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Featured Review Exchange

Religion and the Alt-Right

***Making Sense of the Alt-Right*. By George Hawley. New York: Columbia University Press, 2017. x + 232 pp. $28.00 cloth, $27.99 ebook.**

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The confusion and speculation over what the Alt-Right is, where it came from, who belongs to it, and what its motives might be was rife during the 2016 election. Then candidate Donald Trump's support from this obscure group, which was quickly associated with organized white supremacy, made the need to understand it immediate, though few tools were available. Later reports on the movement did little to offer clarity. Fortunately, George Hawley's book goes a long way in providing much of the missing information. *Making Sense of the Alt-Right* offers what the title promises, and does so in a way that is accessible and clear.

The book is a quick read, but it adequately satisfies its stated purpose, to "help readers understand the history, tactics and possible future of the Alt-Right" (8). When paired with Hawley's previous book titled *Right-Wing Critics of American Conservatism* (Lawrence, Kansas, 2016), the combination yields a more comprehensive view of the milieu from which the Alt-Right emerges. But in the slimmer volume under consideration here, Hawley provides both the non-specialist reader with a good introduction to the Alt-Right and provokes scholars of the American right to consider broader questions about racism and American politics. So I will state outright that it is a book everyone interested in the topic should read.

I want to begin this review with a brief summary of what Hawley states in the book and offer some reflections on that before I discuss some of the questions that emerged in my reading of the book's conclusion and where it asks us to consider the possible future of the Alt-Right (henceforth simply AR) and what that could mean for a number of issues. Hawley

provides a clear definition of the AR as a racist movement. He does not use this term lightly, but confesses he must use the term to honestly describe a movement that has little else to provide common ground for its members. Hawley further specifies that the AR is a movement that embraces and advocates for white identity politics, and often attacks the conservative establishment for not having done so more assiduously. As Hawley explains, often the AR's critique of the mainstream conservative movement is that it has not thoroughly embraced the kind of racialist politics that AR advocates are convinced would lead Republicans to electoral victory. This very sentiment is in fact what can account for the incredible support that the AR, and specifically Richard Spencer, gave to Trump during the 2016 campaign. Attacking conservatives, as Hawley notes, is a common AR attribute. From his book, we get a picture of the AR as opposing the supposed liberalism of the Republican mainstream and its Christianity, as well as the classical liberalism embodied in the Constitution itself. That is to say that, though Hawley rightly describes the AR as amorphous and atomized, he recognizes equally rightly that it does have a core organizing principle, namely racialized opposition to, as he puts it, "liberty and equality as ideals."

In my reading, Hawley sees the AR is much more about opposition—opposition to liberalism and "political correctness," to the conservative mainstream, constitutionalism, and even Christianity. Its animating dynamic is disruption, even if Spencer and others sometimes present is as offering a substantive alternative Right. Hawley argues that the AR is reactionary, vivified by what it loathes and perhaps fears. That the AR emerged to some extent from the waning paleoconservative movement and to a larger extent from older white nationalisms, the AR should finally be understood as a new kind of racist movement that adapts concepts from critics of the conservative movement post-Buckley and the identity-centered activism of older white nationalist organizations. But Hawley is clear that the AR is a new and different movement in several ways.

One of the key ways that Hawley distinguishes the AR from older critics of the right is his description of their use of the Internet. In many ways, what the AR is relates directly to what it does in the form of social media and blogspace activity. Hawley explains that the AR was deeply influenced by Internet "troll culture," as much as it was by paleoconservatism and white nationalism. He places it in the lineage of other online movements, such as the Gamergate controversy and Neo-Reaction (aka NRx), both of which propagated explicitly sexist or otherwise

anti-egalitarian ideas within the anonymous spaces of the Internet. Indeed, much of Hawley's discussion of the AR's origins and activities to date are about its use of the Internet, and social media in particular. The section on meme warfare is particularly helpful to understand the activities of those who count themselves as involved in the movement. For Hawley, the youthfulness of the AR accounts for some of the differences between it and older movements, and directly relates to the importance of the Internet in it, especially in its obsession with the use of social media as a tool for political and social activism.

Hawley's discussion of the AR's use of memes is one of the best contributions to understanding the AR in the book, perhaps second only to his unambiguous description of the movement as a racist one. As Hawley describes in chapter three, meme warfare is the means by which the AR has set itself to the task of confronting the broader society, or "normies," it wishes to shock into questioning the modern liberal consensus. Here Hawley notes the importance of the Internet as a means of delivery of the AR message and its metapolitical goals, but also its style in its use of humor and irony. This is yet another feature that sets the AR apart from its predecessors. But it is also a very significant piece of the general puzzle that confronted commentators early on in the general public's exposure to the previously hidden world of troll culture that informed the development of the AR.

Something I deeply appreciate about Hawley's treatment of the topic is his attentiveness to the important fact that even though the AR is likely to remain influential, if likely to remain at the margins of political debates, it is also divided on a number of issues. For example, he is correct in remarking on the divisions over, for example, homosexuality. One of the most significant points I make in my work is that we cannot imagine that the American Right is monolithic, a point Hawley's description of the Alt-Right and its opposition to conservatives also reveals. So when in his conclusion he suggests in his conclusion that if the AR wishes to have more influence that it should build actual institutions, I think the amorphousness and ludic nature of the movement coupled with the rampant divisions within may in fact keep this from happening. And I think Hawley recognizes the unlikeliness of this taking place as well, though he notes a somewhat greater degree of cooperation and coordination of late.

My reading of Hawley is that the AR is to be understood as a new kind of racist movement that has little in the way of ideology apart from a reactionary white identity politics that is more manifestly present in the realm

of the Internet. The Internet, as I read Hawley, is both the haven of the AR, as it has had little success in organizing in physical space, perhaps apart from Charlottesville, Virginia, and the way the AR has been able to have an outsized impact on the popular political landscape. What interests me the most is how the white identity politics purveyed by the AR is described as a significant concern in considering the future influence of the AR.

Reflecting on this conclusion by Hawley, I see white nationalism, and by extension the AR, as mutations of the institutionalized racism that has long been a part of the social and political life of the United States. In my own work I have tried to demonstrate how many of the narratives of influential white nationalists were littered with nostalgia for an American white supremacist consensus that conservatives and liberals alike have betrayed. Members of the AR, in as much as they are white nationalist in orientation, also long for a racially pure past to be revived in a project described in these circles as archeofuturist. This was certainly how many white nationalist and AR supporters of then candidate Trump understood the slogan "Make America Great Again." Similarly, other commentators, particularly Robert P. Jones of the Public Religion Research Institute, have noted that much of the support enjoyed by Trump from white American voters was grounded in a nostalgia for an America they feel has been overcome by a society in which they can no longer claim dominate position. In short, I am thinking that the significance of the AR is that it peddles the very narratives of white, and especially white male, victimhood that animated white support for the President.

I do not think I am correcting or contradicting Hawley on anything by suggesting this, but I wonder if this is something that we could perhaps state in more unambiguous terms. This point in fact comes close to what Hawley himself discusses at the end of the book. He closes with the claim that we do not yet know what direction the right will go under the Trump administration, but that he does not think that a large number of Americans share AR beliefs. But he mentions, too, a moment later that we can have reasonable concern that "a growing percentage of white America no longer views racism as a moral failing and is willing to be associated with explicit white-identity politics" (174–75). Finally, Hawley argues that the kind of identity politics that the AR pushes may indeed become the norm in a postconservative America. But I wonder if the susceptibility of white Americans to such a discourse to the point of normalizing white identity politics reveals their latent or even overt sympathy for racist ideas. If the AR is a racist movement

that, though marginal, enjoys outsized influence in inserting white identity politics into political discourse, can we not say that it enjoys success to whatever degree it enjoys it because of the salience of racist sentiment in the broader American public? In other words, I want to suggest that the AR matters because a significant number of white Americans are already engaged in thinking about politics in terms of what (they think) may advantage whites over other groups. For me, then, the question that the AR presents to us is the same that white nationalism ultimately presents: Does the appeal of racialist discourse and ideology among white Americans reveal a broader problem of racism in white America? Perhaps, depending how we may feel about this question, we can suggest that the real solution for dealing with the AR is to deal with racism more directly in admitting the problem is just not the Alt-Right or Richard Spencer, or even racist individuals themselves, but a society that has purveyed racist ideas throughout its history.

***Blood and Faith: Christianity in American White Nationalism*. By Damon T. Berry. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2017. x + 268 pp. $60.00 cloth, $29.95 paper.**

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Liberal democratic norms came under attack from multiple positions in recent years. In President Donald Trump's presidential campaign, we saw a resurgence of racially charged right-wing populism. Roy Moore's recent bid for the U.S. Senate in Alabama threatened to revive an intolerant brand of evangelical politics. The so-called Alt-Right, which is simply the latest iteration of the American white nationalist movement, seemed to enjoy exponential growth. Viewing these trends from the outside, one might conclude that liberal democracy is under siege from a robust, unified, and confident extreme right.

Although we should not understate contemporary challenges, such a conclusion would be wrong. Liberal democracy's defenders have a long history of overestimating their opponents' strength and cohesiveness.