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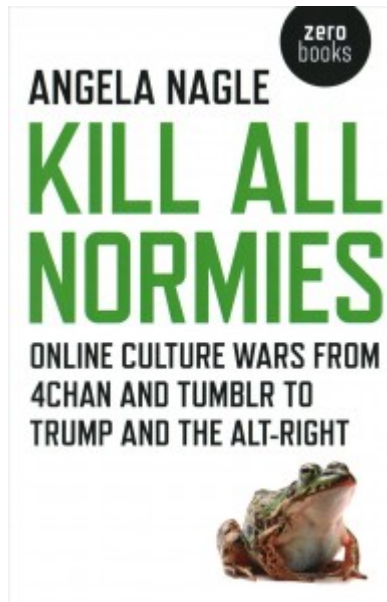
The alt-right and the death of counterculture

By Olivier Jutel

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Angela Nagle has written an indispensable book that allows both the extremely online- and meme-illiterate to grasp the IRL implications of the online culture wars. From the rise of Trump as a lulzy agent of base enjoyment and unrestrained conspiracy, to the collapse of meaning in these perilously ridiculous times, all are products of an ascendant online culture which privileges affect and transgression. Nagle navigates a sea of anime Nazis, gamers, white nationalists, masturbation abstainers and violent misogynists in mapping the contours of online reaction and fascism. What is essential and most controversial in her thesis is the symbiosis between what we can call the 'Tumblr liberal-left' and the alt-right. Both are products of an online cultural vanguardism that has been lauded by techno-utopians, nominally leftist academics and journalists alike. Nagle wields a forceful critique of the online left's aestheticised resistance as both self-satisfied and lacking the dynamism to undercut the alt-right's discourse of modern alienation, however nonsensical. This book is not an attempt at

righteously slam dunking on the basement dwelling nerds of the alt-right or rehashing the excesses of campus identitarians. Instead it takes on the ideological deadlocks of the left that have been masked by the tech-fetishism of late capitalism.



The title '*Kill All Normies*' embodies the wry humour of this book, necessary to deal with the risible nature of the alt-right and the horrifying obscenity, racism and misogyny that fuels the movement. At its origin, the alt-right amounts to a lament of web 2.0 inclusivity which ruined the memes and the 'mean internet' safe spaces of predominately young white male misanthropes. At its core, the alt-right is the equivalent of a new convert to punk complaining that 'modern music today is so terrible'. In Gabriella Coleman's book on 4-Chan and the hacker collective Anonymous, she extensively profiles the archetype troll Andrew Auernheimer, aka weev. weev is a truly contemptible figure, an avowed white supremacist and supporter of Dylan Roof who during the Trump campaign dedicated himself to 'Operation Pepe'. As with so much of

the alt-right, weev is equal parts laughable and evil, claiming that his [weaponisation of Pepe the Frog memes will incite the coming race war](#). And despite his undeniable status as an uber-troll of the alt-right, his interview with Coleman captures a pathetic grandiosity in trying to impress the fact that he 'was in the room when the lulz was first said'. It is so jarringly stupid to think that the renewal of fascism and white supremacy would be driven by a nerdy subcultural one-upmanship but this is the genesis of the online culture wars identified by Nagle.

For Nagle, the rise of the alt-right is not so much about the ideological currency of reactionary politics but the techno-enthusiastic embrace of transgression and disruption deracinated from politics. As with many discussions on the state of the left, Nagle considers the epochal moment of '68 and the youth-led demands for individual emancipation from hierarchy. She writes, the alt-right 'has more in common with the 1968 left's slogan "It is forbidden to forbid!" than it does with anything most recognize as part of any traditionalist right.' Where for fifty years conservatives have been fighting sexual liberation and 'liberal cultural excess,' the alt-right have formulated a style which is counter-cultural, dynamic, and thrives, at least temporarily, on its own incoherency. Embodying the best traditions of [conservative hucksterism](#), Milo has been a key figure in providing a fascist chic and garnering mainstream media access, elevating his brand and online provocations into a reactionary culture-jamming. Nagle observes that Richard Spencer's 'spitting disdain about the vulgarity of the US

consumer culture-loving, Big-Mac munching, Bush-voting, pick-up truck owning pro-war Republican' could be ripped from a mid-oughts edition of *AdBusters*.

The alt-right has latched onto the transgressive and paranoid libertarian style of [culture jammers](#) and [hackers](#), which always sat uncomfortably on the left, and celebrates the liberation of the individual against ghastly sheeple and normie culture. In the process they have disrupted the poles of youth culture, allowing for an easy slippage between gaming, lib-hating, trolling, unbridled misogyny and fascism. As Nagle writes: 'When we've reached a point where the idea of being edgy/counter-cultural/transgressive can place fascists in a position of moral superiority to regular people, we may seriously want to rethink the value of these stale and outworn countercultural ideals.'

One of the intellectual legacies of '68 and the new left that Nagle identifies is the shift of concern from a universalist politics of state, party, the public and economy, to cultural studies, new forms of political identity and privatised resistance. There has been a great deal of intellectual energy devoted to conceptualising political emancipation in a manner that evades the stubbornly persistent questions of party organisation and militancy. In this retreat from the collective and embrace of the new, there has been a tremendous amount of exuberance from nominally left academics, sometimes with chairs paid for by tech companies, about the radical potential of new media. Jodi Dean in her 2009 book *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies*, presaging Occupy Wall Street, wrote of the

‘techno-democracy fetish’ in which new forms of communication in themselves do the hard work of ideology and organisation in our place. The reality of techno-democracy was the ‘collapse of symbolic efficiency,’ meaning an endless circular proceduralism and clarification of terms which prevented participants from making the radical ethical gamble of politics that requires an individual subsumption to a collective discipline.

It was through this mix of techno-utopianism, political indeterminacy and the carnivalesque that figures like weev and the hackers of Anonymous could be turned into progressive allies by the likes of Coleman, Molly Crabapple or philosophy professor Peter Ludlow. The glaring white supremacy of weev was seen simply as trolling and lulzy transgression, while the cesspool of 4-Chan that spawned Anonymous was responsible for this ‘force for good in the world’ wielding lulz as a weapon of resistance. Anonymous have since been thoroughly eclipsed by the alt-right as the inheritors of this legacy. This appalling omission rests on a thoroughly Nietzschean tech-elitism, as Nagle writes, ‘it is certainly hard to imagine even a hint of approval being tolerated in academia if the subjects at hand were ordinary blue-collar normies of the far right like Tommy Robinson, despite his far milder views than what has characterised 4chan and trolls like weev for many years.’ This nerd solidarity and tech-elitism informs Laurie Penny’s profile of Milo devotees as [‘Lost Boys’](#) with anxiety disorders, as opposed to fascists politically responsible for their actions.

The idea that lulzy racism and transgression is either

polysemic or the corollary to a new disruptive network enabled democracy owes to a cheap Deleuzianism deployed by tech-utopians, culture jammers and autonomist Marxists alike. The Rhizome, the Multitude, the wisdom of crowds and peer-produsage all rest on an ideal of a latent affective human connectivity, that passes between bodies in cyberspace, enabling new decentralised forms of resistance and democracy. (See footnote for an extraordinary rhetorical flourish of this nature.) Nagle's critique of this network-determinism, pervasive during Tahrir Square and the Occupy moment, does not simply touch on the failure to seize power or [the tyranny of structurelessness](#), but the pure nihilistic potential of the network. Perhaps the [black-pill](#) trajectory of this discourse should have been clear when *AdBusters* described [ISIS as rhizomatic](#) and superior to the 'Western rationalist approach.'

The failure of online connectivity to stabilise around a radical left ethic is, as Dean notes, both a product of its individuating effects, and the failure of communication itself to overcome the ideological deadlocks of the left. Affect and the lulz may create a short circuit here, but it is not the humanist teleology supposed by cyber-enthusiasts, rather a self-fecund 'ironical in-joke maze of meaning.' Nagle writes, 'every bizarre event, new identity and strange subcultural behaviour that baffles general audiences ... can be understood as a response to a response to a response, each one responding angrily to the existence of the other.' Nagle correctly identifies that this self-referential world has as its end an amoral 'liberation of the individual and the id',

and a pathological enjoyment at the expense of an other. The role of the other in psychoanalytic terms figures prominently in the online neuroses of the Tumblr liberal-left and unrestrained malice of the alt-right. Nagle hints at this libidinal economy but is unable to devote it sufficient time in her task of drawing the battle lines of the culture wars.

What the Tumblrites embody is a taxonomical politics which is driven (drive in psychoanalytic terms) by the techno-fetishist belief in pure communication and individual empowerment. It is in this way that language has become so central to politics. The clarification of terms, the bracketing of difference and the weighing of utterances from different subject positions, cis-males at the bottom, all attempt to make the banality of online life urgent and political. In a manner that mirrors the data colonisation of the social by new media companies, every difference must be celebrated, problematised and deconstructed. Thus there are hundreds of genders, Marxist universalism is misogynist, and effacement of agency requires reparations through any number of micro-payment platforms. Any slight sarcasm or scepticism about these facts is violence. The claim to truth of such politics is purely affective, as challenging political statements from a left-ethical position may elicit the refrain *its not my job to do the emotional labor of explaining this to you*. The political speech-act becomes about amplifying marginal voices towards an in-group consensus, and the concept that ideas be rigorously scrutinised in debate 'seems to anguish, offend and enrage this tragically stupefied shadow of the great movements of

the left.'

Nagle quite rightly castigates this as a joyless and vicious politics that does not expand the quality of left thought so much as garner converts to a woke clergy. It is also an ontologically impossible politics that cannot succeed on its own terms. In Lacanian libidinal theories of language, communication is defined by its impossibility, what Lacan calls symbolic castration, which launches us into the world of subjectivity through a gap and lack between the symbolic and the subject. The attempt of Tumbrites to produce politics through language is doomed; we are always haunted by the other 'what did they mean?', 'did I deny agency?', 'have I internalised cis-male discourse?'. The efforts to eradicate this indeterminacy, rather than make an ethico-political commitment, can only result in a vicious and impotent lashing out. Thus we have seen what Nagle describes as a 'culture of purging' in these online spaces against the left, as an identitarian elite looks to translate a surfeit of virtue into a scarce social capital for online cultural gatekeepers.

This extremely online politics produces a drive to self-destruction and paralysis within a nominally left identitarianism, while providing the alt-right with an obscene pathological enjoyment that defines its entire universe. While Nagle quite rightly takes pains to distinguish between alt-lights (Milo, Gavin McInnes, Mike Cernovich), the Manosphere (Roosh, Paul Elam) and the Nazi alt-right (Spencer, weev), the connective tissue is trolling as libidinal pathology. The logic of trolling corresponds precisely to

what Lacan calls *jouissance*, that is, an enjoyment that is dependent upon another who steals it from us. Trolling is the obsession over and debasement of the other for amorphous crimes against the subculture. Thus for the alt-right, identitarians are an object of constant ridicule that should be, in the language of sexual violence, 'triggered' with misogynist, racist and anti-semitic memes as both a matter of enjoyment and internet justice. Yet for all of the complaints about liberal snowflakes and grievance culture, trolls are obsessed with what is served in the cafeteria of a private liberal arts college they've never heard of. There is an inability to enjoy while this pervasive other threatens their memes, video games, traditional marriage and even Western civilisation.

This logic of *jouissance* as stolen by a nefarious, contradictory and overdetermined other is neatly evinced by the obsession with sexual hierarchy. Nagle's great insight here is in understanding the alt-right's reversion to intense misogyny as a pathological libidinal frustration and self-hatred. She writes, 'their low-ranking status in this [sexual] hierarchy is precisely what has produced their hard-line rhetoric about asserting hierarchy in the world politically when it comes to women and non-whites'. The default insult of liberal men and Never-Trump conservatives as 'cucks' depicts the 'fuck or get cucked' logic of *jouissance*. If you do not have the will to embrace the 'red pill' truth about politics, gender and race and engage in radical transgression you can expect to have your *jouissance* stolen by way of immigrants, liberals, or, in the original meaning of this

metaphor, miscegenation. Here we have the deadlock of jouissance, the very thing that gives the alt-right enjoyment reinforces the racial other's virility as a direct threat to their own potency.

This is Žižek's great insight into the logic of fascism and antisemitism: the figure of the Jew in a contradictory evil – both aristocratic and slovenly, intellectual and carnal – whose enjoyment is based on stealing the people's social jouissance. Whether through the manipulation of media and finance, or the destruction of Western civilisation, the fascist's enemy (Jew, Feminist, Marxist, POC) lives to deny an organic order of gender and racial and religious hierarchy. The enemy's enjoyment extends to the very control of enjoyment, as nicely evinced by the recent [Daily Stormer story](#), that Jews are controlling the porn industry to make men masturbate to plus-size models in order to weaken the white race. The enemy is necessary for the very existence of this idea of natural order, and grows more powerful as the alt-right is confronted with the impossibility of 'Western civilization' or patriarchy as they conceive it. This inevitable failure requires both a violent lashing out, to cover this lack, and an obsessive conspiracy which feeds the cycle of jouissance and frustration. Even if 'Pizzagate', the conspiracy alleging that the Democratic Party is a vast paedophile ring, was created by 4-Chan trolls, its logic corresponds perfectly with how trolls conceptualise their enemy and their politics of enjoyment. The fact that Pizzagate is so [widely believed by Republican voters](#) and that the favourite pursuit of online Fox viewers devotees' is

now 'triggering snowflakes' speaks to the broader political currency of this fascist jouissance.

The great threat of the alt-right identified by Nagle is that they best embody the political potential of networked affect, and that they are able to use this infrastructure to accelerate a pure fascist politics of jouissance and libidinal frustration. The prevailing tendency on much of the self-identified left has been to retreat from the kind of broad popular struggle that could be attractive to the politically curious, making 'the left a laughing stock for a whole new generation.' Nagle's conclusion is harsh, and though it is always complicated unravelling various left threads, in the wake of the liberal resistance's floundering and their continued obsession with Bernie Bros, it holds true.

The alt-right meanwhile will continue to be wracked by their own self-loathing, the diminishing returns from online cultural victories, and an inevitable sectarianism. In this moment of post-ideology it is fitting, however grotesque their beliefs, that even our fascists are second rate. There will be no Steve Bannon-inspired National Socialist New Deal and the alt-right will have to be content with the wages of jouissance. Where this does threaten to verge into new radical territory is with a black pill nihilism that lauds mass shooters and the political violence of Dylan Roof, Elliot Rodgers and Jeremy Joseph Christian. Where networked politics was supposed to be liberatory, it has become a conduit for a violent acting out of this libidinal impasse, that can only grow in the absence of an IRL left militant universalism.

Footnote:

‘And yet, peering through the computer, we find Anonymous in any instant to be an aggregate sack of flesh – meshed together by wires, transistors, and wi-fi signals – replete with miles of tubes pumping blood, pounds of viscera filled with vital fluids, an array of live signalling wires, propped up by a skeletal structure with muscular pistons fastened to it, and ruled from a cavernous dome holding a restless control center, the analog of these fabulously grotesque and chaotically precise systems that, if picked apart, become what we call people. Anonymous is no different from us. It simply consists of humans sitting at their glowing screens and typing, as humans are wont to at this precise moment in the long arc of the human condition. Each body taken alone provides the vector for an irreducibly unique and complex individual history – mirroring in its isolation the complexity of all social phenomenon as a whole – which can itself be reduced yet further to the order of events: mere flights of fingers and an occasional mouse gesture which register elsewhere, on a screen, as a two-dimensional text or a three-dimensional video; the song their fingers play on these keyboards ringing forth in a well-orchestrated, albeit cacophonous and often discordant, symphony; it is sung in the most base and lewd verse, atonal and unmetered, yet enthralling to many: the mythical epic of Anonymous.’ – Excerpt from page 115 of Gabriella Coleman’s *Hacker, Hoaxer, Whistleblower, Spy: The Story of Anonymous*, Verso, 2014

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