many of his videos contend that Coalition governments side with corporations and wealthy investors over workers. Shanks argues that Coalition policies make housing unaffordable for ordinary Australians. “Negative gearing” laws which (allow investors to deduct losses from their taxable income) disadvantage first home buyers, letting rich Baby Boomers “gorge” on their investment properties.¹⁸ The Howard government’s decision in 1999 to halve capital gains tax made real estate investments more profitable, and priced out owner-occupiers.¹⁹ Shanks tells young viewers that they will never afford a home thanks to these “unjustifiable handouts to the rich”.²⁰ He also attacks Australia’s dividend imputation credit system (also established by Howard) which allows retired investors to receive large government payments.²¹

He asserts that Coalition policies erode the pay and entitlements of workers. The Turnbull government’s cuts to penalty rates in 2017 were “biggest wages cut in Australian history”.²² Noting the shrinking proportion of Australians employed in permanent full-time roles, Shanks blames the Coalition for the rise of casualised work in Australia.²³ He states that the incumbent Morrison government’s system of temporary work visas allows companies to “import entire workforces of cheap foreign labour” and overlook

¹⁶ Jordan Shanks, “Alex Jones dishes some DEEP TRUTH”, *YouTube*, 14:06, April 26, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=89lUmgNZAkM>

¹⁷ friendlyjordies, “THE DUMBEST DECISION EVER MADE - Australia repeals the Carbon Tax”, *YouTube*, 9:51, July 26, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=08TP6Oeg8bA>

¹⁸ friendlyjordies, “Negative Gearing”, *YouTube*, 5:33, April 14, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CL7M5RIXjY8>; friendlyjordies, “Hoarding”, *YouTube*, 7:27, March 20, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vFb5vZ7GDnM>

¹⁹ friendlyjordies, “Housing Affordability”, *YouTube*, 5:56, June 28, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d88SSthmRkw>

²⁰ friendlyjordies, “Why You’ll NEVER Own a House”, *YouTube*, 5:49, June 29, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jxoEPBVY8cc>

²¹ friendlyjordies, “Australia’s Biggest “Dole” Bludgers!”, *YouTube*, 6:27, June 17, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C8xv1t3Wc5c>

²² friendlyjordies, “Vote Liberal and suffer the Penalty (rates)”, *YouTube*, 7:08, June 23, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BO6UcfJcUcs>; friendlyjordies, “Now You’ve Paid the PENALTY (rates)”, *YouTube*, 5:34, March 14, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ilm143AI2TE>; friendlyjordies, “Penalty Rates b WHACK yo”, *YouTube*, 5:29, October 27, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XkxwkzFkCdY>

²³ friendlyjordies, “Why it’s Hard to Find a Good Job in Australia”, *YouTube*, 6:16, January 7, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3sLYKh1-JN4>

Australians.²⁴ Overall, Shanks characterises “tax cuts to the upper class” and “middle-class welfare programs” as the bread and butter of Coalition governments.²⁵

He attacks Coalition attempts to deregulate and privatise education. Shanks argued in 2014 that the Abbott government’s proposals to deregulate fees would let universities “charge whatever grotesque amount ... they wish for a degree” and destroy social mobility in Australia.²⁶ In 2016, he attacked the Turnbull government’s plan to cut funding to the public vocational education provider, and instead incentivise private providers. Shanks explained that similar policies in Victoria benefitted “shady institutions” which target vulnerable people for expensive, worthless diplomas.²⁷

He often attacks the privatisation measures of the Coalition government in New South Wales. He described the privatisation of that state’s disability services provider in 2016 as an excuse to channel billions of dollars in business to corporations, which would abandon severely disabled people with expensive care requirements.²⁸ After reports of sub-standard care in a recently privatised Sydney hospital, he denounced the government for selling assets to “corporate scavengers” who “run these vital public services into the ground”.²⁹ He accuses this government of wasting money by selling newly completed infrastructure projects to private operators on favourable terms.³⁰

Shanks also accuses the Coalition of corruption. He accuses the government of New South Wales of allowing the degradation of natural and urban environments, in exchange for illegal donations from property developers.³¹ Coalition politicians also allow their

²⁴ friendlyjordies, “Can the Right Meme?”, *YouTube*, 10:39, January 14, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Op4w8gwOVXw>

²⁵ friendlyjordies, “EMERGENCY! Why Australia is Burning”, *YouTube*, 7:23, November 15, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qt-coJH2X8Y>; friendlyjordies, “history of australia”, *YouTube*, 11:17, November 1, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8O5lzolmk9>

²⁶ friendlyjordies, “Why you won’t be able to go to University”, *YouTube*, 7:49, October 19, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hUUDAD7g6vc>

²⁷ friendlyjordies, “Turnbull’s Tafe Tragedy”, *YouTube*, 6:21, March 22, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9gny2IkM0B0>

²⁸ friendlyjordies, “Mike Baird thinks he can get away with this”, *YouTube*, 6:46, March 7, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bcRk3DPjpXc>

²⁹ friendlyjordies, “THE MOST CORRUPT LEADERS OF ALL TIME”, *YouTube*, 6:10, March 18, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qOgpUIbqN7E>

³⁰ friendlyjordies, “The Worst Leader in Australia”, *YouTube*, 8:07, February 14, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PSg5vHzlxxc>; friendlyjordies, “Note to Self: Don’t Vote for Her”, *YouTube*, 5:58, February 28, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XPH3I7aMm1Q>

³¹ friendlyjordies, “Pure Evil”, *YouTube*, 7:17, December 11, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G-hVKLydyK4>; friendlyjordies, “The Slow Death of Sydney”, *YouTube*, 9:03, August 23, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UmWISfswRzI>; friendlyjordies, “Corruption at Every Level”, *YouTube*, 12:11, September 13, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2mbt8QZpgQk>

“avaricious ... mates” in agribusiness to steal water from the Murray-Darling basin.³² In 2020 and 2021, he levelled accusations of corruption, in particular, at John Barilaro, then-Deputy Premier of New South Wales. Shanks accuses Barilaro of allocating grant money to businesses run by former colleagues without due process and of lying about these deals in parliament.³³ He alleged that Barilaro abused his position at a social club for profit in the 1990s, and insinuated that Barilaro “might be worth hundreds of millions of dollars” because he embezzles money ear-marked for rural communities.³⁴ In response, Barilaro sued Shanks in May 2021, maintaining that portrayals of himself as a “corrupt conman” are defamatory.³⁵ The case was settled out of court in November. Shanks apologised for “offensive” elements of his critique and agreed to remove specific claims from his videos, but paid no damages.³⁶

Shanks alleges that the Morrison government prioritised corporations and the rich in its response to COVID-19. He attacks their decision to target stimulus measures at businesses instead of low-income earners.³⁷ He attacks the “quantitative easing” policies of the Reserve Bank for (in effect) giving stimulus money to banks instead of households.³⁸ He complains that the government’s wage subsidy program handed billions of dollars to profitable companies which did not need support.³⁹

Shanks also criticises climate policy under Coalition governments. The Abbott government cut “one of the most important reforms in our nation’s history” when it

³² friendlyjordies, “Blood Water: the war for Australia's water”, *YouTube*, 1:01:20, July 12, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=glgCA9WmqkI>; friendlyjordies, “Australia’s Plot to Kill YouTube, Kevin Rudd weighs in”, *YouTube*, 11:37, August 31, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XiFTT_QgqIc; friendlyjordies, “A Million Dead Fish!? ONE MILLION!?” *YouTube*, 11:26, January 16, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gNbSazIqVYA>; friendlyjordies, “Australia's Rivers of Blood”, *YouTube*, 9:14, February 12, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pINHLXx02O0>

³³ friendlyjordies, “bruz”, *YouTube*, 26:42, September 14, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ihoirTYqf2c>

³⁴ friendlyjordies, “Secret Dictatorship”, *YouTube*, 38:55, October 21, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4AiYvpe6qfs>; friendlyjordies, “The Italian Job”, *YouTube*, 11:55, November 25, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pgy_FbLYNh4

³⁵ Mitchell, “John Barilaro sues YouTube comedian Friendlyjordies for defamation”.

³⁶ Jamie McKinnell, “Former deputy premier John Barilaro settles defamation suit against YouTube comedian”, *ABC News*, November 5, 2021, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-11-05/john-barilaro-settles-friendlyjordies-defamation-action/100596638>

³⁷ friendlyjordies, “He Sucks.”, *YouTube*, 6:01, March 27, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DdDyox1pkHs>

³⁸ friendlyjordies, “Too Big to Fail”, *YouTube*, 6:00, March 25, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xrn8sZsLnRE>

³⁹ friendlyjordies, “SCOVID”, *YouTube*, 41:05, March 26, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-pn-7uXKjg0>

repealed Australia's short-lived carbon tax.⁴⁰ Abbott's replacement policy (in which polluters are paid to undertake emissions reduction projects) is a "total scam" which hands billions of dollars to corporations.⁴¹ Shanks attacks the unwillingness of Coalition governments to invest in renewable energy.⁴² It remains "stuck in the past" on climate change in order to retain large donations from resources companies.⁴³ Shanks complains in particular about the political influence of the mining magnate (and Australia's richest person) Gina Rinehart.⁴⁴ He similarly criticises fellow mining magnate Clive Palmer.⁴⁵

Shanks blames the Coalition for Australia's catastrophic 2019-2020 bushfire season. He connects the fires with their inaction on climate change.⁴⁶ He attacks Nationals politicians for claiming (without evidence) that the fires were caused by environmentalists who prevented hazard reduction burns.⁴⁷ He blamed the state government for the disaster's severity in New South Wales, because it cut National Parks services.⁴⁸

In these and many other instances, Shanks warns viewers against voting for the Liberal or National parties. He summarises the Coalition as purveyors of "savage and purposely malignant neoliberal policies" which are "designed to make society crumble so the wealthy may pick at its carcass".⁴⁹ They are "hired by some of the most evil corporations on Earth to pretend to be representatives of the people".⁵⁰

⁴⁰ friendlyjordies, "THE DUMBEST DECISION EVER MADE - Australia repeals the Carbon Tax", *YouTube*, 5:21, November 15, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JToHHYSaXbw>

⁴¹ friendlyjordies, "How Direct Action Works", *YouTube*, 5:21, November 15, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JToHHYSaXbw>

⁴² friendlyjordies, "Renewable Energy under the Coalition, Solar and Wind Power in Australia", *YouTube*, 5:22, June 1, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oG-x9DewByY>

⁴³ friendlyjordies, "Coal Miners Better On Climate Change Than Liberal Party", *YouTube*, 6:21, November 15, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LmqtPBT4IR8>; friendlyjordies, "Michael Moore's Movie is Garbage", *YouTube*, 9:46, May 8, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ntB_j-91RFc

⁴⁴ friendlyjordies, "Tony Abbott Vs Climate change with Direct Action", *YouTube*, 1:52, November 13, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cvzs68PzRc>; friendlyjordies, "Inside The Mind Of Gina Rinehart", *YouTube*, 3:46, March 24, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ewH6YJiCG78>

⁴⁵ friendlyjordies, "Australia's Trump: Clive Palmer", *YouTube*, 7:57, January 21, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ee9u6-RK5pI>; friendlyjordies, "Palmer's Perspective (clive palmer's never before seen pilot)", *YouTube*, 2:46, October 12, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w0L94CWL71U>

⁴⁶ friendlyjordies, "KOALA EXTINCTION: Why it's happening", *YouTube*, 7:01, December 2, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WVJRAV6bBW5>

⁴⁷ friendlyjordies, "Australia's Burning: The Blame Game", *YouTube*, 7:47, November 22, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=17cxH9p-xps>; friendlyjordies, "EMERGENCY! Why Australia is Burning".

⁴⁸ friendlyjordies, "Australia's Burning: The Blame Game"; friendlyjordies, "KOALA EXTINCTION: Why it's happening".

⁴⁹ friendlyjordies, "The 2014 Budget Australia - Tony Abbott on cuts and broken promises", *YouTube*, 5:27, May 19, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s3bG1LLcUpY>

⁵⁰ friendlyjordies, "The Adventures of Robbing Hood: A Critique", *YouTube*, 6:55, May 25, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YJTVZht2DFw>

Support for the Labor Party and trade unions

Shanks is a supporter of the social democratic Australian Labor Party. Labor has not formed federal government since the earliest days of his YouTube career. However, Shanks often praises past Labor governments. He celebrates Gough Whitlam's government (of the early 1970s) for instituting universal healthcare and free university education and withdrawing Australia from the Vietnam War.⁵¹ He calls Whitlam "the best prime minister we ever had".⁵² He heaps praise on Bob Hawke and Paul Keating's governments of the 1980s and early 1990s. He attributes Australia's record of uninterrupted growth between 1991 and 2020 to their economic reforms.⁵³ He praises their foreign policies, which saw Australia play a role in ending apartheid and preventing mining in Antarctica.⁵⁴ Shanks considers Keating his personal hero.⁵⁵ Shanks labels Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard's governments between 2007 and 2013 "the most effective ... in the developed world". He praises their reforms on industrial relations, education, and disability services.⁵⁶ In particular, Shanks often celebrates their Keynesian approach to the GFC.⁵⁷ He calls Gillard's carbon tax "Earth-saving legislation" and lauds Rudd's efforts to tax the "super profits" of resources companies.⁵⁸

⁵¹ friendlyjordies, "R.I.P Gough Whitlam", *YouTube*, 0:30, October 21, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kJlv-1MuUk0>

⁵² friendlyjordies, "Andrew Bolt attempts to spit on Gough Whitlam's grave", *YouTube*, 7:32, November 10, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OBmIkeYvhXQ>; friendlyjordies, "Setting the Record Straight on Gough Whitlam 2", *YouTube*, 6:06, November 20, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QM-oZ5UdYpY>

⁵³ friendlyjordies, "AUSSIE vs. LOW IQ CANADIAN", *YouTube*, 11:33, May 30, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NUNQT7Pouwc>

⁵⁴ friendlyjordies, "Why Australia Isn't a Gant Car Park", *YouTube*, 7:03, October 24, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yTzH6fDhDR8>; Jordan Shanks, Tom Montefiore, and Robbie Armfield, "EPISODE 4 - BOB HAWKE TV DRAMA, POLITICAL KNIFING, THE PURSUIT OF DENNY (PT 2), AND CHEMTRAILS.", *The Friendlyjordies Podcast*, February 27, 2015, <https://friendlyjordies.podbean.com/e/episode-4-bob-hawke-biopic-political-knifing-the-pursuit-of-denny-pt-2-and-chemtrails/>; friendlyjordies, "Why Australia Isn't a Gant Car Park".

⁵⁵ Jordan Shanks, "Jordan Peterson's Dark Side", *YouTube*, 14:12, October 22, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fj5K2SAR1mg>; Jordan Shanks, "NEETS", *YouTube*, 19:39, October 16, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PPATfVQJ6yU>

⁵⁶ friendlyjordies, "Australian Election Results 2013 – NEW PM... RUPERT MURDOCH, kevin rudd and tony abbott", *YouTube*, 3:15, September 8, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JtienDV5O5c>

⁵⁷ friendlyjordies, "LABOR'S RECKLESS SPENDING HAS DOOMED US ALL!", *YouTube*, 6:38, April 26, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y3F2NXtCZnk>

⁵⁸ friendlyjordies, "THE DUMBEST DECISION EVER MADE - Australia repeals the Carbon Tax"; friendlyjordies, "Coal is Dirty Stuff", *YouTube*, 5:37, February 14, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gz91yqC7g2E>

Shanks also praises Labor’s efforts in opposition since 2013. For instance, he attributes some of the Morrison government’s COVID-19 policies – such as a boost to unemployment benefits – to pressure from Anthony Albanese’s federal Opposition.⁵⁹ Overall, Shanks credits Labor with “virtually all legislation in the history of this country that is in the general population’s interest”.⁶⁰ In the lead-up to state and territory elections, Shanks also engages with local issues (such as the construction of new freeways) and uploads videos giving reasons for viewers in that jurisdiction to install state or territory Labor governments.⁶¹

Several prominent Labor politicians have appeared on his YouTube channel since 2020. He has uploaded interviews with Rudd, frontbencher Tanya Plibersek, former Leader of the Opposition Bill Shorten, then-Leader of the Opposition in New South Wales Jodi McKay, and former Premier of New South Wales (and current Senator) Kristina Keneally.⁶² Shanks uses these videos to let politicians to make their case for a Labor government, and agrees with their points.

Shanks also champions trade unions. He attributes universal healthcare, superannuation, paid annual leave, parental leave, penalty rates, workplace safety, unfair dismissal

⁵⁹ friendlyjordies, “LEAVE DANIEL ANDREWS ALONE!”, *YouTube*, 5:51, July 17, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8OcGvTkAAfc>

⁶⁰ friendlyjordies, “Why Australia Isn’t a Gant Car Park”.

⁶¹ friendlyjordies, “Denis Napthine’s latest Re - election pledge”, *YouTube*, 2:28, November 10, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VkjfrRrr4k>; friendlyjordies, “MAXIMUM STRENGTH”, *YouTube*, 6:47, January 25, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EfjJgwcnbj8>; friendlyjordies, “The Most Insane Leader in Australia”, *YouTube*, 9:51, March 17, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KYvyJTe8iNM>; friendlyjordies, “THE REAL CANBERRA RAIDERS”, *YouTube*, 7:08, October 6, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M-RAY-mfLsM>; friendlyjordies, “Let’s Cut Down Tasmania’s Rainforests”, *YouTube*, 6:49, February 27, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=umsjM1QcxaQ>

⁶² friendlyjordies, “Friendly with Kevin Rudd!”, *YouTube*, 51:37, February 21, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kznT8Sa6RjY>; friendlyjordies, “CLASSIC JORDIES - Tanya Plibersek”, *YouTube*, 48:32, August 2, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BzMrZykvCO4>; friendlyjordies, “Union Thug EXPOSED— Bill Shorten Interview”, *YouTube*, 52:30, March 12, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FAViGQTGJU>; friendlyjordies, “Friendly with Jodi McKay”, *YouTube*, 40:51, June 10, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2de6NgFL44A>; friendlyjordies, “CLASSIC JORDIES - Kristina Keneally”, *YouTube*, 55:03, July 10, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s6toZb997UU>; friendlyjordies, “Deconstructing Propaganda with Kevin Rudd”, *YouTube*, 1:04:31, May 7, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vs1n-pCycA8>

procedures, and wage increases to union advocacy.⁶³ These rights were won by union members who were “beaten, impoverished, intimidated, and even killed”.⁶⁴ He has railed against anti-union legislation (and Royal Commissions) introduced by the Abbott, Turnbull, and Morrison governments.⁶⁵ He tells his viewers to join a union or be considered “pathetic selfish scabs”: “If you have a full-time job, there is no excuse for you not to join a union right now”.⁶⁶

Portrayals of the right-wing Liberal-National Coalition as purveyors of harmful neoliberal policies and celebrations of Labor and unions as champions of ordinary Australians constitute a large part of the Shanks’s content. An attack on so-called “identity politics” constitutes another significant part of his output.

Identity issues in the media

The propaganda model

Alongside this relatively straightforward social democratic narrative, Shanks often criticises identity politics as a tool of the economic elite. These claims are usually situated within a critique of the mainstream media. Shanks became interested in media criticism through his exposure to the dichotomised treatment of Labor and the Coalition in the Australian commercial media. He now believes that most media outlets aim to elect governments which benefit corporations and the rich.⁶⁷ He is heavily influenced by the “propaganda model” which Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky outline in

⁶³ friendlyjordies, “Tony Abbott’s Royal Commission into Union Corruption”, *YouTube*, 5:44, April 14, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gtZ-uGbrC64>; friendlyjordies, “How you know a Liberal government is getting desperate”, *YouTube*, 3:45, November 25, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fvyU6CE7XcU>; friendlyjordies, “Shit People Say About Unions”, *YouTube*, 1:20, October 1, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QOFg6C1iOTk>; friendlyjordies, “ELECTION VID (jokes)”, *YouTube*, 7:03, August 2, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fZ0a27Iy1WE>

⁶⁴ friendlyjordies, “Tony Abbott’s Royal Commission into Union Corruption”.

⁶⁵ friendlyjordies, “Tony Abbott’s Royal Commission into Union Corruption”; friendlyjordies, “UNION THUGS EVERYWHERE!”, *YouTube*, 6:34, September 22, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rer8fc6FShQ>; friendlyjordies, “The Worst Reason Ever to Force an Election”, *YouTube*, 8:02 April 13, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9HtmF8qv2Ys>; friendlyjordies, “bad.”, *YouTube*, 9:02, May 1, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7RFt1yftqgg>; friendlyjordies, “Australia’s Banning Protesting?”, *YouTube*, 8:04, November 8, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lp_kwX4f2vQ

⁶⁶ friendlyjordies, “Don’t B a cheap STooGE”, *YouTube*, 2:18, October 12, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o4oeJrXJZFY>; friendlyjordies, “ELECTION VID (jokes)”.

⁶⁷ friendlyjordies, “The Project: A Journalistic Farce”, *YouTube*, 11:30, August 8, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fKiEz3XSWPo>

Manufacturing Consent. To Shanks, their analysis “obliterates the fairy tale that the mainstream media is there to inform the public”.⁶⁸

Herman and Chomsky argue that media outlets in liberal democracies “defend the economic, social, and political agenda of privileged groups”.⁶⁹ They describe five “filters” which marginalise information damaging to business or government interests within news coverage. First, prohibitive start-up costs ensure that mainstream news production is the purview of major diversified corporations which are controlled by rich families or investors. This filters out information contrary to the interests of rich people and corporations.⁷⁰ Second, news organisations tailor their coverage to attract advertisers. They therefore avoid stories which might displease the corporations on which they depend for revenue.⁷¹ Third, news organisations want to acquire “the raw material of news” as cheaply as possible. Governments and businesses get special access to the media because they provide a steady flow of press releases and photo opportunities, subsidising the cost of news production.⁷² Fourth, journalists and organisations which publish information which challenges the rich and powerful receive “flak” in response. Lawsuits, advertiser boycotts, and opprobrium from right-wing “media monitoring” think tanks deter news outlets from running risky stories.⁷³ Fifth, the media fosters fear of a common “Enemy” or “Face of Evil”. Communism served this role during the Cold War. More recent “substitutes” include terrorism, Islam, and illegal immigrants.⁷⁴ Emotive stories attacking these boogymen distract from corporate and government malfeasance.⁷⁵ Journalists re-direct anger aroused by economic inequality towards the common enemy.⁷⁶ The media also invokes the enemy to distribute flak – dissenting voices are charged with being in league with the enemy.⁷⁷

⁶⁸ friendlyjordies, “BOYCOTT THE MAINSTREAM MEDIA!”, *YouTube*, 7:53, April 3, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dUuzV3_smE

⁶⁹ Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (London: Vintage, 1998), 298.

⁷⁰ Herman and Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent*, 4-14.

⁷¹ *Ibid*, 14-16.

⁷² *Ibid*, 18-22.

⁷³ *Ibid*, 26-29.

⁷⁴ Andrew Mullen, “The Propaganda Model after 20 Years: Interview with Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky”, *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture* 6 (2017): 14.

⁷⁵ Herman and Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent*, 29-31.

⁷⁶ Chomsky quoted in Jeffrey Klaehn, “A Critical Review and Assessment of Herman and Chomsky’s ‘Propaganda Model’”, *European Journal of Communication* 17 (2002): 157.

⁷⁷ Herman and Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent*, 29-31.

Identity politics as propaganda

Shanks argues that the media now uses identity issues to serve this propagandistic function. He believes that social democratic political parties would be overwhelmingly popular, if their economic policies were understood by the public: “[O]n the issues that actually matter, 70 to 80 percent of the public is on the same page”.⁷⁸ Social democratic economic policies are a “winning argument”; parties win elections when they can make these policies widely understood.⁷⁹ However, as servants of the elite, media companies have a vested interest in preventing comprehension of such proposals.⁸⁰ Media companies distract the populace by lavishing attention on issues of race, gender, and sexuality.⁸¹ The media uses identity issues “to misdirect and divide you with stupid culture war shit”.⁸²

Shanks includes conservative narratives in this criticism. Narratives which appeal to white, male, straight, or native-born identities are also “identity politics”.⁸³ Conservative news outlets whip up resentment against women and minorities to distract from the economic sins of neoliberal political parties and credentials of social democratic ones.⁸⁴ Shanks sometimes criticises conservative news organisations on these grounds. He is a particular critic of Rupert Murdoch, criticising *The Australian*, Murdoch’s tabloid newspapers, and Sky News.⁸⁵

However, when Shanks attacks identity politics in the media, he usually targets stories about sexism, racism, homo- and transphobia in outlets with left-wing reputations. He claims to focus on such outlets because their propagandistic function is more subtle,

⁷⁸ friendlyjordies, “The Media is Lying to You”, *YouTube*, 15:45, April 8, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qhLUajiVKo4>

⁷⁹ friendlyjordies, “WHY DONALD TRUMP WON”, *YouTube*, 15:24, December 14, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uTL7xRNXWI>

⁸⁰ friendlyjordies, “WHY I HATE THE PLEBISCITE”, *YouTube*, 7:53, October 25, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7wJynBD_tEY

⁸¹ friendlyjordies, “You Are Wrong About The ABC”, *YouTube*, 14:20, October 14, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=INZUcj51_tg

⁸² friendlyjordies, “The Media is Lying to You”.

⁸³ Jordan Shanks, “Identity Politics Are Pure Evil”, *YouTube*, 25:33, October 16, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k3oQqD1PPv0>

⁸⁴ friendlyjordies, “The Media is Lying to You”; Jordan Shanks, “Identity Politics Are Pure Evil”.

⁸⁵ friendlyjordies, “If you thought Fox News was bad...”, *YouTube*, 8:47, August 15, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HAK2f1HBLNA>; friendlyjordies, “Rupert Murdoch's Fantasy”, *YouTube*, 7:22, May 24, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3XFtP_jJZ2A; friendlyjordies, “Renewable Energy gets PUSSY WHIPPED!”, *YouTube*, 6:02, July 13, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LLAOhsMXLT8>; friendlyjordies, “Why Sky News Sucks”, *YouTube*, 13:44, June 6, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DpZboCMHkXA>

whereas viewers should be able to identify narratives in the Murdoch press as propaganda without assistance.⁸⁶ He also claims to focus on such media because it plays an increasingly decisive role in projecting corporate power. Shanks insists that issues like racism, sexism, homo- and transphobia now play the same role in the propaganda model as did communism in the 1980s and terrorism in the 2000s. Elements of “the quote-unquote ‘left-wing’ media” use these issues as “boogeymen” to distract audiences from economic problems.⁸⁷ Journalists channel discontent aroused by material inequality into campaigns against the new “common enemy”: racists, sexists, and homophobes.⁸⁸

Shanks outlines a narrative in which media outlets decided to heap attention on identity politics after the GFC, in order to defuse growing awareness of economic inequality. Threatened by movements such as Occupy Wall Street, elites responded by increasing coverage of identity issues in the hope that economic issues would be “pushed to the side”.⁸⁹ Shanks claims that ostensibly left-wing outlets moved further in this direction in 2016, to help Clinton in the United States election.⁹⁰ Now threatened by the substantive social democratic agenda of Bernie Sanders, elites threw their weight behind the more neoliberal Clinton.⁹¹ The mainstream media therefore focused on issues which Clinton was better able to discuss – racism, sexism, homo- and transphobia.⁹²

According to Shanks, this same focus in the media then prevented Clinton from defeating Trump. “[P]seudo-leftist” journalists who are “bought and paid for by commercial interests” could have focused on Trump’s economic agenda, which was even more skewed towards corporations and the rich than Clinton’s. Unable to “bite the hand that feeds them by discussing anything remotely substantive [which] ... leads right back to their sponsors”, these journalists instead fixated on Trump’s racism and sexism. Shanks

⁸⁶ friendlyjordies, “The Project Sinks to NEW LOW (+Gillette Hypocrisy)”, *YouTube*, 12:45, January 22, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yBIqb6KKmEg>

⁸⁷ friendlyjordies, “BOYCOTT THE MAINSTREAM MEDIA!”.

⁸⁸ friendlyjordies, “The Video-YouTube Didn't Want You To See”, *YouTube*, 8:30, May 3, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B8T5j_lvUL0

⁸⁹ Jordan Shanks, “Neel + Jordan: Group Identities”, *YouTube*, 1:27:08, January 16, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qf47ZdUpZxw>

⁹⁰ friendlyjordies, “The Video-YouTube Didn't Want You To See”; Jordan Shanks, Ali Ahmed, and Mislav Belobrajdic, “Kurds and The Propaganda Model”, *The Friendlyjordies Podcast*, October 30, 2019, <https://friendlyjordies.podbean.com/e/kurds-and-the-propaganda-model/>

⁹¹ Jordan Shanks, “Identity Politics Are Pure Evil”; Jordan Shanks, Ali Ahmed, and Mislav Belobrajdic, “Mislav’s Proposal Story and Democratic Candidates”, *The Friendlyjordies Podcast*, March 5, 2019, <https://friendlyjordies.podbean.com/e/mislavs-proposal-story-and-democratic-candidates/>

⁹² Shanks, Ahmed, and Belobrajdic, “Kurds and The Propaganda Model”.

claims that these allegations failed to resonate with voters and allowed Trump to win the White House.⁹³

In this narrative, Australia's public broadcasters also take up identity politics in ways beneficial to economic elites. The ABC and SBS lack commercial owners or advertisers, but must appease the Coalition, which has been in control of their funding for close to a decade.⁹⁴ This analysis reflects Herman and Chomsky's assessment that "right-wing pressure and financial stringency" forces public broadcasters to "emulate the commercial systems".⁹⁵ Shanks alleges that the ABC and SBS focus on feminist, anti-racist, and LGBTQ+ rights issues to avoid discussion of economic inequality (which he constructs in class terms).⁹⁶ They also use identity politics to fracture Labor's support base, adopting very progressive positions on social issues – which Labor cannot emulate without losing its more conservative marginal seats – and then concluding that Labor is "filled with racists and sexists".⁹⁷

Shanks further insists that, in pursuit of coverage, social democratic politicians are forced to dance to the media's tune and focus on identity politics. He states that Sanders focused more on race, gender, and sexuality in 2020 as "marketing messages", not because Sanders "believes in any of that shit".⁹⁸ Meanwhile, Labor "plays the identity politics game" in the media because journalists refuse to cover their economic messages.⁹⁹

Moreover, Shanks complains that women and minorities in the media are themselves members of the elite. The share "the exact same worldview" as other people from

⁹³ friendlyjordies, "WHY DONALD TRUMP WON".

⁹⁴ Jordan Shanks, "Follow your Passion, Don't Work For Money", *YouTube*, 14:37, September 10, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z8_JmGVX2Xg; friendlyjordies, "The ABC Sucks", *YouTube*, 9:35, July 24, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HtV-2X4BjQI>

⁹⁵ Herman and Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent*, xiv, xv.

⁹⁶ friendlyjordies, "Triple J Hack: Unbelievably Awful", *YouTube*, 14:19, April 12, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gJaeWDNEKUM>

⁹⁷ friendlyjordies, "How the Australian Media Plays You"; friendlyjordies, "The Video-YouTube Didn't Want You To See"; friendlyjordies, "BUZZFEED AND MURDOCH ASSAULT THE YOUTH", *YouTube*, 11:16, May 2, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n1ypeIj5FPU>; friendlyjordies, "Friendly with Kevin Rudd!".

⁹⁸ Jordan Shanks, Ali Ahmed, and Mislav Belobrajdic, "Porn and Bernie's Chances", *The Friendlyjordies Podcast*, February 27, 2020, <https://friendlyjordies.podbean.com/e/porn-and-bernies-chances/>

⁹⁹ Jordan Shanks, Ali Ahmed, and Mislav Belobrajdic, "Palestine, Turkmenistan and Gavin McInnes", *The Friendlyjordies Podcast*, November 18, 2019, <https://friendlyjordies.podbean.com/e/palestine-turkmenistan-and-gavin-mcinnnes/>

“extremely privileged backgrounds”.¹⁰⁰ Journalists are drawn from the ruling class – 99 percent of them are “hatchlings of wealthy well-connected families”.¹⁰¹ Female, non-white, and LGBTQ+ voices in the media therefore speak only for the elite. Shanks resents this group for having the gall to lecture people like himself – “from fucking working-class families” – about privilege and oppression.¹⁰² They look down on the intolerant proletariat with an “unwarranted sense of moral superiority”.¹⁰³

Shanks insists that, as with “common enemies” in the past, the media uses identity politics to distribute flak. People who threaten the status quo are accused of being in league with the enemy. The media finds ways to smear dissidents as somehow racist, sexist, homo- or transphobic.¹⁰⁴ Such accusations are now “the mainstream media’s go-to attack to destroy someone’s credibility, just like in the fifties with McCarthyism”.¹⁰⁵

Shanks claims, finally, that the media uses identity politics to help advertisers sell more products. Marketing professionals at “progressive” news outlets lavish coverage on feminist, anti-racist, and LGBTQ+ rights campaigns because this whips up the emotions of readers.¹⁰⁶ Attaching a brand name to these stories is especially successful, because the “spark of emotion” makes people susceptible to advertisements.¹⁰⁷

Despite differences in their emphases and sophistication, there are many parallels between this narrative and the criticisms directed at contemporary social movement activism by aforementioned socialist authors. Many elements of his argument are reminiscent of specific tenets of the critique advanced by Fraser, Reed, and Michaels (as discussed in Chapter Two). With this literature in mind, it becomes clear that Shanks

¹⁰⁰ Jordan Shanks, Ali Ahmed, and Mislav Belobrajdic, “Political Philosophy’s and Quotas”, *The Friendlyjordies Podcast*, February 1, 2018, <https://friendlyjordies.podbean.com/e/political-philosophys-and-quotas/>; friendlyjordies, “Why Triple J is Complete Trash”, *YouTube*, 5:36, August 26, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xji4u55hPOw>

¹⁰¹ friendlyjordies, “BOYCOTT THE MAINSTREAM MEDIA!”.

¹⁰² Shanks, Ahmed, and Belobrajdic, “Political Philosophy’s and Quotas”.

¹⁰³ friendlyjordies, “The Worst Clickbait Site in Australia”, *YouTube*, 12:39, December 16, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uo-kRc6-pqI>

¹⁰⁴ friendlyjordies, “The Video-YouTube Didn’t Want You To See”.

¹⁰⁵ Jordan Shanks, Ali Ahmed, and Mislav Belobrajdic, “Racism, Witch hunts and Pale Hipsters”, *The Friendlyjordies Podcast*, December 13, 2020, <https://friendlyjordies.podbean.com/e/racism-witch-hunts-and-pale-hipsters-friendlyjordies-podcast/>

¹⁰⁶ friendlyjordies, “Hipster Clickbait “News” Site Annihilated”, *YouTube*, 7:49, August 30, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i4aZbdzooRw>; Jordan Shanks, Ali Ahmed, and Mislav Belobrajdic, “White Male! SJWs, Political Correctness, Trump V. Kim Jon, Ali Opens a Restaurant”, *The Friendlyjordies Podcast*, March 15, 2018, <https://friendlyjordies.podbean.com/e/white-male-sjws-political-correctness-trump-v-kim-jon-ali-opens-a-restaurant/>

¹⁰⁷ friendlyjordies, “Hipster Clickbait “News” Site Annihilated”; Shanks, Ahmed, and Belobrajdic, “White Male! SJWs, Political Correctness, Trump V. Kim Jon, Ali Opens a Restaurant”.

possesses his own conception of progressive neoliberalism. Indeed, he states that “socially progressive, economically neoliberal pugs ... infest our televisions and newspapers”.¹⁰⁸ He accuses outlets of “spreading neoliberal bullshit, but ... hiding it under SJW bullshit”.¹⁰⁹ Given their similarity to serious academic critique, I weigh the merit of these potentially justified complaints in the next chapter.

Moreover, these authors contend (in Fraser’s words) that left-wing discourse which “frontally challenge[s]” identity politics can reach people who are currently drawn to reactionary populism because they dislike corporatised strands of social movement activism.¹¹⁰ Next, I analyse the ways in which Shanks targets his political commentary at one group of reactionary populists in particular: potential and actual members of the alt-right/-lite.

Keeping up with the (Alex) Joneses

Audience composition

To begin with, Shanks courts an audience of young men. His audience is between 85 and 90 percent male.¹¹¹ 75 percent of his audience is aged under 35.¹¹² Up to 70 percent of attendees at his live shows are male.¹¹³ He jokes that fans are all “gangly male teenagers”.¹¹⁴

More specifically, Shanks gears his output towards rudderless young men who spend a lot of time online. Many of his early YouTube videos indicate an audience of men who feel alienated from the national mainstream. Shanks often uploads comedy skits without

¹⁰⁸ friendlyjordies, “WHY DONALD TRUMP WON”.

¹⁰⁹ friendlyjordies, “How the Australian Media Plays You”, *YouTube*, 11:13, March 7, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DPIKMVrfFDY>

¹¹⁰ Fraser, “Against Progressive Neoliberalism, A New Progressive Populism”; Fraser, “The End of Progressive Neoliberalism”.

¹¹¹ friendlyjordies, “1 EA\$Y STEP 2 MAKE bank”, *YouTube*, 6:07, September 2, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2N1KHV7kb78>; Riki Scanlan, “Friendlyjordies: ‘there’s no real satire in Australia’”, *Honi Soit*, April 19, 2016, <https://honisoit.com/2016/04/friendlyjordies-theres-no-real-satire-in-australia/>; Steve Zemek, “Why John Barilaro wants FriendlyJordies lawsuit decided by judge”, *The Australian*, August 31, 2021, <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/breaking-news/why-john-barilaro-wants-friendlyjordies-lawsuit-decided-by-judge/news-story/eb0f940f09a0e7edae9e335afb167002>

¹¹² Zemek, “Why John Barilaro wants FriendlyJordies lawsuit decided by judge”.

¹¹³ friendlyjordies, “Woke ‘Fanmail’ DESTROYED”, *YouTube*, 14:00, April 20, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8o5wNFj4Y5s>

¹¹⁴ friendlyjordies, “MAFS Vol. 4: Toilets, Toothbrushes and Turmoil”, *YouTube*, 13:54, March 6, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6S34ziqdY1>

clear political messages.¹¹⁵ He refers to these videos as “candy” which entices viewers to his channel.¹¹⁶ Skits from his first years on YouTube often ridicule touchstones of Australian young adulthood and the tastes of mainstream Australia. “Schoolies” celebrations are ruined by annoying “jocks”.¹¹⁷ Young holidaymakers have turned Bali into “an oversized pig pen”.¹¹⁸ Dance music festivals are filled with interchangeable muscle-bound morons.¹¹⁹ Top 40 radio is an “auditory sewerage system”.¹²⁰ Shanks mocks Australia’s supposed obsession with sport. The AFL amounts to pointless “fumbling around on the ground”. Meathead NRL players are liable to “shit in the hallway of a hotel”.¹²¹ It is embarrassing that cricketers are awarded Australian of the Year.¹²² In such videos, Shanks speaks to men who feel disconnected from the national mainstream.

Shanks has tweaked his output since 2019 to focus more explicitly on this demographic. He has since paid close attention to trends on YouTube. He is “perpetually” on the website “to figure out what the algorithm’s doing”.¹²³ His team are “slaves to the algorithm”.¹²⁴ He now tailors his output to maximise views and traction on social media.¹²⁵ Shanks laughs that he has become “a hermit that stays in this digital world”.¹²⁶ He follows examples set by successful YouTubers (in particular Felix Kjellberg, a.k.a “PewDiePie”).¹²⁷ This research showed Shanks, in 2019, that infrequent videos full of

¹¹⁵ friendlyjordies, “Shit We All Thought About Harry Potter”, *YouTube*, 2:00, June 3, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=stGUAua20ZI>; friendlyjordies, “The Roman Emperor Elagabalus”, *YouTube*, 4:09, July 4, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j7ZrJblUEHY>;

¹¹⁶ Jordan Shanks, “Alex Jones dishes some DEEP TRUTH”.

¹¹⁷ friendlyjordies, “Schoolies! Da tyme of ur lyf”, *YouTube*, 4:00, November 18, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XqN_q2Wfm0A

¹¹⁸ friendlyjordies, “How 2 Liv it up in Bali”, *YouTube*, 4:38, October 29, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=96NrIz_khQM

¹¹⁹ friendlyjordies, “Reddy 2 Get Maggot At Stereo!?” , *YouTube*, 4:44, November 27, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LbXQXKXAHfE>

¹²⁰ friendlyjordies, “Top 40: The Soundtrack To Societal Collapse”, *YouTube*, 5:09, November 14, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SI7oqRGlov4>

¹²¹ friendlyjordies, “NRL Grand Final 2013 Sydney Roosters vs Manly Sea Eagles”, *YouTube*, 2:39, October 2, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=az2kB4gyFak>

¹²² friendlyjordies, “The Ashes 2013 summed up”, *YouTube*, 3:14, December 5, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rAEft3eigIY>

¹²³ Jordan Shanks, “The Power Of Being A Lone Wolf”, *YouTube*, 17:06, January 19, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CwJNfeTxq-U>

¹²⁴ Street, “Jordan Shanks’ Friendly Game”.

¹²⁵ Jordan Shanks, “GET OFF SOCIAL MEDIA”, *YouTube*, 10:02, August 6, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c8GogPFRLNk>

¹²⁶ Shanks, Ahmed, and Belobrajdic, “Racism, Witch hunts and Pale Hipsters”.

¹²⁷ friendlyjordies, “Can The Left Meme?”, *YouTube*, 9:23, July 28, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=upwVnBfCbSo>; friendlyjordies, “spiritually destroyed by memetic content”, *YouTube*, 8:07, November 18, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hfEkTt3k5FE>

“in-depth research” would not grow his audience. He needed to “release content daily”.¹²⁸ Shanks now uploads four videos per week. He now uploads more quick-to-produce non-political videos. He provides off-the-cuff commentary on clips from reality television or popular memes.¹²⁹ He laughs at viewers for lapping up this “clickbait”.¹³⁰ Shanks has also changed the format of his political videos to allow for faster production. His newer videos feature fewer edits and cutaway skits, and more monologues to camera. Shanks states that videos which take “fifteen minutes to film” are more popular than others which take “two weeks to write and research”.¹³¹

This decision to go “full-blown YouTube” has coincided with an increased focus on dislocated young men invested in Internet culture and geekdom.¹³² Shanks now makes esoteric references which assume that viewers are familiar with niche Internet personalities.¹³³ He incorporates the latest memes and Internet slang (such “OK boomer” and “simp”) into his political commentary.¹³⁴ He references esoteric, flash-in-the-pan Internet controversies.¹³⁵ Joking at the expense of his audience, he now characterises them as men who masturbate to Instagram models dressed as anime characters, and as incels.¹³⁶ Compared to his more idiosyncratic jokes in the past, Shanks now admits that

¹²⁸ Jordan Shanks, “What to do when you feel stuck”, *YouTube*, 11:32, January 26, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bLNB_pwH_aE

¹²⁹ friendlyjordies, “Bachelorette: Cyclone Jamie's WARPETH!”, *YouTube*, 20:26, November 6, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DF90Ezi3kYE>; friendlyjordies, “MAFS Vol. 1: The Trashiest Season Yet?”, *YouTube*, 13:21, February 20, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uC9Xon1C3lo>; friendlyjordies, “#KoalaKiller 2.0 Meme Review”, *YouTube*, 10:30, July 13, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kQHi2EcW1tk>; friendlyjordies, “AUSSIE ELECTION MEME REVIEW!”, *YouTube*, 9:49, May 6, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=07oAaqU54bg>

¹³⁰ friendlyjordies, “10 Reasons NOT to Visit Australia”, *YouTube*, 5:55, June 22, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MW5A5ut7TXc>; friendlyjordies, “MAFS Vol. 3: The Dumbest Thing We've Ever Heard”, *YouTube*, 15:19, February 26, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3wrC6YDuB5g>

¹³¹ friendlyjordies, “Reviewing Aussie Food”, *YouTube*, 8:52, February 28, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ObldxQwnfTQ>

¹³² friendlyjordies, “JOKER Meme Review + Movie Review”, *YouTube*, 6:32, October 6, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PqKyn7GwOhM>

¹³³ friendlyjordies, “Warhammer 40k: Nerd Emperor Crowned”, *YouTube*, 16:41, July 23, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i0OtTp-Os84>

¹³⁴ friendlyjordies, “you ok, boomer?”, *YouTube*, 20:45, March 2, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=plA6qTGFG_w; friendlyjordies, “simp.”, *YouTube*, 13:53, April 8, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KhjyLwFX5ek>; friendlyjordies, “Australia's Banning Protesting?”.

¹³⁵ friendlyjordies, “I DRANK BELLE DELPHINE'S BATH WATER!!!!????”, *YouTube*, 6:09, July 7, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QBvY8Yyny2I>

¹³⁶ friendlyjordies, “JOKER Meme Review + Movie Review”; friendlyjordies, “I DRANK BELLE DELPHINE'S BATH WATER!!!!????”.

he scrambles for ways to include references to Internet personalities and memes in videos about politics.¹³⁷

He now also engages with geek media and hobbies. Unlike Benjamin, Shanks appears to lack a personal interest in geekdom. In 2019, he began releasing videos about *Warhammer*.¹³⁸ Shanks jokes that he was forced into the hobby “to appease his ravenous nerd fan base”.¹³⁹ He laughs that viewers have an insatiable desire for *Warhammer* content.¹⁴⁰ Shanks incorporates political commentary into these videos; he paints his figurines in the colours of the Australian Council of Trade Unions and compares Coalition politicians to *Warhammer* villains.¹⁴¹ Despite his opinion (voiced on his self-help channel) that video games are a waste of time, Shanks began uploading videos in 2020 of himself playing popular new games.¹⁴² He comes across as an inexperienced gamer. When Shanks asks viewers to recommend games for future videos, he asks them to “help me out with some nerd shit” because he is trying to “relate to YouTube”.¹⁴³

Shanks therefore tailors his videos to mimic successful YouTube content, and to be boosted by the website’s algorithms. He believes his best bet for popularity is to target men and boys interested in Internet culture and geekdom. He actively courts this group by engaging with their preoccupations and appealing to their tastes. This strategy has been fruitful – he gained more views and new subscribers in 2019 than any previous year.¹⁴⁴ Shanks has found therefore success in addressing the demographic also targeted by alt-right/-lite discourse.

¹³⁷ friendlyjordies, “Australia’s Plot to Kill YouTube, Kevin Rudd weighs in”.

¹³⁸ friendlyjordies, “If Warhammer 40k was Australian”, *YouTube*, 9:28, June 23, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d0TdL46jmVc>

¹³⁹ friendlyjordies, “Grown Man Buys Warhammer 40k”, *YouTube*, 12:28, July 15, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NGFsnFllv2Y>

¹⁴⁰ friendlyjordies, “Horrifying Meme Onslaught”, *YouTube*, 7:22, August 19, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oCErcBdIA6c>

¹⁴¹ friendlyjordies, “Warhammer 40k: BATTLE REPORT!”, *YouTube*, 12:04, November 27, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rdEu5hKD1Qo>; friendlyjordies, “He makes me sick”, *YouTube*, 7:12, April 1, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XJ0PkkoAIVs>; friendlyjordies, “Koala Killer meme review”, *YouTube*, 8:53, January 29, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dnYODStOWIg>

¹⁴² Jordan Shanks, “A Woman’s Greatest Strength Is Their Greatest Weakness”, *YouTube*, 19:23, June 10, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dXuXhk4RE-k>; friendlyjordies, “30yo Boomer plays Half Life”, *YouTube*, 11:35, March 26, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YgFNgK-nVKo>

¹⁴³ friendlyjordies, “Clueless Boomer: Half Life Alyx 2”, *YouTube*, 13:16, April 26, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r6WdBPInxNM>

¹⁴⁴ “friendlyjordies”, *Social Blade*.

Vulgar and politically incorrect comedy

Shanks appeals to this cohort's appreciation of crude, politically incorrect jokes. He considers himself a comedian, and incorporates jokes into all of his political commentary. Shanks wears wigs and costumes, affects character voices, and makes constant pop culture references. He pokes fun at himself as "a guy that ... dresses up in cheap wigs for a living".¹⁴⁵ His "recipe" for political content is to combine references to Chomsky and *The Simpsons*.¹⁴⁶

His joke are often vulgar personal attacks. Shanks mocks the appearance and comportment of public figures. He is a self-described "massive cunt to people I even remotely disagree with".¹⁴⁷ Shanks admits having "made a career out of being gratuitously nasty to people".¹⁴⁸ He points to his own popularity as evidence that this approach appeals to people more than courteous debate: "Look how many eyeballs you get when you use *ad hominem*s".¹⁴⁹ In comments which echo Amber A'Lee Frost (of *Chapo Trap House*) on "political vulgarity", he states that norms of civility have "always been used as a method of shutting the working class out of stating that we want a government that works for us".¹⁵⁰ Such norms are enforced by an elite which finds that "it's very easy to be polite when you're permanently in power".¹⁵¹

This contempt for civility leads Shanks to "say un-PC shit unapologetically". He insists that "normal fucking human beings" tell jokes about race, gender, and sexuality.¹⁵² He defends his right to joke about all topics, and "refuse[s] to not make jokes about women, or transsexuals, or gay people".¹⁵³ He defends ethnic stereotypes as "the height of

¹⁴⁵ friendlyjordies, "You won't believe what Pauline Hanson did", *YouTube*, 7:18, January 26, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RIkikEzFw5Y>

¹⁴⁶ friendlyjordies, "Horriying Meme Onslaught".

¹⁴⁷ friendlyjordies, "Why VICE is Absolute Garbage", *YouTube*, 16:35, February 11, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4jPDLi4xDpc>

¹⁴⁸ friendlyjordies, "SCHOOLIES IS RUINED", *YouTube*, 11:11, December 6, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-DynNUG8uaQ>

¹⁴⁹ friendlyjordies, "bag lady", *YouTube*, 9:30, August 3, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wHDRroQMSP4>

¹⁵⁰ friendlyjordies, "Sky News Host Attacks Friendlyjordies", *YouTube*, 11:22, September 17, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4ETu9QHJIGM>

¹⁵¹ Jordan Shanks, Ali Ahmed, and Mislav Belobrajdic, "Kristina Keneally vs Tu Le", *The Friendlyjordies Podcast*, September 18, 2021, <https://friendlyjordies.podbean.com/e/kristina-keneally-vs-tu-le-friendlyjordies-podcast/>

¹⁵² friendlyjordies, "Sky News Host Attacks Friendlyjordies".

¹⁵³ Jordan Shanks, "Neel + Jordan: Group Identities"; Jordan Shanks, Ali Ahmed, and Mislav Belobrajdic, "Change the Date and Australian Identity", *The Friendlyjordies Podcast*, May 1, 2019, <https://friendlyjordies.podbean.com/e/change-the-date-and-australian-identity/>

comedy”, and often affects foreign accents.¹⁵⁴ He uses people with disabilities as a punchline.¹⁵⁵ He considers it “a simple fact” that “people with foreign accents, people that are ugly, people with deformities are funny”.¹⁵⁶ Shanks insist that only over-sensitive people get offended and “finger-waggle at people’s jokes”.¹⁵⁷

Shanks brings this sensibility to bear against political opponents. As he sees it, these “petty” attacks “make society a better place”.¹⁵⁸ For instance, Shanks describes one News Corporation columnist as a “ratty unlikeable cunt”.¹⁵⁹ He calls another “Witch Face” to draw attention to his facial moles.¹⁶⁰ Shanks portrays former prime minister Tony Abbott as a moronic Bible-thumper whose lack of charisma makes it “very hard to tell the difference between him and a corpse”.¹⁶¹ He mocks Malcolm Turnbull as a pampered fop who recoils in disgust when “commoners” touch him.¹⁶² He insults Scott Morrison as a “smug, talentless, tub of lard” and (thanks to his Pentecostal faith) a “tongue-talking freak”.¹⁶³ Shanks mocks Rinehart’s weight and supposed ugliness.¹⁶⁴ He calls Gladys Berejiklian (the former Premier of New South Wales) a “ferret-woman”.¹⁶⁵ Barilaro is a “fat-lipped pile of rat vomit”.¹⁶⁶ Shanks also bring ethnic stereotypes into these attacks. He affects a “wog” accent (a stereotype of Australians with Mediterranean backgrounds) to imitate Berejiklian and Barilaro, who are of Armenian and Italian descent

¹⁵⁴ Jordan Shanks, Ali Ahmed, and Mislav Belobrajdic, “Comedy, Bullying and Racism”, *The Friendlyjordies Podcast*, March 28, 2019, <https://friendlyjordies.podbean.com/e/comedy-bullying-and-racism/>

¹⁵⁵ friendlyjordies, “Receptionist Duties”, YouTube, 3:05, March 13, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fAMZwglCHqo>; friendlyjordies, “All About Australia”, YouTube, 2:56, June 23, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C_95eovZd0w

¹⁵⁶ Jordan Shanks, Ali Ahmed, and Mislav Belobrajdic, “Constitutional Recognition and Assad”, *The Friendlyjordies Podcast*, July 31, 2019, <https://friendlyjordies.podbean.com/e/constitutional-recognition-and-assad/>

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Jordan Shanks, “Jordan Peterson's Dark Side”.

¹⁵⁹ friendlyjordies, “simp.”.

¹⁶⁰ friendlyjordies, “Andrew Bolt attempts to spit on Gough Whitlam's grave”; friendlyjordies, “Setting the Record Straight on Gough Whitlam 2”.

¹⁶¹ friendlyjordies, “THE DUMBEST DECISION EVER MADE - Australia repeals the Carbon Tax ”.

¹⁶² friendlyjordies, “The Time I Bumped into Sir Malcolm”, YouTube, 2:08, February 3, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qXgYlRX18ok>; friendlyjordies, “The TPP Won't Let Me Be”, YouTube, 5:00, October 15, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Npl7fuTvANG>

¹⁶³ friendlyjordies, “8chan has infiltrated the government”, YouTube, 11:30, October 14, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m_yXg6Gr3OQ; friendlyjordies, “Scomo”, YouTube, 30:28, August 14, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oZXvGfoV0uo>; friendlyjordies, “Scott Morrison is sick.”, YouTube, 8:03, August 13, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=th_6wT_BVck

¹⁶⁴ friendlyjordies, “Inside The Mind Of Gina Rinehart”; friendlyjordies, “Australia was almost NUKED”, YouTube, 7:03, June 4, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yIph6M2LCWY>

¹⁶⁵ friendlyjordies, “EMERGENCY! Why Australia is Burning”.

¹⁶⁶ friendlyjordies, “Australia’s Burning: The Blame Game”.

respectively.¹⁶⁷ His ridicule of Barilaro, in particular, involves many Italian stereotypes, as when he calls Barilaro a “ball of grease” and a Mafia don.¹⁶⁸

This vituperative, politically incorrect style has caused controversy. Palmer threatened to sue for defamation in 2019 after Shanks called him “Fatty McFuckhead” and a “dense Humpty Dumpty”.¹⁶⁹ The Liberal Party politician Nicolle Flint has labelled Shanks a “misogynistic Internet troll and foul-mouthed bully” in parliament because he insults the appearance of prominent women.¹⁷⁰ Berejiklian and Barilaro each complained in 2020 that his attacks on them were racist.¹⁷¹ Barilaro’s defamation suit against Shanks alleged that the “vile and racist” nature of his commentary brought Barilaro into public “odium, ridicule and contempt”.¹⁷²

The New South Wales police have taken the view that this vitriol has no place in public life. In response to complaints from Barilaro’s office about his videos, police began investigating Shanks in December 2020.¹⁷³ He has since been under investigation by the Fixated Persons Investigations Unit, a counter-terrorism squad created in 2017 to monitor individuals with “an obsessive preoccupation” who may be capable of terroristic violence.¹⁷⁴ In June 2021, a producer employed by Shanks was arrested by this unit and charged with stalking or intimidating Barilaro, with “intent to cause fear of physical or

¹⁶⁷ friendlyjordies, “FRIENDLYJORDIES IS CANCELLED”, *YouTube*, 9:44, July 3, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rYD-et6UPy0>

¹⁶⁸ friendlyjordies, “bruz”.

¹⁶⁹ friendlyjordies, “fatty”, *YouTube*, 26:13, September 23, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WmJ7CSRRCDM>

¹⁷⁰ Nicolle Flint, *Parliamentary Debates*, House of Representatives (Commonwealth), August 12, 2021, 72-73, https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/chamber/hansardr/f83fb22e-3b2c-4cf2-9b21-0fe97d5f77a7/toc_pdf/House%20of%20Representatives_2021_08_12_9026.pdf;fileType=application%20Epdf

¹⁷¹ James O’Doherty, “YouTube funnyman in hot water over mocking accents of Gladys Berejiklian, John Barilaro”, *The Daily Telegraph*, June 21, 2020, <https://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/news/nsw/youtube-funnyman-in-hot-water-over-mocking-accents-of-gladys-berejiklian-john-barilaro/news-story/a1d1d8db8e18dd33b1a7367e3393414c>; James O’Doherty, “Labor leader’s controversial new friend”, *The Daily Telegraph*, September 21, 2020, <https://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/news/nsw/jordan-shanks-labor-members-express-concern-over-their-leader-getting-too-close-to-comic/news-story/abf3720d6c112dec0405439b2313e6b1>

¹⁷² Michael McGowan, “YouTube comedian Friendlyjordies sued for defamation by NSW deputy premier John Barilaro”, *The Guardian*, May 28, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2021/may/28/youtube-comedian-friendlyjordies-sued-for-defamation-by-nsw-deputy-premier-john-barilaro>

¹⁷³ New South Wales Legislative Council Budget Estimates, “Portfolio Committee 5 - Legal Affairs: Police”, September 1, 2021, <https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/lcdocs/transcripts/2696/Transcript%20-%20UNCORRECTED%20-%20PC5%20-%20Police%20-%201%20September%202021.pdf>

¹⁷⁴ Keiran Hardy, “Friendlyjordies producer arrest: what is the NSW Police Fixated Persons Investigations Unit and when is it used?”, *The Conversation*, June 16, 2021, <https://theconversation.com/friendlyjordies-producer-arrest-what-is-the-nsw-police-fixated-persons-investigations-unit-and-when-is-it-used-162758>

mental harm”.¹⁷⁵ He was arrested hours after accosting Barilaro in public about the defamation suit (while filming the stunt for YouTube).¹⁷⁶ New South Wales police believe that Shanks is not merely uncivil – he causes mental harm to opponents and demonstrates dangerous “fixations”. These developments have triggered backlash. Many media organisations (including *The Guardian*, the ABC, and Sky News) have protested that the investigation of Shanks, and prosecution of his employee, criminalises satire and undermines freedom of the press.¹⁷⁷ Rudd stated that Australians should be “chilled to the bone” by this “threat to free speech”.¹⁷⁸ New South Wales police dropped the charges in March 2022 without explanation.¹⁷⁹

Shanks packages his political messages in crude, aggressive, politically incorrect comedy. As mentioned, the alt-right/-lite also adopts this style to target young men fond of politically incorrect transgression.

Alt-right/-lite slang and references

Shanks also addresses people who are already interested in the alt-right/-lite. He assumes that knowing references to its memes, personalities, and controversies help viewers relate to his content.

First, Shanks uses memes and slang associated with the alt-right/-lite. He sometimes appropriates this material to critique the alt-right/-lite itself. When Shanks criticises Paul Joseph Watson (of InfoWars) for denying the role of climate change in bushfires, he calls upon lingo from the manosphere:

¹⁷⁵ Christopher Knaus, “Friendlyjordies producer charged with stalking John Barilaro”, *The Guardian*, June 14, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2021/jun/14/friendlyjordies-jordan-shanks-producer-charged-allegedly-stalking-john-barilaro>

¹⁷⁶ friendlyjordies, “arrested”, *YouTube*, June 14, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OXtq4a8829g>

¹⁷⁷ Christopher Knaus, “Friendlyjordies arrest by NSW police fixated persons unit questioned by former top prosecutor”, *The Guardian*, June 18, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2021/jun/18/friendlyjordies-arrest-by-nsw-police-fixated-persons-unit-questioned-by-former-top-prosecutor>; ABC News In-depth, “Friendlyjordies, free speech and defamation | Media Watch”, *YouTube*, 16:56, June 22, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gQS1N84Tius>; Sky News Australia, “‘Violent arrest’ of Friendlyjordies producer ‘disturbs me’: Bolt”, *YouTube*, 7:37, June 30, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EBOSdEfX97w>

¹⁷⁸ Kevin Rudd, “Kevin Rudd: why I’m donating to the defence fund for friendlyjordies’ producer”, *Crikey*, June 21, 2021, <https://www.crikey.com.au/2021/06/21/kevin-rudd-defence-fund-friendlyjordies/>

¹⁷⁹ Jake Lapham, “Police drop Barilaro stalking charges against Friendlyjordies producer Kristo Langker”, *ABC News*, March 10, 2022, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-03-10/police-drop-stalking-charges-on-friendlyjordies-producer/100899334>

I know you spend a lot of time on 4chan[,] ... so allow me to put this in an analogy you'd understand – rainforests are normally as wet as Staceys getting into a Chevy with a Chad. Now they're as dry as when they see ... brilliant polemicists such as yourself.¹⁸⁰

To insult Stefan Molyneux (a Canadian white nationalist YouTuber) for his xenophobia, Shanks calls him an “SJW cuck” who wants a “safe space” without immigrants.¹⁸¹ Shanks also turns a far-Right meme onto rank-and-file members of the alt-right/-lite. The “NPC” meme references “non-player characters” in video games, which are controlled by computer code. The alt-right/-lite calls social justice activists “NPCs” to imply that they parrot progressive orthodoxy and cannot think for themselves.¹⁸² Shanks instead labels fans of alt-right/-lite YouTubers “NPCs” because they spout “a mishmash of ideas” about collectivism or individualism without understanding them.¹⁸³ Shanks calls fans of the reactionary YouTuber Steven Crowder “NPCs”, and then laughs that they would be outraged by his use of their meme.¹⁸⁴

The alt-right/-lite's memes and terminology also make up part of the day-to-day vocabulary Shanks uses to discuss other topics. People who think of the Liberal Party as competent economic managers have “the most NPC ... opinion you could possibly muster” because they believe what the commercial news tells them.¹⁸⁵ Fossil fuel lobbyists who threatened to sue Shanks for defamation are “triggered ... snowflakes”.¹⁸⁶ Morrison's lack of leadership makes him a “beta”.¹⁸⁷ In a poor media performance, Morrison was “cucked” by the interviewer.¹⁸⁸ Because he thinks that Morrison's mismanagement of the 2019-2020 bushfires was criminal, Shanks sells “ScoMo For Prison” merchandise which mimics the “Hillary For Prison” merchandise sold by

¹⁸⁰ friendlyjordies, “Bushfire Liar EXPOSED!”, *YouTube*, 10:37, January 17, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MAqdSZmOy5s>

¹⁸¹ friendlyjordies, “AUSSIE vs. LOW IQ CANADIAN”.

¹⁸² Kevin Roose, “What Is NPC, the Pro-Trump Internet's New Favorite Insult?”, *The New York Times*, October 16, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/16/us/politics/npc-twitter-ban.html>

¹⁸³ Jordan Shanks, “I'm a NPC AMA”, *YouTube*, 14:39, October 26, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HoE1gRMGgUE>

¹⁸⁴ friendlyjordies, “In Defence of Greta Thunberg”, *YouTube*, 10:18, October 1, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RWo65Uhekjs>

¹⁸⁵ friendlyjordies, “AUSTRALIA'S HIGHEST EVER DEBT”, *YouTube*, 9:59, July 25, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p8Xf1OI-wJ8&>

¹⁸⁶ friendlyjordies, “KochBlocked”, *YouTube*, 39:20, May 11, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BPcsx9l5eNM>

¹⁸⁷ friendlyjordies, “10 Reasons NOT to Visit Australia”.

¹⁸⁸ friendlyjordies, “Scomo”.

InfoWars in 2016.¹⁸⁹ He criticises American imperialism by saying that the has been “redpilled” on the topic.¹⁹⁰ Shanks elsewhere copies a video format from Crowder, who invites passers-by to challenge a contentious statement in his “Change My Mind” segment.¹⁹¹ Crowder starts from conservative premises like “Male Privilege is a Myth” or “There Are Only Two Genders”, but Shanks starts from premises like “Liberals Are Terrible Economic Managers” and “Nuclear Power Sucks”.¹⁹² These casual deployments of the alt-right/-lite’s memes and lingo suggest that Shanks is targeting people who are familiar with it.

Shanks also uploads videos about “hot topics” which animate reactionary YouTubers. His take on these controversies usually includes perspectives from the Left. Shanks uploaded a video about the Gillette commercial mentioned in the last chapter, but claimed not to care that it was “mean about men”. Shanks instead berated Gillette for taking a stand on social justice issues when its supply chains involve child labour, deforestation, and animal testing.¹⁹³ He uploaded a video when many reactionary YouTubers were moved to defend the comedian Dave Chappelle from allegations that his Netflix specials are bigoted.¹⁹⁴ Benjamin, for his part, celebrated Chappelle’s jokes about transgender people and the #MeToo movement as brave jabs at the enforcers of political correctness.¹⁹⁵ Shanks side-stepped the appropriateness of Chappelle’s comments, and instead focused the corporate affiliations of the “progressive” news outlets which criticised him. He took the opportunity to criticise some large financial institutions for their role in the GFC.¹⁹⁶ Shanks uploaded a video when, to the outrage of far-Right

¹⁸⁹ friendlyjordies, “Why he should be in prison”, *YouTube*, 7:32, February 7, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EHhWOMCFdTA>

¹⁹⁰ friendlyjordies, “Stephen Colbert Terrifies Me”, *YouTube*, 8:39, July 11, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H68KSMNnMXQ>

¹⁹¹ friendlyjordies, “Adpocalypse is PROBLEMATIC”, *YouTube*, 8:35, June 11, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o6C6cYC8kG8>

¹⁹² friendlyjordies, “Liberals Are Terrible Economic Managers | Change My Mind”, *YouTube*, 1:25:49, May 14, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aEHTiVmBC6g>; friendlyjordies, “NUCLEAR POWER SUCKS - Change My Mind”, *YouTube*, 2:10:49, December 13, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v5K1ImzI24M>

¹⁹³ friendlyjordies, “The Project Sinks to NEW LOW (+Gillette Hypocrisy)”.

¹⁹⁴ Tomi Obaro, “Dave Chappelle Doesn’t Need To Punch Down”, *Buzzfeed News*, August 27, 2019, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/tomiobaro/dave-chappelle-transphobic-netflix-special-sticks-and-stones>; Taylor Hosking, “You Can Definitely Skip Dave Chappelle’s New Netflix Special ‘Sticks & Stones’”, *Vice*, August 28, 2019, https://www.vice.com/en_au/article/59ngpb/you-can-definitely-skip-dave-chappelles-new-netflix-special-sticks-and-stones

¹⁹⁵ The Thinkery, “Dave Chappelle Triggers the Entire Woke Left”, *YouTube*, 11:05, August 27, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kGdJ49U1oHY>

¹⁹⁶ friendlyjordies, “BUZZFEED CANCELS DAVE CHAPPELLE”.

Youtubers, the website demonetised Crowder after he directed homophobic and racist insults at a Vox journalist.¹⁹⁷ Benjamin's video on the topic characterised Vox as the "radical Left" and castigated the "elites" at YouTube for siding with them.¹⁹⁸ Shanks ridiculed the supposition that Vox constitutes "the Left", and pointed out its ties to Goldman Sachs and opposition to social democratic reforms. He used the controversy to criticise corporate influence in the media.¹⁹⁹ Moreover, the titles of these videos mimic those of alt-right/-lite equivalents. New viewers clicking on them might expect all-out reactionary fulmination. Shanks tries to capture the attention of people who follow news stories resonant within the alt-right/-lite, and includes left-wing perspectives in his take on events.

Unlike his critical mentions of Watson or Crowder, Shanks also makes references to alt-right/-lite personalities which imply that he and his viewers are mutual fans of theirs. He makes frequent references to Alex Jones. He treats Jones as "performance art".²⁰⁰ He listens to hours of InfoWars as entertainment and to relax.²⁰¹ He inserts references to the show into unrelated videos.²⁰² Shanks often jokes that he is "Australia's Alex Jones" because he similarly purports to provide an alternative to the corrupt mainstream media.²⁰³ He often imitates Jones when asking for donations (instructing viewers to "help fight the InfoWar").²⁰⁴

Shanks also makes positive references to alt-right/-lite personalities which lack this sense of irony. He considers Milo Yiannopoulos a harmless provocateur who does not merit

¹⁹⁷ Benjamin Goggin, "YouTube's week from hell: How the debate over free speech online exploded after a conservative star with millions of subscribers was accused of homophobic harassment", *Business Insider*, June 10, 2019, <https://www.businessinsider.com/steven-crowder-youtube-speech-carlos-maza-explained-youtube-2019-6/?r=AU&IR=T>; Emily Stewart, "'We don't want to be knee-jerk': YouTube responds to Vox on its harassment policies", *Vox*, June 10, 2019, <https://www.vox.com/recode/2019/6/10/18660364/vox-youtube-code-conference-susan-wojcicki-carlos-maza>

¹⁹⁸ Sargon of Akkad, "The Knives Come Out: #VoxAdpocalypse", *YouTube*, 11:57, June 5, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bBUVaXwQGoA>

¹⁹⁹ friendlyjordies, "Adpocalypse is PROBLEMATIC".

²⁰⁰ Jordan Shanks and Ali Ahmed, "Book Balancing game- Ali's African Heartland- South Africa", *The Friendlyjordies Podcast*, August 10, 2018, <https://friendlyjordies.podbean.com/e/book-balancing-game-alis-african-heartland-south-africa/>

²⁰¹ Jordan Shanks, "Alex Jones dishes some DEEP TRUTH".

²⁰² friendlyjordies, "Secret Dictatorship".

²⁰³ friendlyjordies, "Adpocalypse is PROBLEMATIC"; friendlyjordies, "BOYCOTT THE MAINSTREAM MEDIA!".

²⁰⁴ friendlyjordies, "Australia's UNLOSABLE Election", *YouTube*, 10:35, May 22, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DEUnTPMmixE>; friendlyjordies, "The Media is Lying to You"; friendlyjordies, "BOYCOTT THE MAINSTREAM MEDIA!".

hostile media coverage, underplaying his sexism and links to white nationalism.²⁰⁵ He calls Gavin McInnes (the Canadian founder of the Proud Boys who holds white nationalist views) a “hilarious” entertainer and downplays his racism and sexism.²⁰⁶ In particular, Shanks often shows admiration for members of the IDW. Shanks jokes about elements of Joe Rogan’s podcast (such as Rogan’s favourite topics and verbal idiosyncrasies) which assume familiarity with it.²⁰⁷ Shanks makes similar esoteric references to *Making Sense with Sam Harris*.²⁰⁸ He praises the podcast for its high-brow, intellectual discussions.²⁰⁹ Shanks makes knowing references to Ben Shapiro’s content.²¹⁰ As discussed below, he makes frequent references to Jordan Peterson.²¹¹ Harris and Peterson seem to loom large in his mind – they are the first celebrity comparisons Shanks thinks of when needing to explain the experience of being recognised in public.²¹² He has shown off well-observed impersonations of Jones, Harris, Shapiro, and Peterson, which are not malicious and which would only be funny to viewers who understand their quirks.²¹³ Jones and Peterson have both shared his impressions of

²⁰⁵ friendlyjordies, “The Media is Lying to You”.

²⁰⁶ friendlyjordies, “In Defence of Greta Thunberg”.

²⁰⁷ Jordan Shanks, “Traits Of An Alpha Male”, YouTube, 14:47, December 27, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CNSUiPTVcxA>; friendlyjordies, “dear your majesty...”, YouTube, 8:25, January 6, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=buw5WufsP5k>; friendlyjordies, “KOCHBLOCKED”.

²⁰⁸ friendlyjordies, “7News HUMILIATES ME”, YouTube, 11:31, June 19, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VEiTxFhf40c>

²⁰⁹ friendlyjordies, “Laughing at Drunks on RBT”, YouTube, 4:38, December 4, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WzN-X-haYa0>; Jordan Shanks, Ali Ahmed, and Mislav Belobrajdic, “Chris Brown goes poo poo, Tales of Pakistan (Ali Joins a gang) Feminism and Camile Paglia”, *The Friendlyjordies Podcast*, June 12, 2018, <https://friendlyjordies.podbean.com/e/chris-brown-goes-poo-poo-tales-of-pakistan-ali-joins-a-gang-feminism-and-camile-paglia/>

²¹⁰ friendlyjordies, “Turkmenistan: Farting On Giant Soviet Gas Crater”, YouTube, 11:17, April 2, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FEWH6GLqVks>; Jordan Shanks, “Ben Shapiro’s Best Argument”, YouTube, 15:12, July 16, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=63Vrk1NN_X8

²¹¹ friendlyjordies, “Jordan Peterson GENTLY REBUKES Fool”, YouTube, 12:39, March 6, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P8IaWnsbCE4>; friendlyjordies, “MAFS Vol. 5: The Bottom of the Barrel”, YouTube, 14:03, March 11, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cUYjArDF3j4>

²¹² Shanks, Ahmed, and Belobrajdic, “Racism, Witch hunts and Pale Hipsters”.

²¹³ friendlyjordies, “Jordan Peterson SLAYS Aussie TV Host”, YouTube, 4:56, June 20, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wt9cxABJ90g>; friendlyjordies, “Jordan Peterson OBLITERATES Nutting”, YouTube, 7:42, November 26, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4QDcXALu4jc>; friendlyjordies, “Jordan Peterson Analyses Toy Story”, YouTube, 8:16, August 4, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AIMBFj40hzY>; Friendlyjordies Podcast, “Alex Jones’ Fish Oil”, YouTube, 0:46, July 6, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AJJJ4Uhko-o>; friendlyjordies, “Sam Harris Debates Grant from Love Island”, YouTube, 4:24, July 4, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qHZc40uQuHo>

them online.²¹⁴ Shanks also sometimes includes Jones, Rogan, Shapiro, and Peterson in the thumbnail or title of videos which have little to do with them.²¹⁵ He admits that he does this to draw in their fans.²¹⁶ Shanks assumes that he and his audience share an interest in these figures.

Shanks therefore assumes that his audience understands esoteric references from the alt-right/-lite, and that these help viewers relate to his content. He speaks not only to people in the demographic which the alt-right/-lite courts, but also people who are actively interested in it.

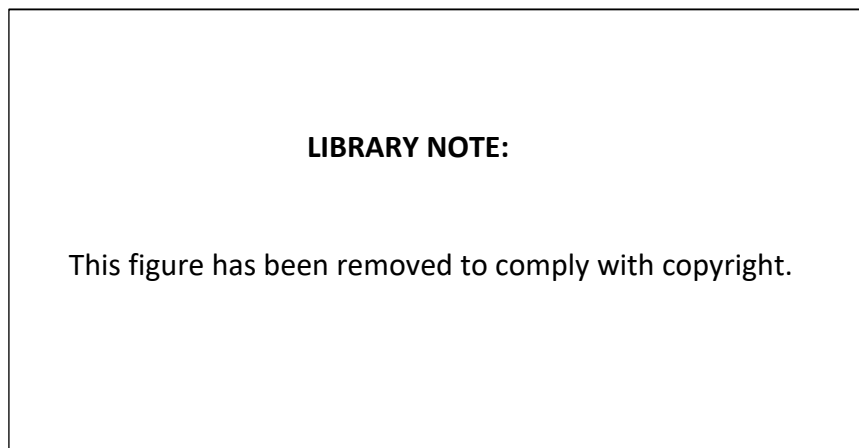


Figure 4. Thumbnails and video titles in which Shanks assumes familiarity with alt-right/-lite figures. friendlyjordies, “Jordan Peterson GENTLY REBUKES Fool”; Jordan Shanks, “How Alex Jones Plans to Rise Again”; friendlyjordies, “Somewhere in Australia...”

²¹⁴ Jordan Peterson, Twitter post, June 27, 2018, 7:20AM, <https://twitter.com/jordanbpeterson/status/1011977489961373701?lang=en>; The Alex Jones Show, “Renowned Brain Surgeons Warn Covid-19 “Vaccines” Are Literally Eating People’s Brains - FULL SHOW 7/9/21”, *Free World News*, July 10, 2021, <https://freeworldnews.tv/watch?id=60e8df1f1ce4bb52fcc7ce29>

²¹⁵ friendlyjordies, “Somewhere in Australia...”, YouTube, 7:12, May 27, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iR3eYPySmFw>; Jordan Shanks, “How Alex Jones Plans To Rise Again”, *YouTube*, 11:45, August 11, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3KUvgYRTtO0>; Jordan Shanks, “Ben Shapiro's Best Argument”; Jordan Shanks, “Jordan Peterson's Dark Side”.

²¹⁶ Jordan Shanks, “Jordan Peterson's Dark Side”.

Self-help

Shanks provides another type of content popular with the alt-right/-lite's demographic when he adopts the role of self-help guru. Shanks credits the genre with his own success.²¹⁷ He states that self-help techniques can ensure success in any field.²¹⁸ Shanks tells viewers not to use self-help for wealth or status. He understands that the genre is popular among people who desire expensive suits, sports cars, and trophy girlfriends, but tells such people that his videos are not for them.²¹⁹ Instead, self-help should be used to contribute to society.²²⁰ Self-help can help viewers find their passion in life and orient it towards community service.²²¹ When he gives models of "success", Shanks mentions Steve Jobs and Bill Gates, but also points to Whitlam, Keating, John Curtin, and Chomsky.²²² Shanks endorsed one viewer comment under his first self-help video which praised his novel attempt to take a genre usually associated with "[c]apitalism, consumerism, and business" and re-orient it towards "civic duty".²²³

His self-help content has always been aimed squarely at Internet-addicted, underachieving young men.²²⁴ Shanks jokes that typical viewers of his self-help channel are men who live in unsanitary share houses and smoke marijuana.²²⁵ He accuses them of not getting out of bed until mid-afternoon.²²⁶ Shanks laughs that viewers are addicted to online pornography and sexualised anime.²²⁷ Referencing a meme from 4chan, Shanks dispenses self-help advice to men who identify as "Doomers": men in their early twenties who feel nihilistic and isolated.²²⁸ In another video, he dispenses advice to men who

²¹⁷ Jordan Shanks, "The Problem with Jordan Peterson's Critics", *YouTube*, 20:11, March 9, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R4nzay8p-TI>; Jordan Shanks, "Jordan Peterson Is A BO\$\$", *YouTube*, 11:14, February 8, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sz4FM0XPoFw>

²¹⁸ Jordan Shanks, "How Tony Robbins Changed My Life", *YouTube*, 36:46, March 18, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q43YcT68RHc>; friendlyjordies, "Chin Up, Stooge!".

²¹⁹ Jordan Shanks, "The Doomer Mindset"; Jordan Shanks, "Chin Up, Stooge", live performance, 2017, <https://www.friendlyjordies.com/merch-past-shows>

²²⁰ Jordan Shanks, "Goals Are Important DAMMIT!".

²²¹ Jordan Shanks, "Alex Jones dishes some DEEP TRUTH".

²²² Shanks, "Chin Up, Stooge"; Uncommon, "What are you going to contribute? | Jordan Shanks (friendlyjordies)", *YouTube*, 0:43, April 28, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sXrLLy16-ic>

²²³ friendlyjordies, "Chin Up, Stooge!".

²²⁴ Ibid.

²²⁵ Jordan Shanks, "Jordan Peterson's BEST ADVICE", *YouTube*, 11:19, March 29, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YSTbQkY9-Yk>

²²⁶ Jordan Shanks, "The Secret to SUCCES\$\$ (Definitely not clickbait title)", *YouTube*, 10:26, July 23, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PkiFmewf7ql>

²²⁷ Jordan Shanks, "Goals Are Important DAMMIT!"; Jordan Shanks, "Jordan Peterson's Dark Side".

²²⁸ Jordan Shanks, "The Doomer Mindset", *YouTube*, 18:12, July 7, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6mLyAGxovCo>; "Doomer", Know Your Meme, accessed March 19, 2021, <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/doomer>

identify as “NEETs”: people aged 16 to 24 who are “Not in Education, Employment, or Training”.²²⁹ Shanks also gives advice to men at risk of becoming incels.²³⁰ He describes viewers of his self-help content as “jobless”, “dateless”, “sexually frustrated” young men.²³¹

Seemingly to help viewers better relate to them, Shanks sometimes filters his self-help messages through references to the alt-right/-lite. He uses manosphere terminology about “alpha” and “beta” men to insist that real “alpha males” show selflessness.²³² Helping others makes you a leader and an “alpha boss”.²³³ Shanks also points to far-Right personalities to demonstrate self-help principles in action. In a video which recommends finding purpose in community service, Shanks points to Jones and his belief that he has been called to serve God.²³⁴ In a video which recommends asking yourself difficult questions, he points to the Fox News pundit Tucker Carlson because he incessantly questions at debate partners.²³⁵ Shanks seems to think that these references will help his viewers relate to self-help dictums.

In pitching a cocktail of self-help and politics at young male underachievers, Shanks emulates Peterson. He targets Peterson’s fans, dropping his name as an enticement in the title of half a dozen self-help videos.²³⁶ Despite realising that Peterson’s reactionary views (for instance on climate change) contradict many of his own, Shanks admires Peterson. He tells viewers that he listens to Peterson while painting Warhammer figurines.²³⁷ He insists that Peterson’s political views are irrelevant because he popularises basic self-help principles – “anyone who helps propagate that message is

²²⁹ Jordan Shanks, “NEETS”.

²³⁰ Jordan Shanks, “My Advice For Incels”, *YouTube*, 13:56, April 6, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9QA892fBIPM>

²³¹ Shanks, “Chin Up, Stooge”.

²³² Jordan Shanks, “People who follow E girls”, *YouTube*, 19:31, August 21, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d1eJZttokU>; Jordan Shanks, “Traits Of An Alpha Male”.

²³³ Jordan Shanks, “Traits Of An Alpha Male”; Jordan Shanks, “NEETS”.

²³⁴ Jordan Shanks, “Alex Jones dishes some DEEP TRUTH”.

²³⁵ Jordan Shanks, “Why it’s IMPOSSIBLE to Cuck The Tuck”, *YouTube*, 12:01, November 3, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QDbGhjOPJXM>

²³⁶ Jordan Shanks, “Jordan Peterson’s best point”, *YouTube*, 13:39, August 22, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8dH99DclF5g>; Jordan Shanks, “Jordan Peterson has a point”, *YouTube*, 9:07, September 26, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Os4RGgAhsR8>; Jordan Shanks, “Jordan Peterson’s BEST ADVICE”; Jordan Shanks, “Jordan Peterson Is A BO\$\$”; Jordan Shanks, “The Problem with Jordan Peterson’s Critics”; Jordan Shanks, “Jordan Peterson’s Dark Side”.

²³⁷ friendlyjordies, “Adult Man’s Warhammer 40k Hissy Fit”, *YouTube*, 14:43, August 6, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hb46qRP3g94>

A-Okay in my books”.²³⁸ Shanks states that even Peterson’s far-Right views are “a net benefit to society” because their controversial nature attracts attention and leads people towards his self-help books and videos.²³⁹ Shanks gushes that Peterson has “saved countless people from suicide” and “fixed the psychology” of millions more.²⁴⁰ Shanks puts his own spin on Peterson’s advice. For example, he tells viewers that getting involved in local environmentalist projects would satisfy one of Peterson’s vague dictums.²⁴¹ Like a left-wing Peterson, he speaks to the evident desire within the underachieving cohort from which the alt-right/-lite is drawn for self-help maxims about resilience and hard work.

Podcast co-hosts

Shanks hosts his podcasts, finally, with people who could be themselves considered members of the alt-right/-lite. These collaborations make for content which is welcoming to other members of the cohort.

Both of his podcasts have been geared towards rudderless young men since their inception. Shanks and his co-hosts on the *Friendlyjordies Podcast* often joke about their lack of female listeners.²⁴² In 2019, Shanks guessed that the podcast had 40,000 male listeners and 2,000 female ones.²⁴³ Shanks intimates that listeners are Internet-addicted, socially dislocated straight men when he jokes that they have all “spent hours watching a Twitch account just because the chick has mildly good tits”.²⁴⁴ Many episodes of the *Friendlyjordies Podcast* include crude discussion which assumes an audience of heterosexual men (such as conversations about the differences between strands of Internet

²³⁸ Jordan Shanks, “Jordan Peterson Is A BO\$\$”; Jordan Shanks, “The Problem with Jordan Peterson's Critics”.

²³⁹ Jordan Shanks, “The Problem with Jordan Peterson's Critics”.

²⁴⁰ Jordan Shanks, “Jordan Peterson's best point”; friendlyjordies, “Jordan Peterson GENTLY REBUKES Fool”.

²⁴¹ Jordan Shanks, “Jordan Peterson's best point”.

²⁴² Jordan Shanks, Ali Ahmed, and Mislav Belobrajdic, “Mislav, Jordan And Ali”, *The Friendlyjordies Podcast*, September 19, 2016, <https://friendlyjordies.podbean.com/e/friendly-jordies-podcast-episode-72-mislav-jordan-and-ali/>; Shanks and Ahmed, “Book Balancing game- Ali’s African Heartland- South Africa”.

²⁴³ Shanks, Ahmed, and Belobrajdic, “Constitutional Recognition and Assad”.

²⁴⁴ Jordan Shanks, Ali Ahmed, and Mislav Belobrajdic, “Joe Biden vs Bernie, Albanese And Shoeys”, *The Friendlyjordies Podcast*, June 28, 2019, <https://friendlyjordies.podbean.com/e/joe-biden-vs-bernie-albanese-and-shoeys/>

pornography).²⁴⁵ One co-host remarked in 2021 that “most of our audience are neckbeards” (i.e. socially inept male nerds).²⁴⁶ On *Neel + Jordan*, Kolhatkar guessed in 2020 that five percent of that podcast’s listeners are women.²⁴⁷ This podcast addresses a similar demographic. Shanks and Kolhatkar dedicate episodes to topics (like being ignored by women) which “a lot of men are dealing with”.²⁴⁸ Kolhatkar explains that he was once “close to the depths of incel mentality”, and the pair offer counsel to men in similar situations.²⁴⁹

Shanks hosts the *Friendlyjordies Podcast* with two personal friends: Ali Ahmed and Mislav Belobrajdic.²⁵⁰ Belobrajdic is not knowledgeable about Australian politics. He has stated that Australia has nuclear weapons and that the Torres Strait Islands are a separate country.²⁵¹ He has been unaware that Australia has a written constitution or that state and federal members of parliament are separate people.²⁵² He admitted in 2017 that he always votes for a cannabis legalisation micro-party.²⁵³ He owes his place on the podcast to his friendship with Shanks, who laughs that Belobrajdic is “paid to be the ... vibe-setter”.²⁵⁴

Belobrajdic consumes far-Right media and brings alt-right/-lite talking points onto the podcast. He is a particular fan of Gavin McInnes. Belobrajdic likes to stay up all night

²⁴⁵ Shanks and Ahmed, “Book Balancing Game- Ali’s African Heartland- South Africa”; Shanks, Ali, and Belobrajdic, “Porn and Bernie’s Chances”.

²⁴⁶ Shanks, Ahmed, and Belobrajdic, “Kristina Keneally vs Tu Le”.

²⁴⁷ Neel Kolhatkar, “Neel + Jordan: Incels and Sex Disparity”, *YouTube*, 1:31:56, February 9, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZG-75kEWNXY>

²⁴⁸ Jordan Shanks, “Neel + Jordan: Neediness”, *YouTube*, 50:11, September 23, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uy0cyo0WkHI>

²⁴⁹ Ibid.

²⁵⁰ Jordan Shanks, Ali Ahmed, and Mislav Belobrajdic, “4th July”, *The Friendlyjordies Podcast*, July 4, 2016, <https://friendlyjordies.podbean.com/e/episode-64-4th-july/>

²⁵¹ Shanks, Ahmed, and Belobrajdic, “4th July”; Shanks, Ahmed, and Belobrajdic, “Change the Date And Australian Identity”; Jordan Shanks, Ali Ahmed, and Mislav Belobrajdic, “I Can See Him Play That (Patron Request) - South Africa and White Farmers”, *The Friendlyjordies Podcast*, August 4, 2018, <https://friendlyjordies.podbean.com/e/i-can-see-him-play-that-patron-request-south-africa-and-white-farmers/>

²⁵² Shanks, Ahmed, and Belobrajdic, “Kristina Keneally vs Tu Le”; Jordan Shanks, Ali Ahmed, and Mislav Belobrajdic, “Jordan’s Week of Hit Pieces”, *The Friendlyjordies Podcast*, September 27, 2020, <https://friendlyjordies.podbean.com/e/jordans-week-of-hit-pieces-friendlyjordies-podcast/>

²⁵³ Jordan Shanks, Ali Ahmed, and Mislav Belobrajdic, “Montgomery’s, Libeterianism Vs. Communism- Small Government a Hinderance or a Help? What’s Better Megadeth or Koshie?”, *The Friendlyjordies Podcast*, May 8, 2017, <https://friendlyjordies.podbean.com/e/episode-107-9th-may-montgomerys-libeterianism-vs-communism-small-government-a-hinderance-or-a-help-whats-better-megadeth-or-koshie/>

²⁵⁴ Jordan Shanks, Ali Ahmed, and Mislav Belobrajdic, “Back From the Dead”, *The Friendlyjordies Podcast*, November 26, 2020, <https://friendlyjordies.podbean.com/e/back-from-the-dead-friendlyjordies-podcast/>

watching McInnes, who he praises as a “family man” who says, at worst, “barely outlandish things”.²⁵⁵ Belobrajdic railed against Labor when it supported a petition to deny McInnes entry to Australia.²⁵⁶ He trusts McInnes as a researcher and repeats his characterisation of the Left as “ethno-masochists” who hate white people and the West.²⁵⁷ Belobrajdic also often spruiks a book admired by McInnes and the Proud Boys, Pat Buchanan’s *The Death of the West*, which denounces immigration and the New Left and disseminates the cultural Marxism conspiracy theory.²⁵⁸ Belobrajdic recommends other far-Right books (such as Douglas Murray’s *The Strange Death of Europe*) about the imminent Islamification of Europe.²⁵⁹ He is a fan of Jones and repeats conspiracies from InfoWars (about Hillary Clinton’s secret health problems or Joe Biden’s supposed paedophilia) in more earnest tones than Shanks.²⁶⁰ Belobrajdic is also a fan of Trump because he stands up to political correctness.²⁶¹

Shanks eggs Belobrajdic on to share his outlandish views.²⁶² He finds it funny that his co-host on a popular left-wing podcast has the views of a Tea Party member.²⁶³ Shanks laughs that episodes of the show are an exercise in preventing Belobrajdic from joining a Christian militia.²⁶⁴ He jokes that the podcast exists “to educate Mislav”.²⁶⁵ Together

²⁵⁵ Shanks, Ali, and Belobrajdic, “Palestine, Turkmenistan and Gavin McInnes”; Shanks, Ali, and Belobrajdic, “Montgomery’s, Libeterianism Vs. Communism- Small Government a Hinderance or a Help? What’s Better Megadeth or Koshie?”.

²⁵⁶ Shanks, Ali, and Belobrajdic, “Political Philosophy’s and Quotas”.

²⁵⁷ Shanks, Ali, and Belobrajdic, “Montgomery’s, Libeterianism Vs. Communism- Small Government a Hinderance or a Help? What’s Better Megadeth or Koshie?”.

²⁵⁸ Jordan Shanks, Ali Ahmed, and Mislav Belobrajdic, “We Analyse Mislav’s Dick Pic and Our Penis Sizes Also Marxist Frankfurt School of Thought”, *The Friendlyjordies Podcast*, January 24, 2018, <https://friendlyjordies.podbean.com/e/we-analyse-mislavs-dick-pic-and-our-penis-sizes-also-marxist-frankfurt-school-of-thought/>; Jordan Shanks, Ali Ahmed, and Mislav Belobrajdic, “We Talk About India, Lena Dumbdumb, Bill Mahar and Maybe 29 Other Things”, *The Friendlyjordies Podcast*, January 8, 2018, <https://friendlyjordies.podbean.com/e/we-talk-about-india-lena-dumbdumb-bill-mahar-and-maybe-29-other-things/>; Shanks, Ahmed, and Belobrajdic, “Joe Biden vs Bernie, Albanese And Shoeys”; McInnes, “Introducing: The Proud Boys”.

²⁵⁹ Shanks, Ahmed, and Belobrajdic, “White Male! SJWs, Political Correctness, Trump V. Kim Jon, Ali Opens a Restaurant”; Gaby Hinsliff, “The Strange Death of Europe by Douglas Murray review – gentrified xenophobia”, *The Guardian*, May 6, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/may/06/strange-death-europe-immigration-xenophobia>

²⁶⁰ Shanks, Ahmed, and Belobrajdic, “Mislav, Jordan and Ali”; Shanks, Ahmed, and Belobrajdic, “Joe Biden vs Bernie, Albanese And Shoeys”.

²⁶¹ Shanks, Ahmed, Belobrajdic, “Mislav’s Proposal Story and Democratic Candidates”.

²⁶² Shanks, Ahmed, and Belobrajdic, “Kurds and the Propaganda Model”.

²⁶³ Shanks, Ali, and Belobrajdic, “Montgomery’s, Libeterianism Vs. Communism- Small Government a Hinderance or a Help? What’s Better Megadeth or Koshie?”.

²⁶⁴ Shanks and Ahmed, “Book Balancing Game- Ali’s African Heartland- South Africa”.

²⁶⁵ Jordan Shanks, Ali Ahmed, and Mislav Belobrajdic, “Celebrity Descriptions- Stoners- Dalai Lama and the End of Buddhism.”, *The Friendlyjordies*, June 28, 2018, <https://friendlyjordies.podbean.com/e/celebrity-descriptions-stoners-dalai-lama-and-the-end-of-buddhism/>

with Ahmed, Shanks sometimes debunk Belobrajdic's far-Right views. They tell Belobrajdic that Soros is not the boogeyman constructed by Jones, that Sharia law is not taking over the United Kingdom, and that liberty and democracy are not exclusively "Judeo-Christian values".²⁶⁶ Belobrajdic sometimes changes his position during episodes.²⁶⁷

Kolhatkar also has reactionary credentials. His most viewed YouTube videos are skits mocking stereotypical social justice warriors. One shows a mathematics classroom in which "feelings" are "more important than facts" and "privilege points" are deducted from the test scores of straight white men.²⁶⁸ Kolhatkar calls this massively popular video "the most-shared 'right-wing' piece of content in the past five years".²⁶⁹ Another shows a dystopian future in which straight white men are killed on sight and "disagreeing with a woman" is a criminal offence.²⁷⁰ These skits have seen Kolhatkar interviewed by Dave Rubin (of the IDW) and lauded in the far-Right American press for his willingness to laugh at feminism and the cult of "victimhood".²⁷¹ Kolhatkar stated in 2020 and 2021 that he has since mellowed on these issues. Alt-right/-lite YouTubers have become repetitive and "anti-SJW content" is not "edgy" enough.²⁷² He says that his views on women have changed since his pseudo-incel days.²⁷³ Kolhatkar nevertheless often steers discussion on *Neel + Jordan* towards issues resonant in the alt-right/-lite. He wants to talk about the biological basis of gender roles, the bathrooms used by transgender people, and whether we need "culturally enforced monogamy" to discipline promiscuous young

²⁶⁶ Shanks, Ali, and Belobrajdic, "Montgomery's, Libeterianism Vs. Communism- Small Government a Hinderance or a Help? What's Better Megadeth or Koshic?"; Shanks, Ahmed, and Belobrajdic, "Change the Date And Australian Identity".

²⁶⁷ Shanks, Ahmed, and Belobrajdic, "Political Philosophy's and Quotas"; Jordan Shanks, Ali Ahmed, and Mislav Belobrajdic, "Mislav on Happy Gas- Islam VS Christianity- What is Happiness- Its your Mum's Fault", *The Friendlyjordies Podcast*, June 21, 2018, <https://friendlyjordies.podbean.com/e/mislav-on-happy-gas-islam-vs-christianity-what-is-happiness-its-your-mums-fault/>

²⁶⁸ Neel Kolhatkar, "Modern Educaysun", *YouTube*, 7:20, November 9, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iKcWu0tsiZM>

²⁶⁹ Jordan Shanks, "Neel + Jordan Podcast | Arguing and Social Media", *YouTube*, 1:02:12, May 28, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7qDevLX5RMg>

²⁷⁰ Neel Kolhatkar, "#Equality", *YouTube*, 3:42, January 18, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XM-HJT8_esM

²⁷¹ Ryan Girdusky, "Is anti-PC comedian Neel Kolhatkar the voice of Generation-Y?", *The Washington Examiner*, January 23, 2016, <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/red-alert-politics/anti-pc-comedian-neel-kolhatkar-voice-generation-y>; The Rubin Report, "Calling Out the Left with Comedy | Neel Kolhatkar | COMEDY | Rubin Report", *YouTube*, 1:03:00, December 15, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IDST2tYully>

²⁷² Jordan Shanks, "Neel + Jordan Podcast | Arguing and Social Media"; Jordan Shanks, "Personal Responsibility | Neel + Jordan Podcast", *YouTube*, 1:18:18, November 12, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=saJKmgityKE>

²⁷³ Jordan Shanks, "Neel + Jordan: Neediness".

women.²⁷⁴ Kolhatkar's distaste for social movement activism makes him unwilling to identify as left-wing: "When you think of the Left ... you think of SJWs and you immediately want to disassociate from that".²⁷⁵ As with Belobrajdic, Shanks sometimes tries to change Kolhatkar's mind when he airs reactionary views.²⁷⁶ Meaning it as a term of endearment, he calls Kolhatkar "Australia's Joe Rogan" because he will hear out perspectives from any quarter.²⁷⁷

According to Shanks, these collaborations make for more interesting listening than a chorus of left-wing hosts who agree on everything.²⁷⁸ The fact that he engages in friendly banter with Belobrajdic and Kolhatkar and (at worst) gently checks their far-Right statements makes these podcasts inviting to listeners who are themselves interested in the alt-right/-lite.

In the above sections, to summarise, I detailed the myriad ways in which Shanks tailors his content not only to resonate with the demographic targeted by alt-right/-lite discourse, but also with people already interested in it. He courts an audience of young men invested in Internet culture and geekdom, adopts a politically incorrect style, assumes that references to the alt-right/-lite help viewers relate to his videos, directs self-help advice at the demographic enamoured with Peterson, and allows his co-hosts to bring alt-right/-lite preoccupations onto his podcasts. I demonstrated that, like others who take a dirtbag Left approach, Shanks creates the sort of "darkly funny" content rooted in "irony-saturated online culture" which Nagle believes can counter the pull of the alt-right/-lite.²⁷⁹

Conclusion

In this chapter, I analysed discourse produced by Shanks and shed light on the ways in which he adopts a dirtbag Left sensibility. He criticises the right-wing Liberal and National parties, in particular the ways in which their neoliberal policies benefit

²⁷⁴ Neel Kolhatkar, "Neel + Jordan: Incels and Sex Disparity"; Jordan Shanks, "Neel + Jordan: Centre Left Parties", *YouTube*, 1:49:21, January 28, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yT39I6Z2A7Y>

²⁷⁵ Jordan Shanks, "Neel + Jordan: False Identity".

²⁷⁶ Jordan Shanks, "Neel + Jordan: Centre Left Parties".

²⁷⁷ Shanks, Ahmed, and Belobrajdic, "Back From the Dead".

²⁷⁸ Shanks, Ahmed, and Belobrajdic, "Celebrity Descriptions- Stoners- Dalai Lama and the End of Buddhism."

²⁷⁹ Nagle, *Kill All Normies*, 10, 35, 46.

corporations and rich investors at the expense of other Australians. He praises (and effectively campaigns for) the Labor Party and champions trade unions. To further shed light on my central research questions and help remedy important gaps in our knowledge of the dirtbag Left, I then described his construction of social movement activism and his overtures to the alt-right/-lite's audience. Putting his own spin on Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model, Shanks claims that the mainstream media heaps attention on anti-racist, feminist, and LGBTQ+ rights issues in ways which allow right-wing political parties to form government. I argued that Shanks positions himself as an opponent of (in effect) progressive neoliberalism. He aims to challenge corporatised versions of anti-racism, feminism, and LGBTQ+ rights activism, which he believes push people towards reactionary populism. I next analysed the ways in which Shanks tailors his output for the demographic courted in alt-right/-lite discourse. His focus on rudderless, Internet-addicted young men, vulgar and transgressive comedy, frequent alt-right/-lite references, approach to self-help, and collaborations with men who themselves have alt-right/-lite credentials all suggest that Shanks courts potential and actual members of the online far Right. As Nagle advises, he aims to win converts from this demographic with "darkly funny" content.²⁸⁰ In the next chapter, I investigate the extent to which Shanks substantiates his hostile characterisation of social movement activists and the extent to which his discourse on the issue overlaps with the alt-right/-lite's.

²⁸⁰ Nagle, *Kill All Normies*, 35.

Chapter Seven

Jordan Shanks: attitudes towards social movements and far-Right narratives

In this chapter, I address my final unanswered research questions by further analysing discourse produced by Shanks and evaluating the manoeuvres described in the last chapter. Having demonstrated that Shanks positions himself as a critic of the media's use of identity politics to benefit economic elites, I consider the extent to which he substantiates this construction of social movements; I investigate whether his attacks narrowly target such behaviour, or dismiss feminism, anti-racism, and LGBTQ+ rights activism in general. I highlight some relevant (if simplistic) criticisms which Shanks levels at the uptake of social movement issues in the press. However, I next outline a conspiratorial narrative in which Shanks claims that many feminist, anti-racist, and LGBTQ+ rights campaigns would not exist if the media failed to drum up concern about racism, sexism, homo- and transphobia, because each is too minor to generate grassroots opposition. Having demonstrated that Shanks adopts a style tailored to the tastes of potential and actual members of the alt-right/-lite, I next investigate (through a comparison with Benjamin) whether similarities between his discourse and the alt-right/-lite's are substantive as well as stylistic. Shanks exhibits many of the problematic elements identified in Benjamin's attack on social movement activism. He often appears to pick up these narratives through engagement with alt-right/-lite discourse. Overall, I argue that Shanks trivialises issues of race, gender, and sexuality as distinct from and less important than economic issues, and appears to import the alt-right/-lite's prejudices when he courts its audience.

Relevant critiques of identity politics in the media

Corporate owners and advertisers

To begin with, Shanks does highlight some issues with the uptake of "identity" issues in the press. He identifies some ownership structures, advertising partnerships, and narratives which smack of progressive neoliberalism. He also recommends a media diet

which includes independent outlets which cover feminist, anti-racist, and LGBTQ+ rights issues. However, even the strongest points of his media criticism simplify a more complicated picture, and are not supported with sufficient evidence.

When Shanks complains that the mainstream media takes up feminist, anti-racist, and LGBTQ+ rights issues in ways which serve the agenda of economic elites, he usually targets youth-oriented online outlets. Many digital outlets have made issues of race, gender, and sexuality central to their reporting.¹ Research into two such outlets (BuzzFeed and *Vice*) identifies a particular focus on anti-racism, LGBTQ+ rights, and gender equality (as well as drug liberalisation and mental health).²

Influenced by *Manufacturing Consent*, Shanks attacks such outlets over their owners and advertisers. He complains that *Vice* is owned by Murdoch.³ This is an exaggeration, but 21st Century Fox did buy a 5 percent share of *Vice* in 2013, and James Murdoch sits on its board.⁴ He complains that Pedestrian – a similar Australian online outlet which covers popular culture and politics – is fully owned by Nine Entertainment, Australia’s largest media conglomerate (which is chaired by a former Liberal Party politician).⁵ He complains that Junkee, another similar website, is 85 percent owned by a large advertising company.⁶ Shanks also criticises all of these outlets over their advertising arrangements with banks. He explains that Westpac is a major advertiser in Junkee and often pays for “sponsored content”.⁷ He attacks *Vice* for similar arrangements with NAB.⁸ Pedestrian produces sponsored content for the Commonwealth Bank, and BuzzFeed has a

¹ Chris Ip, “Why digital media and identity issues are a match”, *Columbia Journalism Review*, March 18, 2015, https://www.cjr.org/analysis/why_digital_media_and_identity_issues_are_a_match.php

² Paul Stringer, “Viral Media: Audience Engagement and Editorial Autonomy at BuzzFeed and Vice”, *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture* 15 (2020): 10.

³ friendlyjordies, “Why VICE is Absolute Garbage”; Jordan Shanks, “Neel + Jordan: Centre Left Parties”; friendlyjordies, “How the Australian Media Plays You”.

⁴ Ben Quinn, “Rupert Murdoch firm dips into hipsters' bible with \$70m stake in Vice”, *The Guardian*, August 17, 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2013/aug/17/rupert-murdoch-vice-magazine-stake>; Jason Deans, “Vice secures further \$500m investment”, *The Guardian*, September 4, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2014/sep/04/vice-investment-investment-digital-media>

⁵ friendlyjordies, “Hipster Clickbait 'News' Site Annihilated”; Max Mason, “How the new Nine will line up as Australia's largest media business”, *Australian Financial Review*, December 4, 2018, <https://www.afr.com/companies/media-and-marketing/how-the-new-nine-will-line-up-as-australias-largest-media-business-20181203-h18n0n>

⁶ friendlyjordies, “The Worst Clickbait Site in Australia”; “oOh! acquires Junkee Media for next chapter of its digital strategy”, *oOh!Media*, June 24, 2016, <https://oohmedia.com.au/ooh-acquires-junkee-media-for-next-chapter-of-its-digital-strategy/>

⁷ friendlyjordies, “The Worst Clickbait Site in Australia”; “About The Cusp”, *The Cusp*, accessed May 5, 2021, <https://thecusp.com.au/about>; “Westpac”, *Junkee*, accessed May 5, 2021, <https://junkee.com/tag/westpac>

⁸ friendlyjordies, “Why Vice is Dying”; “NAB Hack and Hustle”, *Vice*, accessed May 24, 2021, <https://www.vice.com/en/partners/nab-hack-and-hustle>

commercial partnership with CitiBank.⁹ Shanks insists that pressure from these owners and advertisers leads digital outlets to produce anodyne coverage of anti-racist, feminist, and LGBTQ+ rights issues, which fails to implicate corporations or neoliberal governments.¹⁰

As evidence, Shanks highlights a handful of lightweight articles from each website. *Vice* has published a testimonial about the feminist virtue of eating vaginal discharge, *Junkee* has published feminist critique of the teen comedy *Mean Girls*, and *Pedestrian* has cobbled together an article from Instagram posts supportive of same-sex marriage.¹¹ He presents such material as typical of each website. Shanks also identifies one cut-and-dry instance in which an LGBTQ+ rights article in *Junkee* functions as a veiled advertisement (the publication heaps praise on Westpac for offering employees four weeks of paid leave to undertake gender transition, but fails to mention the union which secured this entitlement).¹² He highlights another less transparent instance in which *Vice* appears to use support for Indigenous issues as window dressing in a sponsored video for NAB.¹³

The typicality of such material is hard to establish because systematic research into the nature of feminist, anti-racist, and LGBTQ+ coverage in these publications does not exist. Suggesting a certain superficiality, Paul Stringer does find that *Vice* and BuzzFeed writers are expected to produce multiple articles per day and often write from personal experience or about controversies trending on social media.¹⁴ Articles of this nature (similar to the ones Shanks mocks) can be found on these websites at the time of writing.¹⁵

However, each website also currently features feminist, anti-racist, and LGBTQ+ rights articles which do implicate governments and corporations. *Junkee* and *Pedestrian* are

⁹ friendlyjordies, “Hipster Clickbait “News” Site Annihilated”; “Commonwealth Bank”, *Pedestrian*, accessed May 24, 2021, <https://www.pedestrian.tv/tag/commonwealth-bank/>; friendlyjordies, “The Truth about #ChangeTheDate”; “Citi”, *BuzzFeed*, accessed May 24, 2021, <https://www.buzzfeed.com/citibank>

¹⁰ friendlyjordies, “The Media is Lying to You”; friendlyjordies, “BuzzFeed LITERALLY Destroys Itself”, *YouTube*, 11:15, February 3, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KGUfjMOjbQg>

¹¹ friendlyjordies, “Why VICE is Absolute Garbage”; Hipster Clickbait “News” Site Annihilated”; friendlyjordies, “The Worst Clickbait Site in Australia”.

¹² friendlyjordies, “The Worst Clickbait Site in Australia”; Anna Patty, “Westpac employees to get transgender leave”, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, November 8, 2018, <https://www.smh.com.au/business/workplace/westpac-employees-to-get-transgender-leave-20181108-p50eub.html>

¹³ friendlyjordies, “Why Vice is Dying”.

¹⁴ Stringer, “Viral Media”, 9.

¹⁵ Michelle Rennex, “Betty, The Queer Icon From ‘Rugrats’, Is Now A Confirmed Lesbian And Conservatives Are Losing It”, *Junkee*, May 31, 2021, <https://junkee.com/betty-rugrats-lesbian-reboot/296456>

both critical of the Coalition for its failure to fund endometriosis care and research.¹⁶ Junkee features numerous transgender rights articles (such as a defence of the Safe Schools program) which mention no brands.¹⁷ None of these websites appears to focus on identity issues (as Shanks claims) to the total exclusion of issues of economic class. *Vice*, Junkee, Pedestrian, and BuzzFeed all feature articles supportive of the unionisation drive at an Amazon warehouse in Alabama.¹⁸ Pedestrian features articles critical of the Coalition for its punitive treatment of the unemployed and support for fossil fuels.¹⁹ Junkee denounces deference to “rich people and big businesses” in the federal budget.²⁰ Shanks ignores such coverage when (despite his own penchant for “clickbait”) he presents fluff pieces as typical of these outlet.

Some of his specific allegations against these websites are unsound. Shanks maintains that they are hypocritical to cover feminist and indigenous issues because they advertise banks that finance agribusinesses which harm women and indigenous people in low-income countries.²¹ Shanks insists that digital outlets ignore such outrages to protect

¹⁶ Mille Roberts, “Women With Endometriosis Want The Government To Do More Than Raise Awareness”, *Junkee*, May 14, 2021, <https://junkee.com/endometriosis-federal-budget/295056>; Imogen Dunlevie, “1 In 9 Australian Women Suffer From Endo So Why Is The Govt Spending Just \$5 Million On Us?”, *Pedestrian*, May 13, 2021, <https://www.pedestrian.tv/news/endometriosis-funding-needs-more-than-five-million/>

¹⁷ Sam Langford, “The Trump Administration Is Trying To Erase The Existence Of Trans People By Redefining Gender”, *Junkee*, October 22, 2018, <https://junkee.com/trump-administration-trans-definition/178885>; Sam Langford, “This Transgender Day Of Remembrance, Let’s Remember Those We Lost In The Fight For Equality”, *Junkee*, November 20, 2018, <https://junkee.com/transgender-day-of-remembrance/183094>; Sam Langford, “We Fact-Checked The Daily Telegraph’s Rubbish About ‘Gender Whisperers’ And Trans Kids”, *Junkee*, September 5, 2018, <https://junkee.com/scott-morrison-gender-whisperer/174136>

¹⁸ Elfy Scott, “Why Amazon Workers Are Still Pushing For Improved Rights”, *Junkee*, April 27, 2021, <https://junkee.com/amazon-workers-fight-for-their-rights-amidst-union-controversy/293355>; Aaron Gordon, “Bessemer Union Officially Challenges Amazon Warehouse Vote”, *Vice*, April 19, 2021, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/v7egdj/bessemer-union-officially-challenges-amazon-warehouse-vote>; Darryl Cunningham, “This Comic Describes Awful Working Conditions At Amazon”, *BuzzFeed News*, April 7, 2021, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/darrylcunningham/amazon-warehouse-corporate-working-conditions>; Brad Esposito, “Amazon Promises These Incredibly Weird Employee ‘Ambassador’ Accounts Are Real”, *Pedestrian*, August 13, 2020, <https://www.pedestrian.tv/online/amazon-ambassador-accounts/>

¹⁹ Jeremy Heywood, “Mutual Obligations On JobSeeker Destroyed My Mental Health & Now The Govt’s Making Them Worse”, *Pedestrian*, May 13, 2021, <https://www.pedestrian.tv/news/mutual-obligations-jobseeker-mental-health/>; Alex Bruce-Smith, “Here’s Why You Should Be Really Fucking Mad About The Government’s ‘Climate’ Spend”, *Pedestrian*, May 13, 2021, <https://www.pedestrian.tv/news/government-spending-on-climate-change-explained/>

²⁰ Joshua Badge, “This Year’s Budget Is Just Damage Control For A Dysfunctional Government”, *Junkee*, May 12, 2021, <https://junkee.com/budget-2021-damage-control/294892>

²¹ friendlyjordies, “Why Vice is Dying”; friendlyjordies, “The Worst Clickbait Site in Australia”; Shona Hawkes, *Still Banking on Land Grabs: Australia’s Big Four Banks and Land Grabs* (Melbourne: Oxfam, 2016); Erin Hadley, “Women ‘bear brunt’ of land grabs”, *The Phnom Penh Post*, September 28, 2016, <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/women-bear-brunt-land-grabs>

their sponsors – *Vice* (for example) pretends to “care deeply about indigenous people, as long as they’re south of the Torres Strait”.²² However, *Vice* has produced at least four documentaries about harms caused by agribusinesses to indigenous people in South America and south-east Asia, alongside a number of shorter videos and dozens of articles.²³ Stringer explains that *Vice* devotes significant resources to foreign affairs to boost its reputation.²⁴ It appears that *Vice* has chosen to distinguish itself with coverage of this exact issue. However, Shanks claims that it ignores the topic.²⁵

These counter-examples do not disprove the contention that these outlets deal, overall, in progressive neoliberalism. Herman and Chomsky stress that the propaganda model does not fully “filter” all anti-corporate or anti-government news. It is the marginalisation of such stories, not their total absence, which counts.²⁶ Shanks makes a plausible case that the ownership and advertising structure of these digital outlets makes them unlikely consistent sources of radical news. More systematic analysis may show that the counter-examples identified here are outnumbered by the sort of material Shanks ridicules. Moreover, he does champion fully independent news sources guaranteed to be free of pressure from owners or advertisers.²⁷ He recommends the progressive American daily news program *Democracy Now*.²⁸ He recommends *Michael West Media*, which focuses on corruption and tax avoidance.²⁹ He recommends the online policy journal

²² friendlyjordies, “Why Vice is Dying”.

²³ VICE, “Murder in the Amazon (Documentary): Part 1/2”, *YouTube*, 30:00, May 30, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h7Jg-Iy0Gkw>; VICE, “Murder in the Amazon (Documentary): Part 2/2”, *YouTube*, 33:34, May 30, 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a1_kJEwh9nl; “Deforestation and Slavery in the Amazon”, *Vice Video*, accessed May 26, 2021, https://video.vice.com/en_us/video/deforestation-and-slavery-in-the-amazon/560166f201fdd3af33a24ae1; VICE, “The Post-Antibiotic World & Indonesia's Palm Bomb”, *HBO*, April 17, 2015; VICE, “Last Line of Defense & El Rostro”, *HBO*, June 30, 2017; VICE News, “Illegal Loggers: The Tribe Waging War in the Amazon”, *YouTube*, 20:47, April 18, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HAgoyQs8GYk>; VICE News, “Norway Learned To Stop Eating The Rainforest (HBO)”, *YouTube*, 3:31, January 31, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M1e-FcWRzhE>; VICE News, “Indigenous Peruvians Are Using Satellites And Drones To Fight Deforestation (HBO)”, *YouTube*, 5:50, February 22, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0s5yhms0vzY>; VICE News, “The Indigenous People Saving the Amazon”, *YouTube*, 13:45, March 1, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=feYABJgpLQ>; “palm oil”, *Vice*, accessed May 26, 2021, <https://www.vice.com/en/topic/palm-oil?page=1>; “illegal logging”, *Vice*, accessed May 26, 2021, <https://www.vice.com/en/topic/illegal-logging>

²⁴ Paul Stringer, “Finding a Place in the Journalistic Field”, *Journalism Studies* 19 (2018): 1996.

²⁵ friendlyjordies, “Why VICE is Absolute Garbage”.

²⁶ Herman and Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent*, xii.

²⁷ friendlyjordies, “The Project: A Journalistic Farce”.

²⁸ friendlyjordies, “WHY DONALD TRUMP WON”.

²⁹ friendlyjordies, “The Italian Job”.

Pearls and Irritations.³⁰ He instructs viewers to “Like” the Facebook pages of the progressive activist group GetUp! and the Australia Institute (a progressive think tank).³¹ *Democracy Now* often reports on social movement activism.³² Ariadne Vromen notes that high-profile campaigns from GetUp! have “mainly been based on post-material policy issues and identity politics”.³³ The Australia Institute publishes research about the impact of economic policies on women and Indigenous people.³⁴ This independent, radical media diet would not exclude coverage of feminist, anti-racist, and LGBTQ+ rights issues. However, his narrative about the commercial media’s deference to owners and advertisers clearly oversimplifies a more complicated picture. Shanks cherry-picks a handful of risible articles with feminist, anti-racist, and LGBTQ+ rights angles and ignores readily available substantive ones.

Accusations of prejudice as “flak”

Shanks also highlights issues with some accusations of bigotry in the media. Inspired by the concept of the “common enemy” in *Manufacturing Consent*, he considers such claims the media’s preferred tactic for destroying the credibility of people who threaten the economic status quo.³⁵ Shanks claims in particular that these smears have been directed at Jeremy Corbyn and Bernie Sanders.

Shanks describes allegations of anti-Semitism against Corbyn (and the Labor Party under his leadership) as an “insane salacious smear” cooked up by the British media to discredit him and distract from his policy proposals.³⁶ While Shanks advances this claim on multiple occasions, he treats it as a truism and does not provide evidence. For his part,

³⁰ friendlyjordies, “Gough Whitlam: The Truth”, *YouTube*, 53:27, August 10, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nhcOLzSutNU>

³¹ friendlyjordies, “WHY DONALD TRUMP WON”.

³² Amoshaun Toft, “Network structures in cross-movement talk: Democracy Now!, 2003-2013”, *Social Movement Studies* 19 (2020): 357.

³³ Vromen, *Digital Citizenship and Political Engagement*, 139.

³⁴ “Research // Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander People”, *The Australia Institute*, accessed June 4, 2021, <https://australiainstitute.org.au/research/topic/aboriginal-torres-strait-islander-people/>; “Research // Gender at Work”, *The Australia Institute*, accessed June 4, 2021, <https://australiainstitute.org.au/research/topic/gender-at-work/>

³⁵ Shanks, Ahmed, and Belobrajdic, “Racism, Witch hunts and Pale Hipsters”.

³⁶ friendlyjordies, “Corbyn or Johnson?”, *YouTube*, 6:07, November 29, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hW9zUqqPv6w>; friendlyjordies, “The UK Today: A Poverty-Stricken DUMP”, *YouTube*, 8:02, December 9, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u984F5TxwTM>; Jordan Shanks and Ahmed Ali, “BRITISH ELECTIONS AND PAKISTAN”, *The Friendlyjordies Podcast*, January 8, 2020, <https://friendlyjordies.podbean.com/e/british-elections-and-pakistan/>

Chomsky also appears to conceive of this narrative as “flak”. He calls the charges “a campaign of vulgar deceit and slander” calculated to “fend off the threat” of a reinvigorated Labour Party.³⁷

Allegations of anti-Semitism levelled against Corbyn and Labour are a vexed issue which I cannot resolve here, given the complexity of delineating between anti-Semitism and legitimate criticism of the Israeli state. However, evidence of media bias here does exist. Justin Schlosberg and Laura Laker analyse 259 mainstream news items from 2018 about Corbyn or Labour’s supposed anti-Semitism.³⁸ Many reports either contained factual errors or presented contentious claims as “established fact”. Corbyn’s accusers were quoted often and uncritically, while his defenders were heavily scrutinised or denied a right of reply.³⁹ Schlosberg and Laker identify in their sources a “systematic failure” of reporting which favoured the narrative that Labour had become anti-Semitic under Corbyn.⁴⁰ Outlets with left-leaning reputations (in particular *The Guardian*) were responsible for a disproportionate number of errors.⁴¹

These allegations were again prominent in the British media in 2020, when an investigation by the Equality and Human Rights Commission found that Labour “committed unlawful acts” of anti-Semitism under Corbyn’s leadership.⁴² However, this report has faced compelling criticism. A dissection by an organisation of Jewish members of Labour identifies serious flaws in its methods and conclusions.⁴³ The authors argue that the EHRC “makes sweeping findings unsupported by the evidence it presents and

³⁷ Noam Chomsky, “On the weaponisation of false anti-Semitism charges against radical progressive movements”, *DiEM*, 25, July 31, 2020, <https://diem25.org/noam-chomsky-the-weaponisation-false-anti-semitism-charges-against-radical-progressive-movements/>; Noam Chomsky, “The Task Ahead Is Enormous, and There Is Not Much Time”, interview by Harrison Samphir, *Jacobin*, July 12, 2019, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2019/07/noam-chomsky-interview-climate-change-imperialism/>; David Edwards and David Cromwell, “Charges ‘Without Merit’ – Jeremy Corbyn, Antisemitism, Norman Finkelstein and Noam Chomsky”, *Media Lens*, September 12, 2018, <https://www.medialens.org/2018/charges-without-merit-jeremy-corbyn-antisemitism-norman-finkelstein-and-noam-chomsky/>

³⁸ Justin Schlosberg and Laura Laker, “Labour, Antisemitism, and the News: A disinformation paradigm”, *Media Reform Coalition* (2018): 4.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 11.

⁴⁰ *Ibid* 18.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 8, 11.

⁴² “Investigation into antisemitism in the Labour Party”, The Equality and Human Rights Commission, October 29, 2020, <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/publication-download/investigation-antisemitism-labour-party>

⁴³ Jewish Voice For Labour, *How the EHRC Got It So Wrong: Antisemitism and the Labour Party* (London: Verso, 2021).

distorts critical facts”.⁴⁴ In response to the EHRC’s eyebrow-raising interpretations of certain behavior as “unlawful” harassment and discrimination, Daniel Finn contends that it started from “the assumption that Labour had to be found guilty of breaking the law” and “worked backwards from that point”.⁴⁵ Moreover, a number of EHRC commissioners (appointed by Conservative governments since 2010) have worked or campaigned for the Conservative Party.⁴⁶ The inquiry into Labour was led by a commissioner who has tweeted support of far-Right positions on “culture war” issues (such as BLM) and defended Douglas Murray and Jordan Peterson from “offence-taking zealots”.⁴⁷ Many publications nevertheless failed to raise these issues and treated the EHRC report as official vindication of the allegations.⁴⁸

Shanks also complains that the media smeared Sanders supporters, and by extension Sanders himself, as sexist in 2016.⁴⁹ This was part of its “full-scale assault” to ensure Clinton’s victory.⁵⁰ Shanks again treats this as a truism and does not provide evidence. However, evidence of reporting errors also exists on this front. In coverage of the election, the term “Bernie Bro” came to denote a sexist male Sanders supporter who disliked Clinton and her supporters because of their gender.⁵¹ The BBC, CBS, *Time*, *The Guardian*, and the *Washington Post* (alongside many digital outlets) all published stories

⁴⁴ Ibid, 3.

⁴⁵ Daniel Finn, “A Fabricated Crisis”, *The New Left Review: Sidecar*, February 1, 2021, <https://newleftreview.org/sidecar/posts/a-fabricated-crisis>

⁴⁶ Haroon Siddique, “Politicising the EHRC? Five controversial appointments”, *The Guardian*, December 1, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/nov/30/politicising-ehrc-five-controversial-appointments>

⁴⁷ Eleni Courea, “Equality and Human Rights Commission lawyer Alasdair Henderson faces inquiry into political tweets”, *The Times*, December 1, 2020, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/equality-and-human-rights-commission-lawyer-alsadair-henderson-faces-inquiry-into-political-tweets-b8k266320>

⁴⁸ “The Observer view on Labour and antisemitism”, *The Observer*, November 1, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/nov/01/the-observer-view-on-labour-and-antisemitism>; “The Guardian view on Labour and antisemitism: a question of leadership”, *The Guardian*, October 30, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/oct/29/the-guardian-view-on-labour-and-antisemitism-a-question-of-leadership>; Margaret Hodge, “Antisemitism in the Labour party was real and it must never be allowed to return”, *The Guardian*, October 30, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/oct/29/antisemitism-labour-party-ehrc-report>; Stephen Bush, “What we learned from the EHRC report into Labour anti-Semitism, and what happens next”, *The New Statesman*, October 29, 2020, <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/uk-politics/2020/10/what-we-learned-ehrc-report-labour-anti-semitism-and-what-happens-next>

⁴⁹ Shanks, Ahmed, and Belobrajdic, “Kurds and The Propaganda Model”.

⁵⁰ friendlyjordies, “The REAL Reason Australia Sucks”, *YouTube*, 10:11, March 28, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Buf14CWgw7A>

⁵¹ Robinson Meyer, “Here Comes the Berniebro”, *The Atlantic*, October 17, 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/10/here-comes-the-berniebro-bernie-sanders/411070/>; Dara Lind, “The ‘Bernie Bro’ debate in the 2016 primary, explained”, *Vox*, February 5, 2016, <https://www.vox.com/2016/2/4/10918710/berniebro-bernie-bro>

about sexist trolling by male Sanders supporters in early 2016.⁵² Some journalists insisted that this behaviour reflected poorly on Sanders, and invoked the “Bernie Bro” narrative to characterise his criticisms of Clinton’s policy record as sexist.⁵³

Researchers have bemoaned a lack of evidence in these stories. The above articles often link to one another in lieu of supporting evidence. An article in the digital outlet *Mashable* kick-started this chain in January 2016, despite featuring only one screenshot of gendered anti-Clinton comments by a male Sanders supporter on social media.⁵⁴ Later articles in BuzzFeed, *Time*, and *The Guardian* then linked to this article as though it constituted evidence of a widespread phenomenon.⁵⁵ Articles about Bernie Bros in *The Washington Post* and CBS News were informed by tweets in which three female journalists complained of abuse from Sanders supporters after filing positive stories about Clinton.⁵⁶ However, while these comments and behaviour were offensive, they do not show that Sanders supporters were more sexist and abusive than those of other candidates.

⁵² Callum Borchers, “The Bernie Bros are out in full force harassing female reporters”, *The Washington Post*, June 7, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/06/07/the-bernie-bros-are-out-in-full-force-harassing-female-reporters/>; Janell Ross, “Bernie Sanders’s most vitriolic supporters really test the meaning of the word ‘progressive’”, *The Washington Post*, March 10, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/03/10/bernie-sanderss-most-vitriolic-supporters-really-test-the-meaning-of-the-word-progressive/>; Jessica Lussenhop, “Bernie Sanders supporters get a bad reputation online”, *BBC News*, January 28, 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-35422316>; Reena Flores, “Female journalists report harassment from ‘Bernie bros’ supporting Sanders”, *CBS News*, June 8, 2016, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/female-journalists-report-harassment-from-bernie-sanders-supporters/>; Charlotte Alter, “The Spirit of the BernieBro Lives On”, *TIME*, January 31, 2016, <https://time.com/4201356/bernie-sanders-berniebro/>; Jessica Valenti, “Don’t reduce debate on Hillary Clinton and female voters to a cat-fight”, *The Guardian*, February 11, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/feb/10/hillary-clinton-women-millennial-voters-argument-inter-generational-fight>; Evan McMorris-Santoro, “The Bernie Bros Are A Problem And The Sanders Campaign Is Trying To Stop Them”, *Buzzfeed News*, January 29, 2016, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/evanmcsan/the-bernie-bros#.mlVrpwBoQ>; Emily Cahn, “The bros who love Bernie Sanders have become a sexist mob”, *Mashable*, January 29, 2016, <https://mashable.com/2016/01/29/bernie-sanders-berniebros/>

⁵³ Amanda Marcotte, “Bernie Bros out of control: Explosion of misogynist rage at Nevada’s Dem chairwoman reflects terribly on Sanders’ dwindling campaign”, *Salon*, May 17, 2016, https://www.salon.com/2016/05/17/bernie_bros_out_of_control_explosion_of_misogynist_rage_at_nevada_dem_chairwoman_reflects_terribly_on_sanders_dwindling_campaign/; Amanda Marcotte, “Just like a Bernie Bro, Sanders bullies Clinton: Brooklyn debate confirms Sanders campaign is sticking by sexist ‘ambition witch’ stereotype”, *Salon*, April 15, 2016, https://www.salon.com/2016/04/15/just_like_a_bernie_bro_sanders_bullies_clinton_brooklyn_debate_confirms_sanders_campaign_is_sticking_by_sexist_ambition_witch_stereotype/

⁵⁴ Cahn, “The bros who love Bernie Sanders have become a sexist mob”.

⁵⁵ McMorris-Santoro, “The Bernie Bros Are A Problem And The Sanders Campaign Is Trying To Stop Them”; Alter, “The Spirit of the BernieBro Lives On”; Valenti, “Don’t reduce debate on Hillary Clinton and female voters to a cat-fight”.

⁵⁶ Borchers, “The Bernie Bros are out in full force harassing female reporters”; Flores, “Female journalists report harassment from ‘Bernie bros’ supporting Sanders”.

Expressing any polarising view online will elicit at least a handful of abusive responses.⁵⁷ This spate of articles did not provide sufficient evidence to support their claims. In the most systematic look at the phenomenon, Rebekah Tromble and Dirk Hovy analyse 101,021 tweets posted during the 2016 New Hampshire primaries which mentioned “@HillaryClinton” or “@BernieSanders”. The “vast majority” of gendered insults in the sample were sent by supporters of Republican candidates. Only 89 sexist tweets came from pro-Sanders accounts. Tromble and Hovy conclude that sexist abuse from Sanders supporters “seems relatively limited”.⁵⁸ Assessing “traditional media” reports about Bernie Bros, Kelly Wilz agrees that ostensible critiques of sexism “turned into vague labels used to delegitimise critique”.⁵⁹

Any assertion that anti-Semitism in the Labour Party or sexist harassment by Sanders supporters did not exist is well outside the scope of this thesis (and likely unsupportable). However, while no current research can corroborate the strong claim that these narratives were used as intentional smears, research does show that elements of the media advanced these claims without providing sufficient evidence and while marginalising counter-evidence.

Overall, Shanks makes a plausible case that commercial outlets which put commitments to feminism, anti-racism, and LGBTQ+ rights front and centre are unlikely to be consistent critics of corporations or pro-business governments. However, readily available material complicates this picture, and indicates that his critique is simplistic and exaggerated. Shanks also provides little evidence to support his claim that racism and sexism scandals which implicated left-wing politicians were smear campaigns. However, research into these issues does support the more moderate claim that many publications provided a one-sided version of events. Having here detailed the strongest points of his critique of identity politics in the media, I next examine the frequent descent of this narrative into a chauvinistic conspiracy theory.

⁵⁷ Amanda Hess, “Everyone Is Wrong About the Bernie Bros”, *Slate*, February 3, 2016, http://www.slate.com/articles/technology/users/2016/02/bernie_bros_are_bad_the_conversation_around_them_is_worse.html

⁵⁸ Rebekah Tromble and Dirk Hovy, “These 6 charts show how much sexism Hillary Clinton faces on Twitter”, *The Washington Post*, February 24, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/02/24/these-6-charts-show-how-much-sexism-hillary-clinton-faces-on-twitter/>

⁵⁹ Kelly Wilz, “Bernie Bros and Woman Cards: Rhetorics of Sexism, Misogyny, and Constructed Masculinity in the 2016 Election”, *Women’s Studies in Communication* 39 (2016): 359.

Dismissal of identity activism in general

A media conspiracy theory

Shanks often claims that prominent social justice campaigns are created, not just exploited, by the media. Journalists “engineer” them from scratch to use as distractions and branding opportunities.⁶⁰ The visibility of “SJW cuck shit” is a media plot.⁶¹ This narrative is conspiratorial and erases the real forms of oppression which give rise to these campaigns.

Shanks credits the media with “inventing” and “manufacturing” the movement to change the date of Australia Day.⁶² He insists that very few Indigenous people cared about the issue before the media made it the “flavour of the month” in 2017.⁶³ He states that media outlets fabricated the issue by emphasising complaints from unrepresentative upper-class Indigenous people from Sydney to distract from economic inequality and “sell advertising space”.⁶⁴ Shanks here ignores the efforts of Indigenous organisations since 1938 to mark January 26 as a “Day of Mourning and Protest”.⁶⁵ January 26 was first labelled “Invasion Day” and “Survival Day” by Indigenous groups protesting Bicentenary celebrations in 1988.⁶⁶ Contemporary protests on Australia Day are led by Indigenous organisations and involve tens of thousands of Indigenous participants.⁶⁷ The movement is a decades-old grassroots response to oppression, not a recent confection of media companies which want to “distract us” or create a “branding opportunity”.⁶⁸ Additionally, when Shanks complains that the media gives a megaphone to upper-class “quarter-Aboriginals” and people with “a tiny skerrick of Indigenous blood”, he invokes

⁶⁰ friendlyjordies, “Hipster Clickbait “News” Site Annihilated”.

⁶¹ Shanks, Ahmed, and Belobrajdic, “Kurds and The Propaganda Model”.

⁶² Shanks, Ahmed, and Belobrajdic, “White Male! SJWs, Political Correctness, Trump V. Kim Jon, Ali Opens a Restaurant”.

⁶³ Shanks, Ahmed, and Belobrajdic, “White Male! SJWs, Political Correctness, Trump V. Kim Jon, Ali Opens a Restaurant”; friendlyjordies, “Why Vice is Dying”.

⁶⁴ friendlyjordies, “Why VICE is Absolute Garbage”; Shanks, Ahmed, and Belobrajdic, “Constitutional Recognition and Assad”.

⁶⁵ “‘We hereby make protest’: The 1938 Day of Mourning”, The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, accessed April 8, 2021, <https://aiatsis.gov.au/explore/day-of-mourning>

⁶⁶ Delphine David, “‘Change the Date to May 8, Maaate’: Past and Present Analysis of a Controversial National Day as Australia ‘celebrates’ the 230th Anniversary of the First Fleet’s Arrival”, *Cultures of the Commonwealth* 22 (2019): 6.

⁶⁷ Rachel Hocking *et al.*, “January 26 is long being a day activism for nation’s people, but for many of those who take part in Invasion Day rallies or survival day festivities, what they see on the street is quite often different to what’s depicted on the news”, *The Point*, NITV, January 25, 2019.

⁶⁸ friendlyjordies, “The Truth about #ChangeTheDate”; friendlyjordies, “Why VICE is Absolute Garbage”.

the nineteenth-century “blood quantum” definition of Aboriginality which was already considered offensive and outdated by the late 1960s.⁶⁹

Shanks similarly attributed the prominence of LGBTQ+ issues in 2017 to the media, which “made a huge deal out of gay marriage”; he characterises same-sex marriage as “a little quirk in law” that could have been “ironed out” with little fanfare or media coverage.⁷⁰ However, media outlets heaped attention on the campaign to legalise same-sex marriage to distract from economic inequality with an “emotive social issue”, which could make advertisers “a lot of money”.⁷¹ In reality, the homophobia of politicians, not a scheming media, ensured that same-sex marriage in Australia was secured through a high-profile public vote rather than ordinary legislation. The 2015 decision to hold a plebiscite was a delaying tactic favoured by conservative National and Liberal politicians (including Abbott and Morrison) who opposed same-sex marriage. These influential conservatives then ensured that Turnbull adhered to this policy.⁷² Johnson and Manon Tremblay explain that an absence of political will among socially conservative politicians accounted, in large part, for Australia’s foot-dragging on same-sex marriage relative to countries with similar political institutions.⁷³ The drawn-out, high-profile nature of the process was a direct result of homophobia among powerful politicians, not of neoliberal media activity.

According to Shanks, the #MeToo movement was created by a “small bubble of people that have access [to] and control of the mainstream media”. He dismisses #MeToo as the purview of rich actresses who should “get over it” and “pay the price” (i.e. trade sex) for their fame and fortune. He insists that ordinary people do not think about the issues raised by #MeToo unless the media obsesses over them.⁷⁴ This narrative discounts the experience of women and girls who participate in the movement in response to the

⁶⁹ John Gardiner-Garden, “Defining Aboriginality in Australia”, *The Parliament of Australia*, February 3, 2003,

https://www.aph.gov.au/about_parliament/parliamentary_departments/parliamentary_library/publications_archive/cib/cib0203/03cib10#intro; friendlyjordies, “Why Vice is Dying”.

⁷⁰ Jordan Shanks, “Identity Politics Are Pure Evil”.

⁷¹ friendlyjordies, “WHY I HATE THE PLEBISCITE”; Shanks, Ahmed, and Belobrajdic, “White Male! SJWs, Political Correctness, Trump V. Kim Jon, Ali Opens a Restaurant”.

⁷² Blair Williams and Marian Sawyer, “Rainbow Labor and a Purple Policy Launch: Gender and Sexuality Issues”, in *Double Disillusion: The 2016 Australian Federal Election*, ed. Anika Gauja, Peter Chen, Jennifer Curtin, and Juliet Pietsch (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 2018), 647-648.

⁷³ Carol Johnson and Manon Tremblay, “Comparing Same-Sex Marriage in Australia and Canada: Institutions and Political Will”, *Government and Opposition* 53 (2018): 131-158.

⁷⁴ Shanks, Ahmed, and Belobrajdic, “Chris Brown goes poo poo, Tales of Pakistan (Ali Joins a gang) Feminism and Camile Paglia”.

continued high incidence of sexual violence (as discussed in Chapter Four). In Australia, the movement has transcended its origins in American celebrity culture and drawn attention to sexual violence and harassment in universities and businesses.⁷⁵ Shanks also contends that, in early 2021, the media chose to turn allegations of rape and sexual misconduct against federal politicians and staffers into “such a spectacle” – he alleges that the media heaped attention on these issues in order to help Morrison’s factional enemies within the Liberal Party.⁷⁶ This discounts the experience of many women who reacted to these events as a symptom of wider tolerance for sexual violence, as indicated by the participation of 110,000 people in consequent demonstrations in 40 cities.⁷⁷

Another of his contentions – that social democratic politicians fake commitments to social movement issues in order to secure coverage from the media – is also conspiratorial. Despite his support for Labor, Shanks erases major elements of its history to make this assertion. Johnson maintains that commitments to fight sexism, racism, and homo- and transphobia have informed Labor’s conception of social justice for decades. Early Labor governments did exhibit a “relatively simple” agenda centred around improving the pay and conditions of white male wage-earners.⁷⁸ However, the Whitlam government (elected in 1972) “reflected the influence of new social movements in Australian politics”.⁷⁹ Whitlam echoed elements of second-wave feminist thought, such as the idea that “the personal is political”, and legislated services and benefits to meet the needs of women.⁸⁰ Many feminist activists were appointed to influential public service positions under Whitlam and, as Hester Eisenstein explains, the rhetoric of government agencies came to reflect “a widespread acceptance of feminist analysis”.⁸¹ Whitlam’s perspectives on race also echoed social movement activists, as when he argued that Indigenous people should take pride in a distinct identity rather than assimilate to

⁷⁵ Shaheem Black, Rosanne Kennedy, and Hannah McCann, “Echoes and Silences: #MeToo’s Reverberations”, *Australian Feminist Studies* 35 (2020): 239-240.

⁷⁶ friendlyjordies, “Let’s talk about what’s happening in Canberra.”, *YouTube*, 15:40, April 2, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qf8fPJqQcQU>

⁷⁷ Yan Zhuang, “‘Enough Is Enough’: Thousands Across Australia March Against Sexual Violence”, *The New York Times*, March 15, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/15/world/australia/australia-women-marches.html>

⁷⁸ Carol Johnson, *Social Democracy and the Crisis of Equality: Australian Social Democracy in a Changing World* (Singapore: Springer, 2019), 4, 9, 12.

⁷⁹ Carol Johnson, “Gough Whitlam and the Re-Imagined Citizen-Subject of Australian Social Democracy”, in *Making Modern Australia: The Whitlam Government’s 21st Century Agenda*, ed. Jenny Hocking (Melbourne: Monash University Publishing, 2017), 156.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 161-162.

⁸¹ Hester Eisenstein, *Inside Agitators: Australian Femocrats and the State* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), xiii.

Anglo-Celtic norms.⁸² To Johnson, “a major expansion of Labor’s concept of equality” occurred under Whitlam.⁸³ This “much more inclusive” conception of equality continued to animate subsequent Labour governments.⁸⁴ Moreover, as Johnson and Marian Sawyer each note, the Liberal Party – in particular under John Howard between 1995 and 2007 – attacked Labor’s embrace of social issues as “special treatment of special interests”.⁸⁵ Howard re-framed social movements as “industries” (i.e. “the Aboriginal industry” or “the feminist industry”) populated by a cosmopolitan “elite” which is contemptuous of ordinary Australian values and aims to benefit financially from state expenditure on social issues.⁸⁶ Albeit with different emphases, Shanks echoes Liberal, not Labor discourse on social movements when he paints them as tools used by the elite to shore up its wealth.

Shanks therefore pushes a conspiratorial narrative in which – if not for media manipulation – only a “very small minority” of people would care to oppose sexism, racism, or homophobia.⁸⁷ When he characterises social movement activism as something orchestrated from above by evil elites, Shanks makes a very similar case to Benjamin, who blames KGB brainwashers and cultural Marxists. Shanks himself hints at the conspiratorial nature of this narrative when he jokingly calls it “Australia’s Pizzagate”.⁸⁸ As in Benjamin’s conspiracies, Shanks denies that social movements are a grassroots response to oppression.

Trivialising sexism, racism, homophobia and transphobia

Indeed, Shanks states that prejudice and discrimination are not serious enough problems in Australia to produce such a response. He denies the need for feminist, anti-racist, and LGBTQ+ rights movements, and trivialises the problems which they address.

⁸² Ibid, 30.

⁸³ Ibid, 31.

⁸⁴ Ibid, 16.

⁸⁵ Johnson, *Governing Change*, 42; Marian Sawyer, “From women’s interests to special interests: reframing equality claims,” in *The politics of women’s interests : new comparative perspectives*, ed. Louise Chappell and Lisa Hill (London: Routledge, 2006), 125.

⁸⁶ Johnson, *Governing Change*, 44, 49; Sawyer, “From women’s interests to special interests”, 111-112, 123-124, 127.

⁸⁷ Shanks, Ahmed, and Belobrajdic, “Porn and Bernie’s Chances”.

⁸⁸ Shanks, Ahmed, and Belobrajdic, “White Male! SJWs, Political Correctness, Trump V. Kim Jon, Ali Opens a Restaurant”.

He denies the continued need for a feminist movement. Shanks agrees when his podcast co-hosts assert that earlier feminists have left no more “gaps” between men and women, and that current feminists fail to realise “it’s not 1820”.⁸⁹ Feminists now make sexism appear “out of thin air” by complaining that furniture is too phallic.⁹⁰ They are “women who have never struggled in their life”.⁹¹ Shanks laughs that campaigns to curb sexual violence at universities exist to help over-sensitive women who claim rape after a bad date.⁹² He trivialises separate allegations of sexual assault against male Greens and Labor politicians, considering it unimportant whether or not they “grabbed an arse”.⁹³ He makes fun of feminist discourse about street harassment, stating that feminists expect men to blind themselves rather than glance at attractive women.⁹⁴ He ridicules feminists for imagining that gender representation on television is important.⁹⁵ He mocks a female politician for complaining about media commentary on her wardrobe.⁹⁶ Shanks and his podcast co-hosts themselves sexualise female politicians and joke about masturbating to their images.⁹⁷

Shanks similarly trivialises issues addressed by anti-racist campaigns in Australia. Rudd “saying sorry to the Aboriginals” (i.e. his 2008 apology to the Stolen Generations) received too much attention for a minor issue.⁹⁸ “You’re an idiot if you care” about the date of Australia Day because “the rescheduling of a barbeque” is not important.⁹⁹ Shanks states that anti-racists exaggerate the violence of colonisation and derides the idea that Europeans were set on “actively wiping ... out” Indigenous people:

⁸⁹ Shanks, Ahmed, and Belobrajdic, “Political Philosophy’s and Quotas”; Jordan Shanks, Ali Ahmed, and Mislav Belobrajdic, “Chris Brown goes poo poo, Tales of Pakistan (Ali Joins a gang) Feminism and Camile Paglia”.

⁹⁰ friendlyjordies, “Woke ‘Fanmail’ DESTROYED”.

⁹¹ Shanks, Ahmed, and Belobrajdic, “Chris Brown goes poo poo, Tales of Pakistan (Ali Joins a gang) Feminism and Camile Paglia”.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ friendlyjordies, “A Million Dead Fish!? ONE MILLION!?”; Neel TV, “Tension | Neel + Jordan Podcast”, *YouTube*, 1:09:66, July 5, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NjVRoE7-jU4>

⁹⁴ friendlyjordies, “Why ‘The Project’ is Utter Trash”, *YouTube*, 6:01, June 6, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xtNQku8rmPI>

⁹⁵ friendlyjordies, “You Are Wrong About The ABC”.

⁹⁶ friendlyjordies, “bag lady”.

⁹⁷ Shanks, Ahmed, and Belobrajdic, “Porn and Bernie’s Chances”; Shanks, Ahmed, Belobrajdic, “Mislav’s Proposal Story and Democratic Candidates”.

⁹⁸ Jordan Shanks, Tom Montefiore, and Robbie Armfield, “Hope Edition”, *The Friendlyjordies Podcast*, June 20, 2015, <https://friendlyjordies.podbean.com/e/episode-20-hope-edition/>

⁹⁹ friendlyjordies, “Why VICE is Absolute Garbage”; Shanks, Ahmed, and Belobrajdic, “Change the Date and Australian Identity”.

When a new civilisation comes ... alcohol gets spread to them, germs get spread to them, you just start taking up farmland – it’s not this active thing of ... going out of your way and slaughtering them ... [Europeans did not] spread out in a line and start shooting.¹⁰⁰

These comments ignore the “frontier wars” in which at least 40,000 Indigenous people were killed in battles and massacres in the 150 years after 1788.¹⁰¹ Shanks insists, then, that the only people who care about racial issues in Australia are middle-class whites desperate to appear non-racist – non-white people are not so thin-skinned as to imagine themselves victims of racism in Australia.¹⁰²

Shanks also trivialises LGBTQ+ issues. In 2015, he could “just barely” muster the energy to support same-sex marriage (“It doesn’t concern me at all”).¹⁰³ He supported the “Yes” vote in the 2017 Marriage Law Postal Survey, but grumbled that tax-payer money would be better spent on hospitals or education.¹⁰⁴ He complains about the attention lavished on one of the “least consequential” issues of the day.¹⁰⁵ The vote did “nothing to change society at all”.¹⁰⁶ He wishes more prominence were given to “things that would move humanity forward”.¹⁰⁷ Shanks also downplays issues facing transgender people. He proudly states: “I spend zero percent of my life pondering the debate over transsexuals”.¹⁰⁸ He treats gender transitions as frivolous, arguing that less attention should be paid to people who are “willing to make their clit really big” or “splurge” money on “getting some tits”.¹⁰⁹

Shanks insists that, even taken together, racism, sexism, homo- and transphobia would not make a list of Australia’s “top ten” most important political issues.¹¹⁰ They are “not

¹⁰⁰ Shanks, Ahmed, and Belobrajdic, “Change the Date and Australian Identity”;; Shanks, Ahmed, and Belobrajdic, “Change the Date and Australian Identity”.

¹⁰¹ Henry Reynolds, *Forgotten War* (Sydney: NewSouth, 2013), 121-134.

¹⁰² friendlyjordies, “The REAL Reason Australia Sucks”.

¹⁰³ Shanks, Montefiore, and Armfield, “Hope Edition”.

¹⁰⁴ friendlyjordies, “WHY I HATE THE PLEBISCITE”.

¹⁰⁵ Jordan Shanks, “Neel + Jordan: Group Identities”.

¹⁰⁶ Shanks, Ahmed, Belobrajdic, “White Male! SJWs, Political Correctness, Trump V. Kim Jon, Ali Opens a Restaurant”.

¹⁰⁷ Shanks, Ahmed, and Belobrajdic, “We Analyse Mislav’s Dick Pic and Our Penis Sizes Also Marxist Frankfurt School of Thought”.

¹⁰⁸ Jordan Shanks, “Neel + Jordan: Centre Left Parties”.

¹⁰⁹ friendlyjordies, “The Worst Clickbait Site in Australia”.

¹¹⁰ Jordan Shanks, “Neel + Jordan: Centre Left Parties”.

politics”, only “culture”.¹¹¹ He likes to contrast identity issues with more serious economic ones. Marriage equality is less important than the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline.¹¹² Australia Day is less important than wage stagnation.¹¹³ Transgender people’s bathroom access is less important than penalty rates.¹¹⁴ Racial issues in the United States are less important than restoring manufacturing.¹¹⁵ Shanks sometimes states outright that women and minorities do not face serious difficulties in Australia: “The problems that we have here when it comes to identity – when it comes to gender, when it comes to homosexuality, all these things – they’re fucking minor”.¹¹⁶ No one is still a “victim” because of their inherent characteristics. Those who claim to be should “shut up”.¹¹⁷ Most claims about inequality between groups turn out to be “a crock of shit” when investigated.¹¹⁸ Shanks jokes that, in Australia, women and minorities only suffer in “the Buddhist sense” – “it’s all in their heads”.¹¹⁹

This narrative is disproved by readily available information about inequalities between social groups in Australia. For instance, in addition to aforementioned issues, 17 percent of women have experienced violence by a partner, compared to six percent of men. 23 percent have experienced emotional abuse, compared to 16 percent of men.¹²⁰ Across all industries, managers are almost twice as likely to be men than women. Women in full-time work earn 14 percent less than men. Female graduates are likely to be paid less than male graduates in the same industry. Mothers of small children are six times more likely to be in part-time work than fathers. 70 percent of members of the House of Representatives are male, alongside 63 percent of federal judges and 83 percent of private-sector CEOs.¹²¹ Indigenous Australians are the most imprisoned people in the world, making up (as of 2020) two percent of Australia’s population, but 28 percent of

¹¹¹ Jordan Shanks, “Identity Politics Are Pure Evil”; friendlyjordies, “Triple J - the WORST news source”, *YouTube*, 5:00, November 3, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RdZlyi72rPE>

¹¹² Shanks, Montefiore, and Armfield, “EPISODE 20 - HOPE EDITION”.

¹¹³ Shanks, Ahmed, and Belobrajdic, “CHANGE THE DATE AND AUSTRALIAN IDENTITY”.

¹¹⁴ Jordan Shanks, “Neel + Jordan: Centre Left Parties”.

¹¹⁵ Shanks, Ahmed, and Belobrajdic, “PORN AND BERNIE’S CHANCES”.

¹¹⁶ Jordan Shanks, “Identity Politics Are Pure Evil”.

¹¹⁷ friendlyjordies, “The Video-YouTube Didn’t Want You To See”.

¹¹⁸ Jordan Shanks, “Neel + Jordan: False Identity”.

¹¹⁹ Jordan Shanks, “Neel + Jordan: Group Identities”.

¹²⁰ “Family, domestic and sexual violence data in Australia”, *The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare*, December 16, 2021, <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/domestic-violence/family-domestic-sexual-violence-data/contents/how-is-family-domestic-and-sexual-violence-experienced/emotional-abuse-by-a-partner>

¹²¹ “Gender Indicators, Australia”, *The Australian Bureau of Statistics*, December 15, 2020, <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/people-and-communities/gender-indicators-australia/latest-release>

its prisoners.¹²² Police are more likely to prosecute Indigenous people for minor offences such as cannabis possession or public drinking.¹²³ The life expectancy of Indigenous people compared to non-Indigenous people is nine years shorter for men and eight for women.¹²⁴ Indigenous people are almost three times as likely to die by suicide than non-Indigenous people.¹²⁵ Australia's largest survey of LGBTQ+ people found (in 2020) that 22 percent of respondents (and a third of trans people) had experienced homelessness.¹²⁶ 57 percent had experienced some form of discrimination in the past year, while 34 percent had experienced verbal abuse and 14 percent had experienced a threat of violence or a physical attack.¹²⁷ Rates of suicidal ideation in the past year (41 percent) and attempted suicide (5 percent) were "considerably higher" than in the general population.¹²⁸ This non-exhaustive list of issues faced by women and minorities in Australia demonstrates the persistence of disadvantage, in spite of what Shanks claims.

Shanks does not only target instances of what might be called progressive neoliberalism. He dismisses feminism, anti-racism, and LGBTQ+ rights activism in general, claims that women and minorities do not face serious problems in Australia, and insists that economic issues are distinct from and more important than "identity" ones. Shanks produces the sort of discourse which authors such as Young and Butler worried would be unleashed by the injunction to attack certain forms of identity politics as distractions from class politics.¹²⁹ His discourse is not strictly class reductionist; Shanks believes that advocacy for women, non-white people, and LGBTQ+ is unnecessary because discrimination and prejudice hardly exist, not because these real problems will be solved by socialist reform or revolution. However, when Reed denounces the concept of class

¹²² 11.

¹²³ Michael McGowan and Christopher Knaus, "NSW police pursue 80% of Indigenous people caught with cannabis through courts", *The Guardian*, June 10, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/jun/10/nsw-police-pursue-80-of-indigenous-people-caught-with-cannabis-through-courts>; "Over-represented and overlooked: the crisis of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women's growing over-imprisonment", *Human Rights Law Centre*, May 18, 2017, <https://www.hrlc.org.au/reports/2017/5/18/report-over-represented-and-overlooked-the-crisis-of-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-womens-growing-over-imprisonment>

¹²⁴ "Closing Australia's health and life expectancy gap", *Alcohol and Drug Foundation*, March 16, 2021, <https://adf.org.au/insights/closing-the-gap/#:~:text=The%20average%20life%20expectancy%20for,83.4%20years%20non%2DIndigenous>).

¹²⁵ "Deaths by suicide amongst Indigenous Australians", The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, accessed October 19, 2021, <https://www.aihw.gov.au/suicide-self-harm-monitoring/data/populations-age-groups/suicide-indigenous-australians>

¹²⁶ 14.

¹²⁷ 40.

¹²⁸ 15.

¹²⁹ Young, "Unruly Categories"; Butler, "Merely Cultural".

reductionism as a “myth” spread by milquetoast liberals to discredit the Left, he insists that “no one with any significant voice ... contends that racial or gender injustices or those affecting LGBTQ+ people, immigrants, or other groups as such do not exist, are inconsequential, or otherwise should be downplayed or ignored”.¹³⁰ Shanks contends exactly this to his large audience. Such attitudes are not merely a centrist myth.

Next, I examine further similarities between his construction of anti-racist, feminist, and LGBTQ+ rights activism and Benjamin’s discourse. I argue that Shanks exhibits many of the same problematic elements identified in Benjamin’s work. Moreover, in many instances it appears that Shanks has taken far-Right narratives from his engagement with alt-right/-lite media.

Singing from the alt-right/-lite’s song sheet

Cultural imperialism

First, as with Benjamin, Shanks dismisses sexism, racism, homo- and transphobia in ways that involve cultural imperialism. Like Benjamin, he ignores the reality of Eurocentrism, androcentrism, and heteronormativity and tells women and minorities to simply work hard as individuals who put no stock in their group identities.

Unlike Benjamin, he does not appeal to Enlightenment thought to position himself as a liberal individualist. Shanks is more prosaic and calls reading philosophy “a waste of time”.¹³¹ He is aware of arguments about “classical liberalism” pushed by far-Right YouTubers, but mocks their reverence for such abstract ideas as pretentious “wank”. Shanks mocks people on the Right who talk about “liberalism, liberalism, liberalism” and quote “fucking Rousseau” when in reality their political positions simply showcase obedience to rich investors.¹³²

With fewer intellectual trappings, however, he does insist that women and minorities should proceed in life as individuals. Feminist, anti-racist, and LGBTQ+ rights activists

¹³⁰ Reed, “The Myth of Class Reductionism”; Reed, “Socialism and the Argument against Race Reductionism”.

¹³¹ Shanks, Ali, and Belobrajdic, “Political Philosophy’s and Quotas”.

¹³² friendlyjordies, “An Aussie Reacts to Dave Rubin Reacting to an Aussie”, *YouTube*, 8:58, December 20, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WctrZoSpc84>

are “extremely narcissistic, stupid, and insular” for caring about their group identities.¹³³ Shanks declares:

If you are identifying yourself on the fact that ... you’re black, or that you’re white, or that you’re a woman, or a man, or a homosexual, it shows that you’re stupid. It shows that you have a really superficial understanding of yourself and have not delved deeper[.]¹³⁴

He tells people to reject attempt to define them as a female, black, or gay: “You have the power to create your own identity”.¹³⁵ People who put stock in gender, sexuality, and race have a “literally skin deep” understanding of themselves.¹³⁶

Shanks insists that when people treat these identities as important, they effectively choose to be treated according to their inherent characteristics. “The way you look” only becomes an identity “if you choose it to be”. He claims for instance that a black American would not be harassed by police if he chose to identify as “a businessman” rather than “a black man”. He can disengage from the “culture” of his surrounds by wearing suits and spending time in “the right parts of town”.¹³⁷ People who grow up in ethnic cultures which “reward” laziness and crime need to work hard and “lift yourself out of that culture”.¹³⁸ People who think of themselves as oppressed are simply too attached to their group identity to make the changes necessary for success.¹³⁹ Because conscientious people *can* make such changes, affirmative action is “obscene” and undermines meritocracy.¹⁴⁰ Shanks overall believes women and minorities should emulate himself – he could identify as a “white man”, but insists that “I don’t see myself as that, I see myself as a more nuanced identity”.¹⁴¹

As explained in the discussion of similar perspectives in Chapter Four, contentions that all people should proceed in life as hard-working “individuals” give unfair advantages to members of dominant groups. This position involves cultural imperialism. It is easy for

¹³³ Jordan Shanks, “Neel + Jordan: Group Identities”.

¹³⁴ Jordan Shanks, “Identity Politics Are Pure Evil”.

¹³⁵ Jordan Shanks, “Neel + Jordan: Centre Left Parties”; Jordan Shanks, “Identity Politics Are Pure Evil”.

¹³⁶ friendlyjordies, “Cancel Culture KILLS Artists (Yours and Owls)”.

¹³⁷ Jordan Shanks, “Neel + Jordan: Group Identities”.

¹³⁸ Jordan Shanks, “Neel + Jordan: Group Identities”; Jordan Shanks, “Personal Responsibility | Neel + Jordan Podcast”.

¹³⁹ Jordan Shanks, “Neel + Jordan: Group Identities”.

¹⁴⁰ Shanks, Ahmed, and Belobrajdic, “Political Philosophy’s and Quotas”.

¹⁴¹ Jordan Shanks, “Neel + Jordan: Centre Left Parties”.

Shanks to see himself as an individual without group affiliations because Eurocentrism, androcentrism, and heteronormativity work to convert the specific perspective of straight white men into the universal norm and standard in Australia. Like Benjamin, Shanks sometimes fails to even rationalise the superiority of dominant norms and standards over others. He takes it as read (for instance) that calling a child “Shaniqua” holds them back professionally or that “black” attire looks more suspicious to police than a suit.¹⁴² For members of marginalised groups, putting stock in group identities and positively affirming the characteristics considered “deviant” according to dominant norms is required to overcome exactly these sorts of prejudices. Such activism erodes cultural imperialism and builds genuine equality of opportunity.¹⁴³ Shanks, like Benjamin, is blind to this.

It seems likely that alt-right/-lite media influences these views. While Shanks does not fully accept right-wing narratives about “personal responsibility” – he states that working-class people work just as hard as billionaires, and that people are rarely unemployed through fault of their own – he does accept them when it comes to identity-based activism.¹⁴⁴ He accesses these views through Shapiro and Peterson. Shanks states that Shapiro is right to call activists “annoying” because “they don’t take personal responsibility – they blame society for the reasons that their life sucks”.¹⁴⁵ Kolhatkar elsewhere maintains that people blame their failures on racist, sexist, homo- and transphobic systems because “it absolves you of personal responsibility”. Shanks agrees by quoting Peterson; he tells activists: “You should clean your room”.¹⁴⁶ This is Peterson’s more pithy formulation of his maxim: “Set your house in perfect order before you criticise the world”.¹⁴⁷ As mentioned, in his political lectures Peterson turns this self-help nugget into a claim that life is hard for everyone and that women and minorities should take personal responsibility instead of blaming their failures on

¹⁴² Jordan Shanks, “Neel + Jordan: Group Identities”.

¹⁴³ Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, 154.

¹⁴⁴ Jordan Shanks, “Personal Responsibility | Neel + Jordan Podcast”; friendlyjordies, “The Myth of The Dole Bludger”, *YouTube*, 7:51, February 3, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ddaSYKhXBdM>

¹⁴⁵ Jordan Shanks, “Ben Shapiro's Best Argument”.

¹⁴⁶ Jordan Shanks, “Personal Responsibility | Neel + Jordan Podcast”.

¹⁴⁷ Jordan Peterson, *12 Rules For Life: An Antidote to Chaos* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2018), 118.

fabrications like “patriarchy” and “white privilege”.¹⁴⁸ It therefore seems clear that consumption of Shapiro and Peterson’s content contributes to the views described above.

Like Benjamin, Shanks therefore exhibits cultural imperialism when he tells women and minorities to work hard as undifferentiated individuals. His views on this front appear to be influenced by members of the alt-right/-lite.

Scientism

As with Benjamin, elements of his discourse can also be explained as scientism. Shanks uses the trappings of science to insist that social inequalities stem from the inherent nature of marginalised people. Unlike Benjamin, he does not style himself as a logician or uber-rational “Socratic”.¹⁴⁹ He is aware of this style among far-Right YouTubers and mocks it as pompous.¹⁵⁰ Nevertheless, Shanks confidently disseminates pseudoscience about the differences between men and women.

Shanks maintains that evolution has given men and women different natures. Men were hunters in “caveman times” and “savannah times”.¹⁵¹ In order to track and kill wild animals, men needed to be able to focus for long periods of time.¹⁵² Modern men therefore have a “biological” predisposition for hard work.¹⁵³ Men are more conscientious because their minds are geared towards obsession with their work.¹⁵⁴ Most geniuses are men because “when a male brain works well, it works really well”.¹⁵⁵ This explains why “there’s no female Da Vinci”.¹⁵⁶ Being inclined towards concentration and hard work,

¹⁴⁸ Heller, “Jordan Peterson is on a crusade to toughen up young men”; Lynskey, “How dangerous is Jordan B Peterson”.

¹⁴⁹ Sargon of Akkad, “The Rationalists”; Sargon of Akkad, “The Curse of the YouTube Socratics”.

¹⁵⁰ friendlyjordies, “In Defence of Greta Thunberg”; friendlyjordies, “I get MAIMED by Facts!”, *YouTube*, 7:32, July 27, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lhpdDBsOpAo>

¹⁵¹ Jordan Shanks, “What Men Find Attractive”, *YouTube*, 24:02, April 28, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xq43ylrgvs>

¹⁵² Jordan Shanks, “What women want but won’t tell you”, *YouTube*, 9:28, November 8, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pdUokJXMFIA>; Jordan Shanks, “What Men Find Attractive”.

¹⁵³ Jordan Shanks, “This is how you get a boyfriend”, *YouTube*, 8:01, January 19, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VJDlYTaz8ew>

¹⁵⁴ Jordan Shanks, “A Woman’s Greatest Strength Is Their Greatest Weakness”; Neel Kolhatkar, “Neel + Jordan: Incels and Sex Disparity”.

¹⁵⁵ Jordan Shanks, “How To Know If You’re In The Right Relationship”, *YouTube*, 20:17, July 2, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dwmcF8ysFBY>

¹⁵⁶ Shanks, Ahmed, and Belobrajdic, “Chris Brown goes poo poo, Tales of Pakistan (Ali Joins a gang) Feminism and Camile Paglia”.

men are “able to build huge corporations and push society forward”.¹⁵⁷ Meanwhile, women in “caveman times” were occupied “back in the camps”.¹⁵⁸ They were responsible for raising children and ensuring that “everyone’s relationships were okay”.¹⁵⁹ Modern women are therefore “more socially and emotionally intelligent” than men.¹⁶⁰ However, they are less equipped for concentration and hard work because their “female brain” gets distracted by interpersonal “drama”.¹⁶¹ Shanks adds that unusually high levels of testosterone in an individual produce an especially “male” brain and high levels of estrogen produce an especially “female” one. People in the former group can be identified by their square jaws, while the latter have soft features.¹⁶²

Shanks makes these claims while discussing sex and dating. He advises his audience to account for evolutionary traits when pursuing a partner. Single men should develop impressive skills and focus on personal success. They should “perfect a craft” and focus on resource acquisition.¹⁶³ This is because women “in the natural world” want a man to provide for them while they rear children.¹⁶⁴ Women compete for high-status men because they want to procreate with an “alpha male”.¹⁶⁵ Men should be confident and boastful because women are impressed by someone who promises “the biggest cave” and to protect them from sabre-toothed tigers. Men should be persistent if rebuffed, because women always deflect advances as a reflex, to “make sure you don’t impregnate them”.¹⁶⁶ Women do not care if a man is “an arsehole” as long as they believe that he is strong enough to protect them during childbirth.¹⁶⁷ Meanwhile, Shanks tells single women to focus on physical attractiveness. Men prioritise “reproductive faculties” in women.¹⁶⁸ Women “have to work out” and get into “peak physical condition” to signal their reproductive prowess.¹⁶⁹ Shanks knows that feminists would call this sexist, but shrugs

¹⁵⁷ Jordan Shanks, “A Woman’s Greatest Strength Is Their Greatest Weakness”.

¹⁵⁸ Jordan Shanks, “What women want but wont tell you”.

¹⁵⁹ Jordan Shanks, “What Men Find Attractive”.

¹⁶⁰ Jordan Shanks, “A Woman’s Greatest Strength Is Their Greatest Weakness”.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Jordan Shanks, “How To Know If You’re In The Right Relationship”.

¹⁶³ Neel Kolhatkar, “Neel + Jordan: Incels and Sex Disparity”.

¹⁶⁴ Jordan Shanks and Ali Ahmed, “Jordan and Ali talk about Relationships, Life, Abortion and Sex”, *The Friendlyjordies Podcast*, May 28, 2019, <https://friendlyjordies.podbean.com/e/jordan-and-ali-talk-about-relationships-life-abortion-and-sex/>

¹⁶⁵ Shanks and Ahmed, “Jordan and Ali talk about Relationships, Life, Abortion and Sex”.

¹⁶⁶ Jordan Shanks, “Inside The Mind Of An Incel”, *YouTube*, 12:58, May 8, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0eEQ9E7Vxck>

¹⁶⁷ Jordan Shanks, “What Men Find Attractive”; Jordan Shanks, “Jordan Peterson’s Dark Side”.

¹⁶⁸ Jordan Shanks, “What Men Find Attractive”.

¹⁶⁹ Jordan Shanks, “This is how you get a boyfriend”; Jordan Shanks, “What Men Find Attractive”.

that “biology is inherently sexist”.¹⁷⁰ Women are “the male peacock of our species – they’re the one that’s supposed to be attractive”.¹⁷¹ After attracting a partner, Shanks advises viewers to adhere to traditional gender roles within relationships. “Polarity of the sexes” ensures a happy relationship. Relationships work when “the guy is more of a man, and the woman is more of a woman”.¹⁷²

While Shanks mostly doles out this advice in his role as dating guru, his belief in sweeping biological sex differences has political implications. He criticises feminist attempts to address representation in high-status jobs and the gender pay gap. He insists that the different innate preferences of men and women simply lead them to make different career choices.¹⁷³ His dating advice is also itself political. His support for “polarity of the sexes” includes a proscription against relationships in which the man is “bossed around” by a “powerful” woman. He tacitly endorses a traditional dynamic in which the man is a powerful head of household.¹⁷⁴

Like Benjamin, Shanks takes this information from sociobiology and evolutionary psychology. He often accesses this material in self-help sources. Lancaster notes that self-help is a corner of pop culture which has embraced these fields.¹⁷⁵ For instance, Shanks takes the notion from Tony Robbins that women bore men with detailed stories thanks to their past as “gatherers” who needed to communicate “where the berries are”.¹⁷⁶ From John Gray’s best-seller *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus*, Shanks takes the idea that women like to talk about problems while men reflect alone in their “cave”.¹⁷⁷ He recommends these and many other self-help manuals about relationships which belong to what Ging calls an “explosion” of books (from the 1990s onwards) which are filled with “dubious and almost entirely discredited” information about gender.¹⁷⁸ Julia Wood writes that such books are “so seriously flawed that they would be laughable if they did not have serious consequences”.¹⁷⁹ For instance, Cordelia Fine critiques one

¹⁷⁰ Jordan Shanks, “What Men Find Attractive”.

¹⁷¹ Shanks and Ahmed, “Jordan and Ali talk about Relationships, Life, Abortion and Sex.”.

¹⁷² Jordan Shanks, “What Men Find Attractive”.

¹⁷³ friendlyjordies, “Jordan Peterson GENTLY REBUKES Fool”.

¹⁷⁴ Jordan Shanks, “What Men Find Attractive”.

¹⁷⁵ Lancaster, *The Trouble With Nature*, 82, 103.

¹⁷⁶ Jordan Shanks, “What women want but wont tell you”; Angela Belieu, “Tony Robbins ‘meadow report’”, *YouTube*, 27:27, January 17, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OxqlSsHYkSg>

¹⁷⁷ friendlyjordies, “MAFS Vol. 3: The Dumbest Thing We've Ever Heard”.

¹⁷⁸ Ging, “Bros v. Hos”, 56-57.

¹⁷⁹ Julia T. Wood, “A critical response to John Gray's Mars and Venus portrayals of men and women”, *Southern Communication Journal* 67 (2002): 208.

passage in which Gray tries to insist that hormonal differences make household chores more enjoyable for women than men.¹⁸⁰ Shanks shares information from such sources, but presents it as “the facts” about gender.¹⁸¹

In addition to being credulous of the same dubious fields of study as Benjamin, Shanks sometimes accesses this pseudoscience directly through the alt-right/-lite. He takes from Peterson takes the idea that “men like things, women like people”.¹⁸² Shanks is especially influenced by PUAs and the “seduction community”. He has consumed a large number of videos and books by PUAs.¹⁸³ He jokes that everything he knows about evolution is from this material.¹⁸⁴ While Benjamin considers it distasteful, Shanks recommends the sort of objectifying material (as described in Chapter Two) which purports to teach men strategies for hacking women’s evolutionary drive to sleep with “alpha” males. He says that this material teaches men “how to decode *The Matrix* ... when it comes to women”.¹⁸⁵ He recommends videos from a pick-up advice company which has had two instructors expelled from Australia over their misogynistic views.¹⁸⁶ He recommends a 20-hour seminar series by a PUA who advocates physically aggressive pick-up moves and has bragged about forcing sex on an ex-girlfriend.¹⁸⁷ Shanks reminisces about using PUA techniques in the past.¹⁸⁸ He positions it as simply another branch of self-help which can teach men the “scary” truth about how men and women relate.¹⁸⁹ In equating PUA and self-help content, Shanks reflects Ging’s observation that what seems like “bizarre

¹⁸⁰ Cordelia Fine, *Delusions of Gender: How Our Minds, Society, and Neurosexism Create Difference* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010), 81.

¹⁸¹ Jordan Shanks, “What Women Find Attractive”.

¹⁸² Jordan Shanks, “What women want but wont tell you”.

¹⁸³ Jordan Shanks, “Inside The Mind Of An Incel”; Shanks, Montefiore, and Armfield, “EPISODE 20 - HOPE EDITION”.

¹⁸⁴ Jordan Shanks, “Neel + Jordan: Evolution (NEW PODCAST)”.

¹⁸⁵ Neel Kolhatkar, “Neel + Jordan: Incels and Sex Disparity”.

¹⁸⁶ Stephanie Anderson, “Visa of ‘pick-up artist’ Jeff Allen cancelled after petition launched”, *ABC News*, January 19, 2016, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-01-19/jeff-allen-pick-up-artist-visa-cancelled-after-petition-launched/7097688>; “Julien Blanc, self-described pick-up artist who promotes choking women, leaves Australia and has visa cancelled”, *ABC News*, November 7, 2014, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-11-07/pick-up-artist-julien-blanc-leaves-australia-amid-outrage/5874604?nw=0>

¹⁸⁷ Jordan Shanks, “Neel + Jordan: Reality”, *YouTube*, 1:03:45, September 9, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2r7hDGceDZQ>; Jordan Shanks, “Inside The Mind Of An Incel”; Jordan Shanks, “Neel + Jordan: Neediness”; Patrick McGuire, “This Canadian Pick-Up Artist Bragged About Forcing Sex On a ‘Slut Whore’”, *VICE*, November 13, 2014, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/av4xea/this-canadian-pick-up-artist-bragged-about-forcing-sex-on-a-slut-whore-bitch-297>

¹⁸⁸ Jordan Shanks, “Not enough matches on Tinder? Make this tweak.”, *YouTube*, 11:09, May 27, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zPzrTHuBjc8>

¹⁸⁹ Jordan Shanks, “A Woman’s Greatest Strength Is Their Greatest Weakness”; Jordan Shanks, “Inside The Mind Of An Incel”; Jordan Shanks, “What Men Find Attractive”.

and shocking” pseudoscience in PUA material is only an “intensification” of the views found in mainstream self-help manuals.¹⁹⁰ Shanks therefore takes “knowledge” about sex differences from Peterson and from sexist PUAs who repackage the claims of evolutionary psychologists which were speculative to begin with. He nevertheless presents this information as the scientific consensus on gender.

Unlike Benjamin, Shanks sticks to gender and does not engage with the alt-right/-lite’s other efforts to explain away social inequalities with pseudoscience (such as claims about the lower IQ of non-white people). However, he does present pseudoscience as concrete proof that gender inequalities are natural. In making these scientific arguments, Shanks is influenced both by the same academic disciplines as Benjamin, and by alt-right/-lite media itself.

Hegemonic masculinity and emphasised femininity

Like Benjamin, Shanks also states that activists who fail to embody ideals of masculinity and femininity (as described in Chapter Six) are contemptible figures who can be ignored. His discourse on this front again appears to be influenced by the alt-right/-lite.

Shanks ridicules men who fail to exhibit hegemonic masculinity. He usually directs this scorn at “progressive” journalists, but also sometimes targets rank-and-file activists. He laughs at them for being physically weak or timid. Journalists go about “wagging their weak little in-bred fingers” at people.¹⁹¹ He laughs at them as “nervous” and unable to speak confidently.¹⁹² Men passionate about “social issues” more generally are “so skinny” and “so lacking in protein” that “it’s like a blade of grass ... trying to get mad”.¹⁹³ He laughs that such men were likely bullied in school.¹⁹⁴ Participants in the George Floyd protests were “skinny little weedy pale dudes” who looked ridiculous in scuffles with muscular Proud Boys.¹⁹⁵ Men who criticise Shanks for own his racist, sexist, or

¹⁹⁰ Ging, “Bros v. Hos”, 57-58.

¹⁹¹ friendlyjordies, “BOYCOTT THE MAINSTREAM MEDIA!”.

¹⁹² friendlyjordies, “Triple J - the WORST news source”; friendlyjordies, “Dancing on the Grave of Buzzfeed”, *YouTube*, 7:26, June 3, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bsMUKJYIFRE>

¹⁹³ Shanks, Montefiore, and Armfield, “Hope Edition”.

¹⁹⁴ Shanks, Ahmed, and Belobrajdic, “White Male! SJWs, Political Correctness, Trump V. Kim Jon, Ali Opens a Restaurant”.

¹⁹⁵ Neel TV, “Collapse Of Society | Neel + Jordan”, *YouTube*, 1:10:56, June 28, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r4urTYKhTA4>

homophobic comments are always “pale, friendless, nervous cunts”.¹⁹⁶ When he imitates journalists or male social justice activists, Shanks very often affects an effeminate voice.¹⁹⁷

Shanks also mocks women who fail to exhibit emphasised femininity. He mocks young women who do not adhere to beauty standards which might make them sexually attractive to men. Shanks invokes the same stereotype as Benjamin. Activist women are “exact clone[s]” of one another – they are fat, wear glasses, and have short hair dyed an artificial colour.¹⁹⁸ Shanks has this stereotype in mind when he jokes that feminists are “always the same ... awful harlequin women[,] ... minstrel acts of women”.¹⁹⁹ When he is criticised on Twitter, Shanks focuses on one critic who matches elements of the stereotype, and sneers that women who look like this should not dare call him “gross”.²⁰⁰ He elsewhere uses an out-of-context screenshot of an American TikTok user with glasses and unusual hair as a stand-in for all his feminist critics.²⁰¹ His typical female critic is “fat, looks like a pear, [and is] paler than blobfish in the deep ocean”.²⁰² Meanwhile, the body positivity movement is “embarrassing us” in front of slimmer Asian countries by celebrating “gross” fat women.²⁰³

Shanks also mocks older women as unattractive and as failed mothers. He characterises feminist and anti-racist women on the ABC as “smug 60-year-old bags of pudding”.²⁰⁴ Elsewhere they are “shriveled prunes”.²⁰⁵ He dismisses “progressive” content on the ABC and SBS because it is apparently “concocted by childless 60-year-olds”.²⁰⁶ In another jab at female journalists as failed mothers, Shanks calls Junkee writers “future

¹⁹⁶ Shanks, Ahmed, and Belobrajdic, “Racism, Witch hunts and Pale Hipsters”.

¹⁹⁷ friendlyjordies, “WHY DONALD TRUMP WON”; friendlyjordies, “bag lady”; friendlyjordies, “Cancel Culture KILLS Artists (Yours and Owls)”.

¹⁹⁸ Shanks, Ahmed, and Belobrajdic, “Racism, Witch hunts and Pale Hipsters”.

¹⁹⁹ Shanks, Ahmed, and Belobrajdic, “Chris Brown goes poo poo, Tales of Pakistan (Ali Joins a gang) Feminism and Camile Paglia”.

²⁰⁰ friendlyjordies, “Twitter Addicts END Friendlyjordies”, *YouTube*, 12:34, April 30, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KCbLdtoXZxI>

²⁰¹ friendlyjordies, “Cancel Culture KILLS Artists (Yours and Owls)”.

²⁰² Shanks, Ahmed, and Belobrajdic, “Racism, Witch hunts and Pale Hipsters”.

²⁰³ Jordan Shanks, “Why Tess Holiday’s Cosmo cover is HUGE”, *YouTube*, 14:59, September 16, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jczRW_qBDRc

²⁰⁴ friendlyjordies, “You Are Wrong About The ABC”.

²⁰⁵ Shanks, Ahmed, and Belobrajdic, “Chris Brown goes poo poo, Tales of Pakistan (Ali Joins a gang) Feminism”.

²⁰⁶ friendlyjordies, “You Are Wrong About The ABC”.

cat ladies”.²⁰⁷ His contempt for childless women is further evident in his tendency to insult Berejiklian (although herself a figure of the Right) as a “spinster”.²⁰⁸

His derision of social movement activists who fail to adhere to gender norms is influenced by the alt-right/-lite. Shanks makes use of the same stock characters as Benjamin. Alluding to Chanty Binx, he dismisses his female critics on the Left because they all resemble “that classic triggered chick ... with the red hair”.²⁰⁹ He laughs at the specific male anti-Trump protestors dubbed “AIDS Skrillex” and “Carl the Cuck” and uses them as archetypes of male activists.²¹⁰

Shanks also uses alt-right/-lite slang and memes. Using manosphere lingo, he calls male activists and journalists “betas”.²¹¹ Referencing the aforementioned meme that soy products decrease testosterone, he jokes that BuzzFeed journalists only eat “sushi and soy milk”.²¹² He elsewhere states that “testosterone-deprived” BuzzFeed journalists lack “properly functioning testicles”.²¹³ This references a 2017 video in which male BuzzFeed presenters discovered after blood tests that their testosterone levels were low.²¹⁴ Many members of the alt-right/-lite commentariat then penned gleeful articles which took the BuzzFeed results as evidence that conservative men are stronger and have more testosterone than left-wing men.²¹⁵ Shanks takes this narrative straight from the far-Right – his source for the story is an article in the reactionary *Gateway Pundit*.²¹⁶ He also makes frequent use of the term “cuck” to ridicule effeminate men. BuzzFeed journalists

²⁰⁷ friendlyjordies, “The Worst Clickbait Site in Australia”.

²⁰⁸ friendlyjordies, “Pure Evil”; friendlyjordies, “Australia’s Rivers of Blood”.

²⁰⁹ Shanks, Ahmed, and Belobrajdic, “Racism, Witch hunts and Pale Hipsters”.

²¹⁰ friendlyjordies, “my apology”, *YouTube*, 19:31, August 28, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wLPMvrahP50>; friendlyjordies, “WHY I HATE THE PLEBISCITE”; Shanks, Ahmed, and Belobrajdic, “White Male! SJWs, Political Correctness, Trump V. Kim Jon, Ali Opens a Restaurant”.

²¹¹ friendlyjordies, “Triple J - the WORST news source”; friendlyjordies, “my apology”.

²¹² friendlyjordies, “BuzzFeed LITERALLY Destroys Itself”.

²¹³ friendlyjordies, “The Media is Lying to You”; friendlyjordies, “The Ultimate Streets Brain Freeze”, *YouTube*, 6:25, November 15, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=huaPyUNJOJo>

²¹⁴ BuzzFeedVideo, “The Try Guys Test Who Is The Most Attractive”, *YouTube*, 21:27, October 28, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xm63aVNwvao>

²¹⁵ Melissa Meszaros, “Buzzfeed’s Male Writers Revealed to have Dangerously Low Testosterone”, *AltRight.com*, 2017, <https://altright.com/2017/10/30/buzzfeeds-male-writers-revealed-to-have-dangerously-low-testosterone/>; Amanda Prestigiaco, “BuzzFeed Guys Test Their Testosterone Levels. The Results Are Exactly What You’d Expect”, *The Daily Wire*, October 30, 2017, <https://www.dailywire.com/news/buzzfeed-guys-test-their-testosterone-levels-amanda-prestigiaco>; Darush Valizadeh, “Male Buzzfeed writers have catastrophically low testosterone levels (lab tested)”, *Roosh V Forum*, October 29, 2017, <https://www.rooshvforum.com/thread-65500.html>

²¹⁶ Jim Hoft, “Buzzfeed Crew Shocked to Discover They Have Testosterone Level of a 12 Year-Old Boy (Video)”, *The Gateway Pundit*, October 29, 2017, <https://www.thegatewaypundit.com/2017/10/buzzfeed-crew-shocked-find-testosterone-levels-12-year-old-boys-video/>

represent the extreme in “cuck-dom”.²¹⁷ The ABC should stand for “A Bunch of Cucks”.²¹⁸ His own typical critic from the Left is “some pale cuck male”.²¹⁹ Borrowing more far-Right slang about masculinity, Shanks also attacks journalists as “nu-male[s]” and “neo-humans”.²²⁰ These insults originated on 4chan’s /pol/ board and are meant to ridicule the emasculated “new age men” who accept feminist critiques of masculinity.²²¹

Shanks parrots another far-Right narrative about effeminacy when he claims that the erosion of gender norms precipitates civilisational collapse. He insists that the genders were sharply differentiated at the high points of ancient Greece and Rome.²²² There is “always a celebration of masculinity” when civilisations are flourishing.²²³ He states that the decline of civilisations correlates with increased gender fluidity. “Men didn’t look extremely muscly, women didn’t look extremely dainty”.²²⁴ The blurring of gender roles is part of a broader descent towards “decadence” and “hedonism” which brings strong civilisations undone. Germanic tribes toppled ancient Rome because it became “extremely decadent”, while “weak and decadent” Athens was defeated by militaristic Sparta. Hedonism makes civilisations vulnerable to conquest by more disciplined peoples.²²⁵

Shanks believes that the West is in such a period of decline and that social movement activists are its embodiment. Because many left-wing news outlets are “sex positive” and in favour of drug liberalisation, Shanks characterises “progressive” journalists as participants in “drug-fuelled hedonism” and sexual “debauchery”.²²⁶ They are equivalent to fat Roman aristocrats who were hand-fed by slaves.²²⁷ Their audiences are similarly

²¹⁷ friendlyjordies, “Scomo”.

²¹⁸ friendlyjordies, “Clive Palmer: Enemy of the State”.

²¹⁹ Shanks, Ahmed, and Belobrajdic, “Racism, Witch hunts and Pale Hipsters”.

²²⁰ friendlyjordies, “bruz: eternal”, *YouTube*, 44:34. May 3, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kUhNFSyHGyE>; friendlyjordies, “Triple J - the WORST news source”.

²²¹ Nu-male”, *Know Your Meme*, accessed June 7, 2021, <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/nu-male>; Chris Beck, “The Rise of Nu-Males and Soy Boys”, *Splice Today*, September 25, 2018, <https://www.splicetoday.com/pop-culture/the-rise-of-nu-males-and-soy-boys>

²²² Jordan Shanks, “Neel + Jordan: Reality”.

²²³ Neel TV, “Collapse Of Society | Neel + Jordan”.

²²⁴ Jordan Shanks, “Neel + Jordan: Reality”.

²²⁵ Neel TV, “Collapse Of Society | Neel + Jordan”.

²²⁶ friendlyjordies, “Triple J Hack: Unbelievably Awful”.

²²⁷ friendlyjordies, “Twitter Addicts END Friendlyjordies”; friendlyjordies, “Triple J - the WORST news source”.

“degenerate”.²²⁸ Their “absurdly easy” lives have made them effeminate.²²⁹ Men who make and consume feminist, anti-racist, and LGBTQ+ news are the sort of “noodley” (i.e. weak) people “who were responsible for the decline of the Roman Empire”.²³⁰ Shanks here characterises transgender women as especially effeminate men, who – like the Roman emperor Elagabalus – have directed surgeons to give them vaginas in an act of hedonistic excess.²³¹ Such decadence and consequent effeminacy will soon see Western democracies eclipsed by China.²³²

These views have currency in the alt-right/-lite. The white nationalists Molyneux and Felix Lance make this case.²³³ For his part, Benjamin knows enough about antiquity not to repeat these spurious claims about Greece and Rome, but his belief that women’s failure to fulfil their traditional role as mothers will trigger civilisational collapse is similar to this narrative. Shanks appears to access these ideas through the American academic Camille Paglia. Many members of the alt-right/-lite have shown admiration for Paglia, thanks to her defence of traditional gender roles and insistence that feminism is anachronistic (all while calling herself a feminist).²³⁴ For instance, Benjamin likes to quote Paglia’s claim that “if civilisation had been left in female hands, we would still be living in grass huts”.²³⁵ Paglia has also appeared on Peterson’s YouTube channel.²³⁶ Shanks considers Paglia a “genius” with “watertight” arguments.²³⁷ She maintains that a “movement towards androgyny occurs ... as a civilisation is starting to unravel”. An “anything goes” attitude towards sexuality and gender is symptomatic of “the late phases

²²⁸ friendlyjordies, “The Power is YOURS!”, *YouTube*, 6:08, June 26, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uxizCIujxC8>

²²⁹ friendlyjordies, “Triple J - the WORST news source”.

²³⁰ friendlyjordies, “You Are Wrong About The ABC”; friendlyjordies, “Twitter Addicts END Friendlyjordies”.

²³¹ Neel TV, “Collapse Of Society | Neel + Jordan”.

²³² Ibid.

²³³ Exley, “Black Pigeon Speaks”; Joey Redmon, “Stefan Molyneux The Truth About The Fall Of Rome”, *YouTube*, 2:28:58, October 12, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SGYVWvjRMXU>

²³⁴ Molly Fischer, “Camille Paglia Predicted 2017: What the ’90s provocateur understands about the Trump era”, *New York*, March 6, 2017, <https://www.thecut.com/2017/03/what-camille-paglia-understands-about-the-trump-era.html>

²³⁵ Sargon of Akkad, “Why Do People Hate #Feminism? #2 - The Patriarchy”.

²³⁶ Jordan B. Peterson, “Modern Times: Camille Paglia & Jordan B Peterson”, *YouTube*, 1:42:47, October 3, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v-hIVnmUdXM>

²³⁷ Shanks, Ahmed, and Belobrajdic, “Chris Brown goes poo poo, Tales of Pakistan (Ali Joins a gang) Feminism”.

of culture”.²³⁸ Shanks echoes Paglia’s exact phrasing to make these points; it seems likely that he is influenced by her.²³⁹

Moreover, as discussed in Chapter Four, the far Right in the twentieth century also drew a causal line from comfort to decadence, weakness, and eventual submission to rival powers. Fascists often characterised liberal decadence as feminising. Passmore explains that fascists were “dismissive of the ‘feminine’ softness” which they considered characteristic of “effeminate” liberal societies.²⁴⁰ Interwar fascists interpreted the blurring of gender roles (with more women in the workforce as a legacy of the First World War) as “a sign of general social decay”.²⁴¹ There are clear similarities between this narrative and the one disseminated by Shanks. Paglia – his apparent guide on the topic – flippantly repeats a tenet of Nazi ideology when she includes “Weimar Germany” in a list of societies which were apparently too gender fluid to survive.²⁴² Shanks therefore repeats a far-Right narrative about gender norms which not only has resonance in the alt-right/-lite, but has clear fascistic overtones.

Like Benjamin, Shanks therefore believes that social movement activists who fail to embody gender ideals should be mocked and dismissed. It is clear from the archetypes, lingo, memes, and narratives he employs that Shanks is influenced on this front by the alt-right/-lite.

Overall, Shanks echoes many problematic elements of Benjamin’s construction of feminism, anti-racism, and LGBTQ+ rights which were identified and critiqued in previous chapters. Like Benjamin, his insistence that women and minorities should proceed in life as conscientious individuals without group identities is grounded in cultural imperialism. His use of pseudoscience to insist that major differences between the sexes account for gender disparities is an example of scientism. His belief that social movement activists should be ridiculed and ignored because of their appearance punishes people who fail to embody hegemonic masculinity and emphasised femininity. It seems

²³⁸ Gravitahn, “Lesson from History: Transgender Mania is Sign of Cultural Collapse - Camille Paglia”, *YouTube*, 7:10, December 15, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l8BRdwgPChQ>

²³⁹ Neel TV, “Collapse Of Society | Neel + Jordan”.

²⁴⁰ Passmore, *Fascism*, 124.

²⁴¹ *Ibid*, 123.

²⁴² Gravitahn, “Lesson from History: Transgender Mania is Sign of Cultural Collapse - Camille Paglia”.

apparent in each instance that Shanks has (at least in part) picked up these narratives through his engagement with the alt-right/-lite.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I continued my analysis of political discourse produced by Shanks and evaluated the extent to which he substantiates his attack on identity politics. I considered whether, as he intimates, Shanks targets shallow instances of anti-racism, feminism, and LGBTQ+ rights which benefit economic elites. He makes the plausible case that ostensibly “progressive” outlets with corporate owners and advertisers are unlikely sources of radical news, but cherry-picks evidence to present a simplistic picture of these outlets. He highlights instances in which accusations of racism and sexism have been levelled against left-wing politicians in the media without sufficient evidence, but does not substantiate his characterisation of these accusations as deliberate smears. Moreover, his media criticism veers into conspiracy theory when he claims that prominent “identity” campaigns are concocted by the press. Shanks erases the real forms of oppression which give rise to such campaigns and makes the insupportable claim that sexism, racism, homo- and transphobia are insignificant problems in Australia. I then considered the extent to which his discursive construction of social movements overlaps with the alt-right/-lite’s. I argued that Shanks exhibits many of the same problematic elements identified in Benjamin’s discourse. He ignores cultural imperialism and tells women and minorities to work hard as individuals, makes the scientistic case that natural sex differences account for gender disparities, and dismisses activists who do not adhere to hegemonic masculine or feminine ideals. Shanks appears to be influenced in each instance by his alt-right/-lite discourse. Overall, across this and the previous chapter, I find that Shanks attempts to craft a critique of neoliberalism and identity politics which appeals to potential and actual members of the alt-right/-lite, but dismisses feminist, anti-racist, and LGBTQ+ issues as distinct from and less important than class-based economic inequality economic inequality, and appears to import the alt-right/-lite’s prejudices as well as its style.

My analysis of Shanks therefore helps to illuminate previously understudied aspects of the “dirtbag Left” sensibility. My research lends weight to the aforementioned fear

(which appears in the popular press) that efforts to harness a transgressive spirit similar to the alt-right/-lite's can lead to the emulation of its prejudices.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I analysed online discourse critical of so-called “identity politics”. In two case studies, I analysed content produced by Carl Benjamin – a.k.a. “Sargon of Akkad” – and Jordan Shanks – a.k.a. “friendlyjordies” – as cases of wider phenomena. I analysed Benjamin as a member of the alt-right/-lite. This loose confederation of online Anglophone white nationalists, memesters, trolls, anti-feminists, and conspiracy theorists found common cause during the Gamergate controversy in 2014 and – joined by members of the Intellectual Dark Web – entered the international spotlight in 2016 thanks to their enthusiastic support for Donald Trump. Members of the alt-right/-lite believe that feminist, anti-racist, and LGBTQ+ rights activists are not real opponents of oppression, but instead powerful people who use positions within government, academia, and the media to secure preferential treatment for women, non-white people, and LGBTQ+ people at the expense of straight white men. I analysed Shanks as a member of the dirtbag Left. This smaller group of online content-creators and communities embraces elements of the alt-right/-lite’s style, but include critiques of neoliberalism and advocacy for socialism or social democracy alongside their attacks on identity politics. Members of the dirtbag Left believe that prominent strains of anti-racism, feminism, and LGBTQ+ rights activism serve neoliberal actors who offer hollow expressions of respect and affirmation to marginalised groups in order to garner popular support and distract from issues of economic class. Each of these cohorts produces content which seems designed to appeal most to young white male underachievers who spend a lot of time online.

In Chapter Two, I explained that research into these phenomena has so far been led by scholars in disciplines other than political science, despite the influence which these online sensibilities (in particular the alt-right/-lite) exercise over the political parties, electoral contests, and mainstream media narratives usually analysed by political scientists. Taking an issue-oriented, interdisciplinary approach inspired by Critical Discourse Analysis, I then identified important gaps in our current knowledge of these phenomena across the social sciences. First, I noted that since 2017 a number of researchers have endorsed criticisms of contemporary feminism, anti-racism, and LGBTQ+ rights activism made by members of the alt-right/-lite themselves. These scholars accept claims from people who maintain that flaws within social movement

activism drove them to the far Right. In many of their works – the most influential of which is Angela Nagle’s *Kill All Normies* – such statements are taken at face value. I therefore identified a need for research which draws out the detail of the alt-right/-lite’s case against identity politics and subjects claims therein to critical analysis. Second, I noted the relative lack of research into the alt-right/-lite on YouTube, given the platform’s importance to the movement. Quantitative methods have failed to shed light on the arguments and narratives pushed by far-Right YouTubers. A small number of qualitative studies do provide some of this detail, but fail to subject the claims of these YouTubers to critical analysis. I argued that such arguments should not be considered beneath discussion, in particular those advanced by more “moderate” members of the alt-right/-lite who present themselves as non-sexist, non-racist, and non-homophobic. As indicated by massive viewership and subscriber counts, their arguments appeal to large numbers of people, and start some YouTube users down a radicalisation pipeline towards out-and-out white nationalism. I therefore identified a need for critical analysis of claims made by such YouTube personalities. Third, I noted a lack of research into the dirtbag Left. Scholars in many fields have indicated the dirtbag Left’s relevance to their research, but its sources themselves remain understudied. In response to contradictory assessments of the phenomenon, I identified a need for research which investigates the extent to which the dirtbag Left’s attack on identity politics targets the appropriation of anti-racism, feminism, and LGBTQ+ rights by the rich and powerful, or dismisses these movements in general. I aimed to investigate the accusation that this cohort imports some of the alt-right/-lite’s prejudices when it emulates its politically incorrect style.

I then outlined my use of conceptual work to highlight and illuminate elements of the discourse under consideration. I argued that diverse perspectives (whether on “cultural imperialism”, “scientism”, or “hegemonic masculinity”) can best make sense of different aspects of the construction of social movement activism which I uncover in YouTube discourse. I then explained how this study can be fruitfully contextualised within intra-Left debates about the merit of so-called “identity politics”. Concepts from these debates help me to draw out the substance and weigh the merit of complaints about social movement activism in ill-organised YouTube discourse. Socialist critics of identity politics (such as Nancy Fraser, Adolph Reed, and Walter Benn Michaels) argue that mainstream strains of social movement activism constitute progressive neoliberalism. Corporations and neoliberalised centre-Left political parties have co-opted these

movements, and now use watered-down versions of anti-racism, feminism, and LGBTQ+ rights to distract from economic inequality. Mainstream versions of each movement only seek to “empower” women and minorities to form a proportionate chunk of the ruling class. These authors accuse social movement activists of priorities and behaviour which repel and alienate people, and attribute these traits to their unwillingness to criticise capitalism. Fraser extols members of the authentic Left to “frontally challenge” neoliberalised versions of social movements in order to win people currently enamoured with reactionary populism to the Left.¹ Liberal critics of identity politics (such as Todd Gitlin, Mark Lilla, and Richard Rorty) accuse anti-racist, feminist, and LGBTQ+ right activists of dividing the Left, only to navel-gaze about minor injustices and esoteric theories of power. Divisive obsessions with identity prevent broader, more effective coalitions based on civic nationalism, and nihilistic theories of power sap enthusiasm for concrete action. These authors also accuse social movement activists of priorities and behaviour which repel and alienate people, but attribute these traits to their preference for the purity and sophistication of marginal movements over the compromise and practicality necessary for effective ones. This literature helped me identify instances in which I should “hear out” potentially justified grievances which are reminiscent of those outlined by serious academics on the Left.

For their part, defenders of contemporary anti-racism, feminism, and LGBTQ+ rights (such as Iris Marion Young and Judith Butler) have argued that attacking forms of identity politics as distractions from issues of economic class will unleash generally dismissive attitudes towards issues which affect women, non-white people, and LGBTQ+ people. Butler attributes “neoconservative” attitudes on social and cultural issues to critics of identity politics.² These authors contend that positive affirmations of identity are connected to struggles for material equality, and that their intra-Left opponents ignore the causal link between “cultural” politics and material equality. These authors accuse their opponents of class reductionism: the belief that movements to address sexism, racism, homo- and transphobia are unnecessary because these forms of oppression will disappear alongside class exploitation. For scholars who do not blame social movements themselves, other concepts have been provided to explain contempt for identity politics. Authors such as Michael Kimmel and Arlie Russel Hochschild contend that hostility

¹ Fraser, “Against Progressive Neoliberalism, A New Progressive Populism”.

² Butler, “Merely Cultural”.

towards anti-racism, feminism, and LGBTQ+ rights is rooted in resentment about the decline of white, male, and heterosexual privilege. Concepts such as aggrieved entitlement and the “deep story” interpret criticisms of identity politics from members of historically dominant groups as rationalisations for the preservation of their relative privilege. This literature help me to weigh the merit of narratives critical of identity politics and consider the extent to which they might constitute class reductionism or otherwise rationalise and reinforce the privilege of historically dominant groups.

After this discussion of gaps in knowledge and relevant theoretical issues, I detailed the research questions which guided my analysis:

- How are social movement activists constructed in alt-right/-lite and dirtbag Left discourse on YouTube?
- To what extent do constructions of social movement activists in alt-right and dirtbag Left discourse overlap with one another?
- To what extent do alt-right/-lite and dirtbag Left personalities adequately substantiate the claims which make up these constructions?

My “purposive” decision to analyse Benjamin and Shanks among many similar content creators reflected the fact that each is well-placed to yield information which addresses these important unanswered questions about the alt-right/-lite and dirtbag Left. To better understand the ways in which Benjamin and Shanks construct feminism, anti-racism, and LGBTQ+ rights as noxious forms of identity politics, to evaluate their claims, and to offer explanations for prominent elements of their discourse, I combined insights from Foucauldian, Critical, and Political discourse analysis.

In Chapter Three, I then detailed Benjamin’s position as an influential member of the alt-right/-lite on YouTube who positions himself as a non-sexist, non-racist, non-homophobic commentator who is compelled to denounce the misconduct of anti-racist, feminist, and LGBTQ+ rights activists. I then began to address my research questions by identifying and analysing Benjamin’s claim that he rejects social movements as a liberal individualist opposed to their “illiberalism” and “collectivism”. He insists that political approaches which affirm or mobilise group identities are insidious because they designate “out-group” members as the hated “Other”, and violate their rights and liberties in service of the “in-group”. He alleges that feminist, anti-racist, and LGBTQ+ rights activists do this to men, white people, and heterosexuals. Benjamin maintains that

women, non-white people, and LGBTQ+ people no longer need to emphasise their group identities because all people are equal “individuals” before the law, and possess the rights and freedoms associated with citizenship in the Enlightenment tradition. He insists that continued inequalities between social groups are attributable to the failings of marginalised people, not prejudice or discrimination. His complaints resemble allegations from aforementioned liberal authors who criticise identity politics, who maintain that anti-white, anti-male, anti-heterosexual rhetoric within social movements alienates people, and that women, non-white people, and LGBTQ+ people should avoid divisive references to group membership and pursue justice in the “universal” language of shared citizenship.

I found that Benjamin tends to misrepresent the innocuous behaviour of social movement activists as attempts to violate the liberties of the hated straight white male “Other”. He recoils from “reverse” discrimination and authoritarianism in their complete absence. His own status as a principled “classical liberal” is further called into question by his readiness to curb the rights of childless women for the sake of the nation, and his partisan support for the violation of liberal norms in the attack on the United States Capitol. I argued that this element of Benjamin’s discourse is an instance of cultural imperialism as defined by Young: indifference to the barriers to equality which exist when “universal” norms are derived from the experience of dominant groups. Such norms include the Enlightenment package of rights and liberties. His insistence that women, non-white people, and LGBTQ+ people should live as “individuals” and avoid calling attention to their group membership leaves them unable to challenge discriminatory norms which perpetuate social and economic inequality.

Benjamin therefore does claim to have turned against identity politics for reasons reminiscent of those theorised by its academic critics. However, my analysis shows Benjamin does not substantiate his claim to reject feminism, anti-racism, and LGBTQ+ rights activism as a liberal individualist opposed to their “illiberalism” and “collectivism”. His seriously flawed complaints assail a caricature of social movements. They cannot be taken to indicate the real widespread presence of such tendencies. My analysis does lend some credence to accounts which attribute hatred of identity politics to aggrieved entitlement (and similar concepts). His narrative about illiberalism and collectivism has the effect of making critiques of androcentrism, Eurocentrism, and

heteronormativity impossible, and therefore shores up the relative privilege of men, white people, and heterosexuals.

In Chapter Four, I further shed light on my research questions by identifying and analysing Benjamin's claim that he rejects social movements as a defender of science and reason opposed to their "irrationality". He constructs his own opinions as objective truth, arrived at via the examination of facts from the natural sciences. He maintains that feminist, anti-racist, and LGBTQ+ rights activists ignore facts which contravene their views, and advance their cause with "tricks" instead of arguments. He complains that activists derive the value of input from the identity of the speaker, and thereby invalidate reasoned criticism from straight white men. He complains that postmodern injunctions to "deconstruct" the component parts of a knowledge claim are tactics which exhaust opponents and side-step rational debate. These attributes make activists akin to religious believers. These accusations resemble those of both liberal and socialist critics of identity politics, who allege that social movement activists connect the value of an argument with the identity of the speaker to ward off criticism, and embrace complicated, nihilistic postmodern theories which prevent concrete political engagement. These authors also make comparisons between social movements and religion.

I found that Benjamin tends to construct feminist, anti-racist, and LGBTQ+ rights positions as unscientific despite their foundation in academic research. He fails to engage with evidence which might challenge his views and recoils from "irrationality" in its absence. His comparisons with religion misrepresent innocuous behaviour. He attacks a caricature of standpoint theory despite his tacit acceptance of its insights in the case of white men, and attacks a caricature of postmodernism despite himself demonstrating its continued relevance. Benjamin's status as a principled defender of reason is further called into question by his inability to successfully ground his own views in evidence, and his reliance on misrepresented or dubious research. I argued that this element of his discourse is an instance of scientism: the rhetorical invocation of "science" to lend ill-founded positions an air of respectability. Benjamin likely takes this approach from New Atheism. He invokes "science" to insist that inequalities which benefit historically dominant groups are attributable to the inherent deficiencies of marginalised people, and therefore "natural".

Benjamin therefore again claims to have turned against identity politics because of faults which bring to mind those theorised by its academic critics. However, my analysis shows Benjamin does not substantiate his claim to reject feminism, anti-racism, and LGBTQ+ rights activism a lover of science opposed to their “irrationality”. His complaints again construct a straw person. They cannot be taken to indicate the real widespread presence of such tendencies. My sources here were again better illuminated by concepts which interpret hatred of identity politics as a defence of privilege. Benjamin’s narrative about irrationality makes inequalities which fall in the favour of historically dominant groups seem like facts of nature, and therefore has the effect of reinforcing their relative privilege.

In Chapter Five, I identified and weighed the merit of the final major component of Benjamin’s hostile construction of social movement activism: he claims that feminism, anti-racism, and LGBTQ+ rights activism are “uncool”. He maintains that social movement activists embarrass themselves with earnest and passionate displays of conviction, and freakish displays of anger. He attributes the latter to their sanctimonious belief that everyone on the Right is immoral. He considers popular culture with feminist, anti-racist, or LGBTQ+ themes “cringe”, and denounces activists as buzzkills who ruin hobbies and media franchises enjoyed by other people by making them politically correct. These accusations resemble those of socialist and liberal critics of identity politics, who mock earnest, impassioned denunciations of oppression from (in particular) student activists, and who accuse social movement activists of bullying political opponents who they deem “immoral monsters”.³ Socialist authors attribute such incivility to a tendency to eschew structural critique and account for social problems at the level of individual psychology. Scholars have also criticised the inclusion of watered-down feminist, anti-racist, and LGBTQ+ themes into pop culture franchises as lame.

However, I found that Benjamin himself exhibits the earnestness, sanctimony, and anger which he labels “uncool” in social movement activists. He approves of these traits in political allies. His complaints about sanctimony and anger are not responses to overly individualistic conceptions of social problems; Benjamin misrepresents even structural critiques of social inequalities as nasty accusations of bigotry against individuals. I argued that his views about uncool activists are an instance of complicit masculinity: veneration

³ Lilla, *The Once and Future Liberal*, 112-113.

of ideals of hegemonic masculinity and emphasised femininity which serve to uphold patriarchy, and contempt for men and women who fail to honour these ideals. I also argued that his complaints about feminist, anti-racist, and LGBTQ+ rights activists ruining other people's hobbies and favourite media are an instance of toxic geek masculinity: hostility towards developments, including the presence of women and the appearance of stories not about "hegemonic" men, which threaten the ability to derive masculine self-esteem from investment in geekdom. He rejects the presence, not the implementation, of anti-racist, feminist, and LGBTQ+ themes in his favourite media.

Benjamin therefore again claims to reject identity politics thanks to flaws which bring to mind those theorised by its academic critics. My analysis shows that Benjamin claims to consider feminism, anti-racism, and LGBTQ+ rights activism "uncool" for (more or less) principled reasons, but fails to substantiate these accusations. Instead, the real object of his scorn seems to be deviance from ideals of gender which perpetuate the subordination of women. His constructions here are again better explained by theories of aggrieved entitlement and the "deep story" which interpret hatred of identity politics as a defence of privilege. His narrative about uncoolness reinforces a hierarchy of gender with straight men at its apex.

In Chapter Six, I described Shanks's embrace of a dirtbag Left sensibility and shed light on his own construction of social movement activism. I detailed his critique of Australia's right-wing Liberal and National parties as purveyors of harmful neoliberal policies, and his support for trade unions and the social democratic Labor Party. I described his critique of identity politics, which tweaks the "propaganda model" advanced in Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky's *Manufacturing Consent* to insist that mainstream media companies heap attention on feminist, anti-racist, and LGBTQ+ issues in order to distract from the economic credentials of social democratic politicians, and make neoliberal ones seem "progressive". I analysed the ways in which Shanks targets this commentary at potential and actual members of the alt-right/-lite. He appeals to rudderless young men who spend a lot of time online with mockery of "mainstream" youth culture and references to Internet culture and geekdom, uses politically incorrect comedy to disseminate his views, assumes that references to alt-right/-lite memes and personalities will help viewers relate to his output, directs politically charged self-help content at the same demographic enamoured with Jordan Peterson, and collaborates with people who themselves have alt-right/-lite preoccupations. I argued that – because he champions

left-wing alternatives to neoliberal policies, attacks progressive neoliberalism as a barrier to economic justice, and courts people interested in the far Right – Shanks produces the sort of discourse which socialist critics of identity politics believe can win “hearts and minds” and reinvigorate the Left.⁴ I argued that – thanks to his transgressive style and evident focus on the cohort otherwise subject to the alt-right/-lite’s overtures – Shanks produces the sort of “darkly funny” online content which Nagle praises as a counter to the alt-right/-lite.⁵

In Chapter Seven, I addressed my remaining unanswered research questions by considering the extent to which Shanks substantiates his critique of identity politics and the extent to which it overlaps with the alt-right/-lite’s. I found that Shanks has some valid, if simplistic criticisms about the uptake of anti-racist, feminist, and LGBTQ+ issues in the media. However, his narrative about identity politics is also dismissive of racism, sexism, homo- and transphobia more generally. Shanks claims that problems faced by women, non-white people, and LGBTQ+ people in Australia are too trivial to generate grassroots opposition, and pushes a conspiratorial narrative in which popular feminist, anti-racist, and LGBTQ+ rights campaigns are orchestrated from above by media companies. I also found that Shanks emulates the problematic elements identified in Benjamin’s hostile construction of social movements. His discourse contains cultural imperialism, in his insistence that women and minorities should downplay their membership in marginalised groups and therefore leave discriminatory norms unchallenged, scientism, in his use of pseudoscience to construct gender inequalities as natural, and veneration for ideals of hegemonic masculinity and emphasised femininity which legitimise patriarchy, in his contempt for men and women who fail to honour them. Shanks appears in many instances to pick up these narratives through his flirtations with the alt-right/-lite.

My analysis of Shanks lends credence to the concerns of authors who believe that calls to attack versions of anti-racism, feminism, and LGBTQ+ rights as distractions from economic inequality will result in the marginalisation of issues of race, gender, and sexuality. Shanks does not strictly exhibit class reductionism – he does not describe racism, sexism, homo- and transphobia as epiphenomena of capitalism – but he does clearly position these issues as distinct from and less important than economic ones. My

⁴ Fraser, “The End of Progressive Neoliberalism”.

⁵ Nagle, *Kill All Normies*, 35.

analysis weakens claims from authors who dismiss the idea of such discourse as a “myth” disseminated by centrists to discredit the real Left.⁶ My analysis again tends to support concepts in which criticisms of identity politics are interpreted as narratives which often perpetuate white, male, and heterosexual privilege. Shanks echoes many narratives which I evaluated as such in chapters Three, Four, and Five. My finding that Shanks appears to take these narratives directly from the online far Right lends credence to fears that the dirtbag Left’s embrace of the alt-right/-lite’s aesthetic and pursuit of its audience can lead to the import of its prejudices.

In conclusion, in this thesis I analysed political discourse associated with two online movements critical of contemporary feminism, anti-racism, and LGBTQ+ rights activism: the alt-right/-lite and the dirtbag Left. In response to gaps in our knowledge of these phenomena across the social sciences, I drew out the detail of the alt-right/-lite’s complaints about social movements (which many authors take to be substantive) and subjected the claims therein to critical analysis. I analysed the arguments of an ostensibly non-bigoted YouTuber at the “moderate” end of the platform’s radicalisation pipeline. I analysed dirtbag Left sources, with an eye to finding out whether attacks on feminism, anti-racism, and LGBTQ+ rights activism narrowly target the appropriation of these issues by the rich and powerful, and whether overtures to potential members of the alt-right/-lite import the prejudices of that movement. I looked at Benjamin as a prominent alt-right/-lite YouTuber who positions himself as a principled, non-bigoted opponent of social movements, and who collects narratives from across the online far Right into one place. I looked at Shanks as a member of the dirtbag Left who competes for attention on a platform dominated by the alt-right/-lite, and who divides opinion in Australian public life with his politically incorrect style. Embracing judicious eclecticism, I made use of a range of theoretical works and approaches to explain elements of the discourse under consideration, and referred throughout to intra-Left theoretical debates in which authors seek to explain hostility towards identity politics. Concepts from these debates helped me to draw out the detail and latent elements of Shanks and Benjamin’s complaints about social justice warriors.

I found that Benjamin purports to reject feminism, anti-racism, and LGBTQ+ rights activism as a principled opponent of flaws in contemporary social movements. He

⁶ Reed, “The Myth of Class Reductionism”.

constructs himself as a liberal individualist opposed to their illiberalism and collectivism, which sees activists violate the rights and liberties of the vilified straight white male “Other” in service of an “in-group” of women, non-white people, and LGBTQ+ people, as a defender of reason opposed to their irrationality, which sees activists ignore facts and use tricks rather than argumentation or evidence to advance their cause, and as a defender of cultural spaces from the incursion of uncool activists who seek to ruin other people’s hobbies and favourite media in the name of political correctness. In each instance, Benjamin advances claims which (albeit with different emphases and often less sophistication) resemble those levelled by serious academic critics of identity politics. I evaluated these accusations and found, on all three fronts, that Benjamin does not accurately represent either his opponents or himself to make these claims. My analysis cannot be used to support the contention that the alt-right/-lite exists in response to real flaws in social movement activism. It does not support the argument (advanced in theoretical and polemical works since the 1990s) that people reject identity politics largely in response to the real existence of such flaws. It suggests that the perception of such flaws can result from inaccurate distortions of social movements. My analysis of Benjamin was aided to a greater extent by theoretical work in which criticisms of identity politics are interpreted as narratives which serve to defend and reinforce the relative privilege of historically dominant groups.

I found that Shanks critiques both economic inequality and the abuse of identity politics by the rich and powerful, and challenges progressive neoliberalism in an effort to win reactionary populists to the Left. Shanks courts potential and actual members of the alt-right/-lite with the sort of “darkly funny” approach which Nagle wants to see embraced by more people on the Left.⁷ I evaluated this discourse and found that Shanks dismisses racism, sexism, homo- and transphobia as distinct from and less important than class-based economic inequality. He disparages feminism, anti-racism, and LGBTQ+ rights activism with many of the same problematic narratives identified in Benjamin’s discourse. My analysis of Shanks lends credence to the fears of authors who believe that calls from the Left to attack versions of social movement activism as handmaidens of capitalism will lead, if not strictly to class reductionism, to retrograde views about race, gender, and sexuality and the general marginalisation of issues which affect women, non-white people, and LGBTQ+ people. My analysis also lends credence to fears that the

⁷ Nagle, *Kill All Normies*, 35.

dirtbag Left's efforts to court the alt-right/-lite's audience with its own politically incorrect style can reproduce its prejudices.

I do not mean to argue, finally, that contemporary Anglophone feminism, anti-racism, or LGBTQ+ rights activism are perfect, or that all critiques of these movements serve to perpetuate unearned privilege. I do not make the case that no feminist, anti-racist, or LGBTQ+ rights activists espouse shallow analyses and ambitions which are compatible with capitalism or that no neoliberal individuals or institutions try to improve their image with commitments to hollowed-out versions of these movements. I do not make the case that no feminist, anti-racist, or LGBTQ+ rights activists use divisive rhetoric which might alienate potential coalition partners, or that feminist, anti-racist, and queer academia is free of obfuscation and nihilism. Future research may identify more disciplined, more principled online discourse which only denounces such forms of activism. However, in this thesis, I analysed high-profile Internet personalities who claim to assail exactly this sort of problematic behaviour, but found instead that each pushes narratives which make justice for marginalised groups harder to achieve. Therefore, people genuinely invested in the erosion of sexism, racism, homo- and transphobia should be careful in issuing calls to arms against "identity politics" which might embolden or give an air of legitimacy to people on both the Right and Left who do not share their goals.

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