



'The fire rises': identity, the alt-right and intersectionality

Phillip W. Gray

To cite this article: Phillip W. Gray (2018) 'The fire rises': identity, the alt-right and intersectionality, *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 23:2, 141-156, DOI: [10.1080/13569317.2018.1451228](https://doi.org/10.1080/13569317.2018.1451228)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569317.2018.1451228>



Published online: 21 Mar 2018.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 4056



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 2 View citing articles [↗](#)



'The fire rises': identity, the alt-right and intersectionality

Phillip W. Gray 

Texas A&M University, Doha, Qatar

ABSTRACT

This article examines the ideology of the 'alt-right,' specifically in its relation to the importance of identity. Placing the alt-right within the context of the rising importance of identity within American society, the article discusses the alt-right as overlapping in significant ways with the identitarian elements within the American Left. Investigating the manner in which national/racial identity plays a central role in alt-right thinking and using the notion of 'category-based epistemology' for guidance, this article argues that the alt-right – rather than a quirk of the 2016 electoral cycle – is likely to increase in its importance as a 'rightist' form of intersectionality.

Who you are elucidates who you hate. As identity becomes more central in political confrontations, the importance (and danger) of in-group/out-group dynamics increases. In various parts of the Western world – be it in the nationalist rhetoric of Donald Trump's presidential campaign and its supporters, the nationalist rhetoric of many 'Brexit' supporters within the United Kingdom, or the electoral fortunes of the Freedom Party in Austria's 2016 presidential election – the saliency of national identity (at times with an ethnic/racial undercurrent) has increased in recent years. But unlike much of the nationalist rhetoric of earlier periods (particularly between 1922 and 1945), this current form of nationalist identity is separatist rather than imperial. In the American context, the 'alt-right' best represents this identity-focused movement on the Right. This movement is less an outlier, however, when seen in the context of the broader identity focus in the West: in effect, the ideational structure of movements like the alt-right becomes much clearer once one sees it in comparison with the importance of identity for the progressive Left, exemplified by the notion of intersectionality.

This article will present the alt-right as engaged with identity politics in the United States as it has developed in recent decades. In particular, this article places the alt-right as a continuation of identitarianism that saw its initial growth in progressive politics. The discussion will be in three parts. The first section examines the similarities and overlaps between the alt-right and what can be called the 'intersectional Left,' presenting them as two subtypes of 'category-based epistemology.' The second section explicates the role of identity within the alt-right, especially as it differs from some earlier political forms of racial/national

identity. The third section goes on to indicate the rising role of identity in American politics, in order to understand the comparative late appearance of the alt-right to prominence. The article concludes by briefly discussing the importance of studying the alt-right in America. Before expanding on the alt-right itself, we must first turn to intersectionality as it appears in the Right and the Left.

Intersectionality, left and right

Within the varying elements of the alt-right, a common trait is the centrality of identity: specifically, a notion of ‘national’ identity founded upon an ethnic/racial basis.¹ In analysing the alt-right, especially in its overlaps with the intersectional Left, the means of examining these theories should consider the tortured relationship between identity, politics and social action. Within both the alt-right and the intersectional Left, their notions of identity depend upon an ideational structure of ‘category-based epistemology,’ where there is:

‘... the belief that a specific group holds a particularly important place in social/historical development, with this unique position providing privileged access to ‘truth’ as a result. ‘Truth’ need not denote a transcendental standard or eternal law; rather, the epistemologically-privileged group can observe the *actual* dynamics that influence, shape, and (in a manner) determine the direction of History and human development.’²

In itself, the ‘category’ that orients a category-based epistemology can be an economic class, a national/racial group, the ‘marginalized’ (however defined), or perhaps even a non-human entity (such as the ecosphere), but this category must in some way denote a separation between the epistemologically privileged population and some other population(s). By emphasizing the role of the identity/category population, which highlights the self-perceived experiential authority of the identity group in its interaction with the broader political world, ‘category-based epistemology’ appears to address the core of intersectionality considerations while avoiding the implicit normative focus of intersectional studies in practice. The ‘experiential authority’ of the epistemologically privileged population obviously has similarities to ‘standpoint epistemology.’ Effectively, ‘standpoint epistemology’ would be a subset of ‘category-based epistemology,’ with the former being normative while the latter is descriptive. While I generally agree with Lindsay that ‘intersectionality’s status as a heuristic means that it can highlight a range of normative views, conservative or otherwise, in any socio-economic context,’³ the connection in academic and political practice of intersectionality with ‘progressive’ critical theory will make such a shift difficult. Category-based epistemology, on the other hand, avoids this type of connection.

Generally speaking, the alt-right would place whites (and males) in this epistemologically privileged category, at least as a ‘potential’ population, needing to be ‘activated’ by raised consciousness. As with earlier forms of category-based epistemology, such as Leninist modes of thought, thinkers in this style argue that the general ‘mass’ of the epistemologically privileged population is inert, locked in ‘habit’ or false consciousness reinforced by the dominant society. Using evolutionary psychology, genetic modelling, demographics and (types of) anthropology as the ‘sciences’ to flesh out the ‘true’ dynamics of human development, the alt-right seeks to raise the consciousness of the members of the epistemologically privileged group, mobilizing them, ‘activating’ the inert mass to a level – in this case – of white racial consciousness.

Especially if we understand intersectionality as a subtype of ‘category-based epistemology,’ there is no theoretical reason demanding that intersectional methods must be ‘progressive’ or to the ‘Left’ in any sense – and the alt-right provides a practical example of a non-progressive version. More to the point, if intersectionality denotes an expectation of experiential authority – again, similar to the view of the epistemologically privileged population ‘seeing’ the dynamics of development – relevant notions of ‘oppression’ or ‘marginalization’ are defined by the population itself. Lindsay best sums the nature of intersectional analysis when she describes it as a heuristic that can ‘clarify a particular question – how do identities, social categories, or processes of identification and categorization gain meaning from each other?’⁴ In this sense of intersectionality, the alt-right appears as a strong case of non-progressive use of this heuristic. With the primacy of identity for alt-right and ‘intersectional Left’ alike, both would likely assent to the proposition that ‘One doesn’t fight for “ideas,” one fights for a people – ideas are only the struggle’s instruments, not its goal.’⁵

A striking aspect of the alt-right is its emphasis on many thinkers that also hold pride of place with the ‘intersectional Left,’ either directly or via affiliated thinkers (such as writers associated with Eurasianism or the ‘Groupement de recherche et d’études pour la civilisation européenne’). Indeed, the ‘alt-right’ focus on identity is in many ways a mirror image of identity for intersectional forms of progressive thought, although with a greater emphasis on those thinkers related to the ‘Conservative Revolution’ in Germany in the period after the First World War, including Oswald Spengler and Ernst Jünger, among others.⁶ But two thinkers in this general period that overlap between alt-right and ‘intersectional Left’ are Carl Schmitt and Martin Heidegger, the latter particularly notable in the works of the Russian Eurasianist theorist (and alt-right ‘ally’) Alexander Dugin.⁷ For the alt-right, Schmitt and Heidegger fit within an alternate interpretation of identity, one that includes ‘... such writers as Nietzsche, Heidegger, Schmitt, Benoist, Faye, etc.,’⁸ which emphasizes inequality as much as equality, and focuses upon the dominating and oppressive force of ‘slave morality’ (in a sense, rearticulated in ‘cultural Marxism’) upon society. While the ‘intersectional Left’ will usually take an egalitarian interpretation from many of these writers (Nietzsche especially), the alt-right instead emphasizes the inegalitarian interpretations in their analysis of identity.

Additionally, the alt-right critique of decline shares structural similarities to the discourse on oppression in intersectionality theory. As Leslie McCall notes, ‘Interest in intersectionality arose out of a critique of gender-based and race-based research for failing to account for lived experience at neglected points of intersection – ones that tended to reflect multiple subordinate locations as opposed to dominant or mixed locations.’⁹ What is notable about these intersections is that, merely as a methodological matter, there is nothing theoretically demanding that the ‘subordinate’ be defined in a progressive manner. Theoretically at least, a different population could use a similar methodology based upon a self-experienced form of oppression as well as group solidarity. For instance, there would be little an alt-right thinker would dispute in Fogg-Davis’ statement that ‘[t]he task at hand is to make lofty philosophical questions ... relevant to those who must struggle to create and sustain their life projects within the confines of racial categories,’¹⁰ other than focusing on ‘white’ political theory rather than a ‘black’ version.

Whether the population defines ‘marginalization’ as lack of access to economic power, lack of access to political power, or (for lack of a better term) demographic protection, both the ‘intersectional Left’ and the alt-right patrol the borders of acceptable discourse based upon the population’s ‘experience’ – with critique from outgroups (be it from whites,

nonwhites, men, women, or whoever) thereby being inherently suspect on its own terms. Both the alt-right and the 'intersectional Left' are dominated by a focus on category-based epistemology, where the experiential authority of the identity population – arising from genetics or from the experience of oppression – effectively concentrates importance on identity, making the specific identity the lens through which to comprehend the world in all of its aspects. While the 'intersectional Left' defines its focus 'with understanding the multifaceted, complex, and interlocking nature of social locations and power structures and how these shape human lives,'¹¹ the alt-right effectively follows this same focus but adds 'biological/genetic' to 'social locations.' Specifically, the alt-right includes a biological element into this framework, on the view that genetics play a major role in shaping these structures, with the belief that '... a changing population could change *everything* in America.'¹² In practice, this identity-population focus leads to a form of anti-universalism in both of these types: global 'meta-histories,' imperialism, 'neoconservative' foreign policy, and neo-liberal corporate activities are shared enemies for the alt-right and 'intersectional Left,' often presented as preservation of identity against economic rationalization and commodification of society.

Similarly, the identity-foundation for the alt-right and 'intersectional Left' requires the construction of an outgroup that could be labelled the Enemy population/structure. Although the action of this Enemy varies between the two (decline vs. oppression), both view the Enemy as dominant, and its influence as totalistic. Both alt-right and 'intersectional Left' assume a position of defence and 'David' by the epistemologically privileged population against the aggressive and powerful 'Goliath': the linguistic structures, social institutions, and political powers acting to 'silence,' deform, or remove the specific identity population. The Enemy is perceived as totalistic insofar as its influence is all-encompassing and, in the end, unified. For the 'intersectional Left,' economic exploitation connects with sexism connects with racism connects with imperialism connects with heteronormativity, forming a comparatively unified 'oppression;' for the alt-right, social unrest connects with civilizational decline connects with multiculturalism connects with 'cultural Marxism' connects with disrupted norms, forming a comparatively unified 'decline' or 'decadence.' In both cases, the identity populations suffering from oppression/decline are varied, but the exploiters are unified: the social structures in place serve to benefit discrete, identifiable populations against Others. For the alt-right, the Enemy entails a comingling of a 'new class,' creating dissension within society (among other means) through the 'diluting' of the population via immigration as well as neoliberal globalization. Deriving from earlier writers on the 'managerial revolution,' in this view the Enemy is the population based upon '... a managerial political ideal that involved a bureaucratic, social-engineering state actively intervening in and altering by design the economic, social, and even intellectual and moral relationships of its subjects.'¹³ An area of contention within the alt-right on the Enemy is the 'Jewish question:' specifically, if Jews are viewed as an intentional, collective racial enemy. Jared Taylor (founder of *American Renaissance*) views Jews as a population with indifference, believing European Jews, as white ethnics, could assimilate into American white society,¹⁴ displaying at most what one might call 'casual' anti-Semitism. The more radical alt-right, however, sees Jews as a central part of the Enemy, where the decadence of American society is not merely historical accident or the result of ideology: rather, '... white extinction is the *intended* result of the policies we oppose.'¹⁵ In the style of the 'evolutionary analysis' of Kevin MacDonald,¹⁶ this view holds that Jews – operating from a racial consciousness that seeks its collective benefit – attempts to undercut white racial consciousness (as a competitor) through policies

and ideologies of egalitarianism, universalism, and individualism (especially in terms of consumerism). This is in contrast to alt-right thinkers such as Taylor, who focuses more on black, Hispanic, and immigrant populations.

In this view, a false egalitarianism, based upon 'false consciousness' (for lack of a better phrase), serves to advance the interests of a 'globalist' and 'cosmopolitan' population, against the interests of others (here, primarily white populations, but also including other ethno-nations across the world). For the 'intersectional Left,' on the other hand,

'... white male heterosexuality provides three axes – whiteness, maleness, and heterosexuality – against at least one of which the rest of us are intersectionally differentiated. ... the conduct of a white heterosexual man is normative not just because of what he is *doing* (i.e. his conduct) but because it is *he* who is doing it (i.e. his status).'¹⁷

This form of Enemy – usually amorphously connected to institutional or cultural structures, but also connected to identifiable individual traits – provides the Other for intersectionality; the entity causing marginalization and oppression in general, as well as in specific policy areas. Institutional and structural oppression, generally to the benefit of white cisheterosexual Western men, serves as the Enemy for the 'intersectional Left' in a manner similar to the role of the 'cultural Marxist' and multiculturalist in the alt-right.

A criticism of comparing ideational structures of the alt-right and the 'intersectional Left' would be in their strongly divergent views of social reality: biologism vs. social constructivism. Specifically, the alt-right focus on biology reifies contemporary observations as natural 'facts,' and denies agency in populations through its form of genetic determinism, both in contrast to the methods and concerns of the 'intersectional Left.' The first point is partially correct, as a methodological matter, although this becomes a fundamental dispute between the two views (the one reifying biology, the other 'construction'). But this difference, and criticism, begins to deteriorate when interrogating what 'social construction' means. Authors far outside the sphere of the alt-right have noted the potential difficulties in the intersectional perspective. On the one hand, intersectionality can lead to a type of atomistic specificity, where 'Intersectionality, taken to its extreme, would conclude that individuals experience life differently based upon their unique combination of social groupings.'¹⁸ On the other hand, it can simply lead to a different form of determinism. If intersectionality is based upon a notion of social constructivism, and '[s]ocial constructionism maintains that power and knowledge are inextricably linked, such that power is exercised through the construction of knowledge,'¹⁹ one must wonder 'how far down' construction goes in identity formation. If most, or even all, of our understanding of reality is socially constructed, but this social construction is so deeply encoded in human psychology (and reinforced by the sundry inputs coming from social institutions and structures) that it in effect determines actions, choices, and identities, then the line between genetic determinism and social determinism becomes rather thin. In other words, this criticism may have merit if there was a clearer idea of what entailed the formation and maintenance of identity without oppression and with autonomy. Some recent discussion of transgender issues illustrates this problem. In noting the impossibility and undesirability of socially eliminating the gender binary, Fogg Davis writes, 'For it is precisely because gender identity is such an important part of our lives that we must take care not to institutionalize situations that deprive individuals of the authority to embody and enact the gender identity that *feels* most right to them.'²⁰ If the 'feeling' arises from socially encoded construction, then such an identity is as important – and meaningless – as any other, which then requires some basis for the priority of one type

of identity protection over another. If the ‘feeling’ is, on the other hand, based on some type of biological or genetic predilection, racist thinkers such as Michael Levin could argue that the ‘intersectional Left’ bases itself on biology as well, when convenient – the alt-right merely maintains greater consistency. While the methodological differences between alt-right and ‘intersectional Left’ are not minor, these are disputes between factions with some common agreement (the primacy of identity) rather than separate systems; more similar to disputes between Gramscians and structuralist Marxists rather than, for instance, disputes between a Marxist and a Hayekian.

One main difference between the alt-right and the ‘intersectional Left’ is temporal: while intersectionality is comparatively new, the focus on identity within more progressive political thought been recognized for a few decades. The alt-right, on the other hand, has only gained more attention recently, mostly in connection with the Donald Trump campaign for the Republican nomination for the presidency. But the alt-right itself is not new, and Trump’s campaign appears to have mobilized it, but certainly did not create it. In a sense, the alt-right has existed for nearly as long as mainstream American conservatism (or perhaps predates it, depending on one’s perspective), tracing its lineage some of the members of the ‘Old Right’ (especially Mencken and Ransom, among others)²¹ and viewing its history as shaped by the ‘purges’ within mainstream American conservatism, including the ‘excommunication’ of the John Birch Society (1962) by *National Review*, with minor ‘purges’ of individuals/groups, including Samuel T. Francis (1995) and Joseph Sobran (1993). One could point to the ‘Tea Party’ movement as an immediate cause of the ‘shift’ of interest from mainstream American conservatism to alt-right. In contrast to the rise of the Trump presidential campaign, the Tea Party movement remained basically within mainstream American conservatism. As one alt-right writer notes, distancing himself from it, the Tea Party was ‘a piously colour-blind, universalistic movement promoting fiscal conservatism and constitutional government which was nevertheless viciously attacked as “racist” by the Left.’²² This may give us some insight into the shift. On the one hand, various populations may have viewed the Tea Party movement as a failure insofar as its tactics appeared too ‘weak,’ especially compared to the activity – and at times, violence – from the Left (as occurred at points during the contemporaneous ‘Occupy Wall Street’ movement). On the other, and related to Johnson’s comment, the demonization of the Tea Party movement as racist and inherently violent, perhaps best exemplified by the initial accusations that mass shooter Jared Lee Loughner was inspired or otherwise connected to the Tea Party and/or its rhetoric, may have inadvertently created an incentive for paying more attention to the alt-right. It is at least conceivable that the perceived failures of the Tea Party combined with demonization encouraged some in the population to be more willing to lend an ear to the alt-right, as their rightist views would be ‘racist’ regardless of how near or far they are from the centre. But to understand this shift, and the overlaps in alt-right and ‘intersectional Left’ views of identity, we must consider how this heightened focus on identity came into being within the United States.

Identity and the alt-right

The centrality of identity for the alt-right contrasts with the ideology of mainstream American conservatism,²³ in a manner not dissimilar to the greater emphasis on identity in the ‘intersectional Left’ compared to the ‘interest-based’ or ‘traditional’ American

progressivism. For instance, ‘Black Lives Matter’ is an identity-focused ‘intersectional Left’ movement, in comparison to Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and similar unions that are part of the ‘interest-based’ sections of American progressivism. For the Right, the sharp division between the two groups centres on the role of culture vs. biological determinants on ‘national’ identity. For mainstream American conservatism, the main importance of national identity is cultural and, in a sense, ‘creedal’ or based on a ‘proposition’:²⁴ in theory at least, there are no barriers to entering into the American community as long as one assimilates to its culture, mores, and practices. While not a low barrier, it is one that can be theoretically attainable for any given individual. The alt-right (similar to continental European versions of the Right) and the ‘intersectional Left’ are much more identitarian in their foundational ideas. ‘Identitarian’ here indicates those sets of ideas that hold paramount a specific attribute(s) or quality as centrally important at the individual and social levels, with this attribute(s) being generally immutable.²⁵ Rather than ‘creedal,’ the alt-right views the norms and mores of American culture as solidly connected with ‘white’ culture, based significantly upon racial, (purportedly) genetically influenced behaviours. For the alt-right, the universalistic norms related to ‘creedal’ ideas of pluralistic society are inherently flawed, and those parts that still have some value are incapable of preservation within the current circumstances of decline. This mentality holds that ‘... we must stop thinking like “conservatives” and figure out how to rebuild a tolerable order upon the facts of primitive human nature itself.’²⁶ In effect, the alt-right takes the view that there is little to nothing worth ‘conserving’ in the sense of the mainstream and one must instead look further back for the bases and foundations of human interaction in biology and anthropology. Whether this is looking to the ‘primal’ form of male identity in the ‘survival scenario’²⁷ or to understand the fundamentals of genotype/phenotype differences between racial populations,²⁸ the proper analysis of society must look farther back than the founding of the United States, or indeed before the founding of ‘civilization’ at all. For alt-right writers, the decadence within American society – built both upon demographic changes as well as upon dysfunctional cultural norms of ‘equality’ and universalism – have gutted most of what can be salvaged from contemporary institutions. Although deriving more from the language of the German ‘Conservative Revolution’ (especially Spengler), decadence discourse also overlaps in part with some of the intersectional Left.

The differences in identity are most important, regardless of whether these differences are ‘good’ or not: in the words of one popular alt-right writer regarding immigrants, ‘Even if they were all Mother Teresas, that still wouldn’t change the fact that they’re *aliens*. They have a different culture, and that fact alone means they shouldn’t be here.’²⁹ Assimilation is a difficult endeavour, one that could only (possibly) be accomplished with a highly restricted inflow of immigrants from ethnically similar populations. More likely, an influx of new populations will instead lead to fundamental, and perhaps irrecoverable, changes to society overall and to the white population specifically. As a matter of cultural/racial self-preservation, some form of separation is needed. Taylor, echoing the views of much of the alt-right, argues that a level of racial separation is needed without necessarily an idea of superiority:

‘For their very survival as a distinct people with a distinct culture, whites must recognize something all others take for granted: that race is a fundamental part of their identity. Any society based on the assumption that race can be wished away or legislated away ensures for itself an endless agony of pretense, conflict, and failure.’³⁰

In contrast to many racist ideologies in the past, the alt-right view bases itself primarily on *difference*, with *superiority* being secondary and/or implicit. This difference from earlier forms is not minor: structured more in terms of national/ethnic self-determination rather than racial supremacy and imperialism, the alt-right's self-perception is often closer to various 'national liberation' movements than to the Third Reich, or even Fascist Italy. Advocating homogeneous ethno-nations – with a unity of identity within the state while accepting a plurality of racially/ethnically different states – the alt-right believes that social peace arises from separation: that all populations (but especially whites, as the epistemologically privileged population of concern) will live more comfortably and peacefully if each has its own state. As summed by Greg Johnson (one of the more extreme alt-right writers), '... we support, at least in principle, the nationalism of all nations, the ethnic self-determination of all peoples. We envision a kind of classical liberalism for all nations, in which each people has a place of its own, whose legitimate rights need not conflict with the legitimate rights of all other nations.'³¹ In this ethno-nationalist formulation, biological race plays a strong role in defining these various nations, emphasizing *separation* over expansion in a form of racial self-determination (although obviously entailing exclusions within a nation).

As noted earlier, the cultural perception of 'nation' in mainstream American conservatism differs from the greater focus on biological race for national identity among the alt-right.³² In this perspective, 'The introduction of new educational measures and even legislation to overcome existing inequalities will be successful only if based on a full understanding of the underlying *biological* and cultural factors.'³³ There are two parts to this view, one generalizable to all races, the other focused more specifically on relations of whites to other racial groups. The generalizable element relies on 'genetic similarity theory',³⁴ hypothesizing a general evolutionary preference for 'like' populations. Translated into human behaviour, this view holds that more similar genetic populations (here defined by race) will be more willing and able to cooperate vs. other genetic groups. For the alt-right, this preference towards 'like' populations is constant across races, and indeed is uncontroversial within the intersectional Left if this preference is expressed through ideas like 'Black pride' or the Hispanic '*Raza*.' However, the unacceptability of white racial consciousness, if based in a similar 'like' preference, reflects (for the alt-right) an unfair discrimination against white populations in America. The more specific element in the alt-right view focuses on differences between whites and other racial groups, often specifically blacks. Levin,³⁵ Jensen,³⁶ and Rushton³⁷ are important influences, but here we will focus on Levin. Under his view, aggregate-level racial differences on various scales are the likely result of evolutionary adaptations by different human subpopulations, and from which there is no universal measure for 'superior' (as such an assessment must come from a particular perspective – in this case, racial). For Levin:

'Known race differences in intelligence, impulsivity and aggressiveness, and such race differences as there prove to be in cooperativeness and rule following, together with the divergent evolutionary histories of the races, suggest that the races have also evolved divergent *evaluations* of cooperativeness, aggression, rule-following, and concern with the future.'³⁸

In other words, biological racial differences (genotypes) strongly influence social, behavioural, and moral evaluations and structures as well: specifically, that 'epigenetic' dynamics (the interaction of environment and genetics) give rise to differing phenotype expressions between races. For Levin and others like him, the genetic differences arising between whites and black – developed from prehistoric population migrations out of Africa and from the

adaptations of these different racial groups from their environments (Europe vs. sub-Saharan Africa) – show themselves within American society, where similar conditions can lead to significantly different outcomes. Race and culture are not separate but connected in the alt-right view; and the attempt to create and maintain a multiracial society – which must force groups to fight against their genetically embedded preferences for those who are similar as well, as requiring some groups to operate in social systems that ‘fit’ poorly with their evolution-shaped genetic adaptations – must lead to tension at best, but more likely civil unrest. Moreover, the influx of genetically/culturally different populations must result in a situation of social conflict and collapse, in the view of the alt-right.

Basing itself on an epistemologically privileged population grounded on race, the alt-right’s ideational structure tends it to more collectivist notions of community and a de-emphasizing of individualism (with qualifications). For much of the alt-right, the focus is less on community-as-historically bound-individuals and more towards community as collectivity, emphasizing the dependence of the individual on, and priority of, the identity population. This priority of the collectivity increases the importance of the political: the alt-right agrees with Francis Yockey (an earlier racialist writer) in his view that ‘This age is political in a sense that no previous Western age has been so. This is the Age of Absolute Politics, for the whole form of our life is now a function of *power*.’³⁹ One could look at this alt-right view as effectively being the Right version of the intersectional notion of ‘the personal is political,’ where ‘politics must attend to nuanced, embodied, ... and affective lived experience.’⁴⁰ A focus on racial solidarity, based within white racial consciousness, becomes important to ensure and reinforce communal homogenization to maintain the primacy of collective identity, where ‘[w]e want a society in which you can choose anything you want, *as long as it does not imperil the long-term existence of our race*.’⁴¹ Related to this focus on the collectivity of the identity population, individualism separated from the broader collective base is viewed as inherently suspect. Pure individualism, with its related tendencies towards consumerism, selfishness, and atomization, undermines the solidarity and the long-term health of the ethno-nation, in effect undermining the foundation for individual prosperity. This anti-individualism encompasses economic as well as political topics: free market economics in the style of the Austrian School, and the ‘bourgeois’ morality and rationality it supports, are viewed as at best only worthwhile *within* the (racial or national) population, and at worst a ‘globalist’ fixation on wealth by corporate powers at the cost of the population. ‘Corporate interests’ are viewed with suspicion, since in a historical context of decadence, free market systems ‘can also be destructive of higher values, in which case they manifest the structures and practices of the deteriorating society.’⁴² The decisions of an individual, then, can cover a wide scope, but only within the delimited boundaries of collective identity’s preservation. The decline of the West – in its racial configuration, its sexual mores, its consumerism, and the like – is thus not a group of separate causes; rather, it is interconnected. In other words, the alt-right views decadence as overlapping: social conflict (from racial mixing) and corrupted norms (from ‘Cultural Marxism’ – generally a catch-all phrase for various forms of progressive thought, using Marxist terminology while replacing the ‘proletariat’ with various identity groups) are part of a structural push towards decline. Thus, policies and institutions viewed as working against interest of white populations, male populations, heterosexual populations, and others are not perceived as separate issues, but rather, alt-right thinkers ‘... share the logic that multiple marginalizations of race, class, gender, or sexual orientation at the individual and institutional levels

create social and political stratification, requiring policy solutions that are attuned to the interactions of these categories.⁴³

A notable, if disconcerting, element in this discussion of the alt-right and identity is not that this focus is unusual. Rather, it is disconcerting because it is familiar: while echoing ideas from the past, what is striking is its similarity to ideas in the present. More specifically, the importance of identity for the alt-right overlaps considerably with much of the identity focus of the ‘intersectional Left.’ It is to this overlap, and the partial explanation it can give for the recent surge of interest in the alt-right, I turn next.

The rise of identity

The rise of identity is strongly connected with the New Left of the 1960s, and the ‘generation of ‘68.’ For the generation growing up after the Second World War, identity held a historically influenced importance, be it national guilt for past identity-based genocide (in Europe, and West Germany particularly), or current injustices based on identity (in the case of discrimination against African-American populations in the United States). Although viewed as connected to economic exploitation and alienation, identity-based injustice (and identity-based consciousness in response) was perceived as not reducible to simple class analysis. In resisting discriminations, *de jure* and *de facto*, based on racial identity, the ‘generation of ‘68’ would pay greater attention to the role of identity separate from economic class as a significant factor in oppression: strongly emphasizing racial identity initially, but also interconnecting with Second Wave feminism. Moving from the period of the 1960s, the recognition of identity in power and marginalization expanded, including other racial identity groups, LGBT populations, disabled populations, and others. As the number, and divergent perspectives, of these identity populations increased, the need for theoretical union became necessary, with intersectionality being a major move in this direction. In this sense, the ‘intersectional Left’ originates in the recognition of identity-based forms of oppression previously unanalyzed or ignored, interrogating these ideas and creating identity alliances for a broader liberatory/emancipatory project.

But another strong influence on the rise of identity was the perceived failures of the earlier form of epistemologically privileged population: the proletariat. With the activities and structure of ‘actually existing socialism’ in the Soviet Union and the Eastern bloc as well as the ongoing ‘failure’ of the working class in the West to coalesce in the manner expected in Marxist theory, the identitarian Left faced the challenge of having a radical theory lacking a revolutionary subject. In effect, the ‘task’ of the ‘generation of ‘68’ was replacing a failed epistemologically privileged population (the working class) with a new, preferably more revolutionary, population. Domestically within the United States, the revolutionary subject shifted away from primarily economic identity to other forms: racial identity (or being an ‘ally’ with racially conscious marginalized groups) in the period of the Civil Rights era, gender identity with Second Wave feminism, a more ambiguous identity of ‘youth’ or students, moving on to other forms of marginalized identity, including orientation, non-binary views of gender, and others. An external influence to these domestic shifts was the rising importance of national liberation movements (including those against existent colonial powers, as well as movements against more amorphous ‘imperialism’ in the cases of Cuba and China): significantly, these national liberation movements often emphasized national, racial, or other non-economic identities as a basis for revolution and liberation.

This anti-colonial identity discourse would be influential on the American ‘intersectional Left,’ be it on political organizations (such as the Black Panther Party focus on ‘internal colonies’), or in broader areas, such as education. While initially, the focus on identity led to prioritizing one identity over others, the move towards intersectionality emphasized the multiplicity of identity and oppression – a move that could provide greater theoretical foundations for inter-group alliances against oppression (however defined), while also serving the practical purpose of attempting to mitigate intra-alliance disputes over priority.

In contrast, the alt-right appears as somewhat of a latecomer to attention, even if some alt-right thinkers trace the ‘movement’ to even before the appearance of the mainstream American conservatism. As noted earlier, an immediate cause of its rise to attention has been the presidential candidacy and election of Trump in the United States, with the alt-right focused on his campaign. However, Trump would not be the first, or even most natural, candidate for alt-right attention: many continue to praise Patrick Buchanan, who also ran for nominee in 1992, 1996, and 2000, and yet the alt-right was unable to gain traction at that time. One might also look at other previous candidates (such as George Wallace) or movements (including the militia movement of the 1990s) as spaces where the alt-right would have gained in prominence, and yet did not. If the focus on identity grew so important among the ‘intersectional Left’ over a period of decades, why is the alt-right only gaining larger attention *now*? There are four influences for the current saliency of the alt-right: these are based on technological and historical changes, internal changes within the American Right, and the ‘coming home to roost’ of the identity politics of the intersectional Left as it now arises with the alt-right.

An important influence may be the advancement of genetic research, and the resulting expansion of genetic and biologicistic explanations in broader discourse as well as political analysis. The popularization of the Human Genome Project, the availability of private genetic testing services such as those offered by ‘23andMe,’ and the cementing of evolutionary-style reasoning for scientific explanation (on matters biological and behavioural) have put genetic and/or biological modes of analysis and explanation to the forefront. In these circumstances, the extension of genetic/biological analysis to the relation of race and sex to politics and/or society is not surprising.⁴⁴ On the one hand, advances in technology have brought difficult questions into the policy arena, such as the health policy implications of the connections between race and pharmacogenetics in treatments such as BiDil.⁴⁵ On the other, researchers have already started to look for genetic and/or evolutionary causes behind political preferences. It is not hard to envision, in the context of possibly relevant racial differences in medical treatments as well as phenotype/genotype analysis on political preference, that a political ideology combining both would gain renewed attention.

A second reason for the late entrance of the alt-right would be the distance of the present from the Second World War. Within the American context, an explicit appeal to racialism (rather than an implicit one, in the Klu Klux Klan rhetoric of ‘Americanism’) would summon up the memory of the enemy states of Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy. Blatant appeals to these regimes would repel many potential adherents (even if they might be inclined towards alt-right notions of racial/national identity) as it could be perceived as betrayal: specifically, potential adherents could see such appeals as extolling a significant *national* enemy. Related to this previous history, a third reason of particular importance for the delayed rise of the alt-right in the United States would be the significant level of self-policing that occurred within the mainstream American conservative movement itself. The general

narrative within mainstream American conservatism usually starts with the founding of the Intercollegiate Studies Institute (ISI; originally 'Intercollegiate Society of Individualists') in 1953, the publication of *National Review* in 1955, the founding of the 'Young Americans for Freedom' group (YAF) in 1960 (with its founding 'Sharon Statement'), and the 1964 presidential campaign of Barry Goldwater. The Cold War plays a central role, as the combined goal of anti-Communism provided a framework for alliance between disparate elements in the movement, illustrated in the idea of 'fusionism.' Maintaining this alliance, however, required a level of self-policing: with William Buckley and his *National Review* holding special importance in this regard, various organizations (John Birch Society), ideologies (Objectivism), and individuals were 'excommunicated' from the movement. In particular, the aim of self-policing was to remove conspiracy-theorists, anti-Semites, fascists, or other 'swamps' on the Right, particularly those with a more biologically focused notion of identity or society. With the expansion of access to readers through the telecommunications revolution of the 1990s, aided by the expansion of rightist programs on 'talk radio,' this form of self-policing would be difficult to maintain: indeed, the alt-right's increased attention is in no small part connected to its use of platforms such as Twitter, Reddit, and other online systems. But in the period from the 1960s until the early part of the 21st century, the alt-right often lacked the 'oxygen' of publications and networks to expand as a result of conservative self-policing. With these limitations gone, or at least significantly reduced, the alt-right had more ideational and media 'space' for expansion.

One final, and more immediate, cause for the alt-right's rise to attention is the level of social and racial agitation within contemporary American society, and in particular the more militant activity of those labelled 'social justice warriors' by their detractors. With the increased prominence and activity of groups such as 'Black Lives Matter', upheavals at universities such as Yale and the University of Missouri, and the mainstreaming of terminology and arguments focused on white privilege, male privilege, 'mansplaining,' and others, the labelling of 'whiteness' would denote something negative, and 'masculinity' usually tied to 'toxic.' Additional concerns regarding these populations comes from violence: race riots in Baltimore and Ferguson, the shouting down or obstruction of speakers at universities, the attacks on Trump supporters at rallies, and the targeted shooting of police officers in Dallas and Baton Rouge being prominent examples. The observation by Skocpol and Williamson regarding Tea Party advocates could easily apply to many of these protests and groups, often using the language of the 'intersectional Left:' 'Stereotyping and hateful rejection became even more extreme where organized political opponents are at issue ...' and 'is married to a level of out-group intolerance and refusal to contemplate compromise.'⁴⁶ As the identity politics of the intersectional Left became more prominent, and was perceived as enforced by centres of power in government and the media, the alt-right gained prominence for beginning to engage in similar rhetoric and activities. For various members of the American population, the protests of the intersectional Left could create dissonance, be it declarations of 'oppression' by Ivy League students, or extensive media attention to the death of Michael Brown (a black teenager shot by a white police officer) compared to little media focus on the death of Kathryn Steinle (shot by a Mexican illegal immigrant in the sanctuary city of San Francisco). In effect, the strident activities of these groups, the construction of 'whiteness' as oppression, and the increasingly identity-based authority of progressive activism helped open space for increased popularity of an identity-based politics from the Right. The Enemy category of 'whiteness' being so vilified created an atmosphere for a response

giving ‘whiteness’ a content outside of amorphous ‘privilege’ and oppression; in such a social space, the alt-right was ready to provide that content. As a matter of political tactics, the alt-right may be gaining saliency because of its ability to combat the intersectional Left on the shared ground of identity.

Conclusion

This article placed the alt-right in the broader context of identitarianism within American politics, noting its overlaps and similarities in ideational structure with the intersectional Left. Regardless of the final electoral success (or lack thereof) of various nationalist identitarian groups, it is likely that the American alt-right will remain politically relevant to some level for the foreseeable future. As such, it is better to understand the alt-right now – what its members believe and what policies they seek – rather than to misdiagnose the movement at some future cost.

A key mistake for outside observers to avoid would be to analyze the alt-right and its theorists as unthinking.⁴⁷ Instead, these theorists should be read and considered for two main reasons. The first would be to understand their arguments (and the reasoning of those who support them) inasmuch as they may wish to counteract them. By investigating their actual beliefs, as well as their broad policy preferences, one can better anticipate likely directions of the movement, as well as distinguishing between the more moderate, the more extreme, and those that may not fit in the movement at all. The second reason focuses more on self-criticism, especially for the intersectional Left and its allies. While much of the alt-right discourse is more explicitly biologically/materially determinist in its focus than is the case for left-identitarians, this may be a distinction with little difference: if social construction goes ‘all the way down,’ and is inevitably moulded and reinforced by structures of power, then the difference is in the basis of deterministic group identity, but not in the determinism itself. More to the point, the alt-right provides a means to analyze identitarian ideology and explicate its internal problems: it may illuminate problematic areas in identitarianism itself – at the theoretical and/or practical and political levels – that apply to both Right and to Left. Understanding an opponent’s views provides a better probability of defeating them; but such an understanding can also provide a window into examining the disturbing aspects of one’s own theories as well.

Notes

1. A significant portion of the alt-right also focuses on male identity, similarly focused on evolutionary science as its method. For the purposes of length, this element will be left to the side.
2. Emphasis in original. P. W. Gray, ‘Vanguards, sacralisation of politics, and totalitarianism: category-based epistemology and political religion,’ *Politics, Religion & Ideology*, 15 (2014), pp. 527–528; also see pp. 526–533.
3. K. Lindsay, ‘God, gays, and progressive politics: reconceptualizing intersectionality as a normatively malleable analytical framework,’ *Perspectives on Politics*, 11 (2013), p. 456.
4. Lindsay, *ibid.*, p. 449.
5. Emphasis removed. G. Faye, *Why We Fight: Manifesto of the European Resistance*, M. O’Meara (Trans.), (London: Arktos, 2011), p. 264.
6. G. Hawley, *Right-Wing Critics of American Conservatism* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2016), pp. 210–222.

7. A. Dugin, *The Fourth Political Theory*, M. Sleboda and M. Millerman (Trans.), (London: Arktos, 2012).
8. G. Johnson, *Truth, Justice, and a Nice White Country* (San Francisco, CA: Counter-Current Publishers, 2015), p. 108.
9. L. McCall, 'The complexity of intersectionality', *Signs*, 30 (2005), p. 1780.
10. H. Fogg-Davis, 'The racial retreat of contemporary political theory', *Perspectives on Politics*, 1(3) (2003), p. 562.
11. O. Hankivsky, 'Rethinking care ethics: on the promise and potential of an intersectional analysis', *American Political Science Review*, 108 (2014), p. 255.
12. Emphasis in original. J. Taylor, *White Identity: Racial Consciousness in the 21st Century* (New Century Books, 2011), p. 286.
13. S. T. Francis, 'Neoconservatism and managerial democracy: how conservatism evolved into the right-wing of the new class', in P. E. Gottfried and R. B. Spencer (Eds) *The Great Purge: The Deformation of the Conservative Movement* (Arlington, VA: Washington Summit Publishers, 2015 [1986]), p. 110.
14. See: C. M. Swain and R. Nieli (Eds), *Contemporary Voices of White Nationalism in America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 102–104.
15. Emphasis in original. Johnson, *op. cit.*, Ref. 8, p. 17.
16. K. MacDonald, *The Culture of Critique: An Evolutionary Analysis of Jewish Involvement in Twentieth-Century Intellectual and Political Movements* (1stBooks, 2002).
17. Emphasis in original. D. W. Carbado, 'Colorblind intersectionality', *Signs*, 38 (2013), p. 818.
18. R. L. Oprisko, *Honor: A Phenomenology* (London: Routledge, 2012), p. 57.
19. N. M. Else-Quest and J. S. Hyde, 'Intersectionality in quantitative psychological research: I. Theoretical and epistemological issues', *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 40 (2016), pp. 159–160.
20. Emphasis added. H. Fogg Davis, 'Sex-classification policies as transgender discrimination: an intersectional critique', *Perspectives on Politics*, 12(1) (2014), p. 54.
21. See R. M. Crunden, *The Superfluous Men: Conservative Critics of American Culture, 1900–1945* (Wilmington, DE: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 1999). The more explicitly racist alt-right writers differ from other alt-right movement members, identifying the 'Old Right' as the Italian Fascists and German Nazis rather than the 'superfluous men,' see G. Johnson, *New Right versus Old Right: and Other Essays* (San Francisco, CA: Counter-Current Publishers, 2013), pp. 185–196.
22. Johnson, *ibid.*, p. 196.
23. For the purposes of this article, 'mainstream American conservatism' includes those ideologies/populations that adhere to (in some combination): a notion of 'classical' liberalism, especially in free-market economic preferences; a support for norms and institutions of traditionalist 'Judeo-Christian' religious orientation; and a preference towards American patriotism/nationalism, often reflected in strong support for the military and in creating/maintaining American dominance in global affairs. See G. H. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America: Since 1945* (Wilmington, DE: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 1996); C. Robin, *The Reactionary Mind: Conservatism from Edmund Burke to Sarah Palin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Hawley, *op. cit.*, Ref. 6, pp. 37–73.
24. I. Kristol, *Neoconservatism: The Autobiography of an Idea* (Chicago, IL: Ivan R. Dee, 1995), pp. 246–248.
25. Such identities would include (among others) race/ethnicity, gender, sex, sexual orientation, as well as – in certain views, such as the alt-right – nationality. Ideologies based on identities that would not be included are those that are not immutable, especially as they may seek changes of others in identity.
26. F. R. Devlin, *Sexual Utopia in Power* (San Francisco, CA: Counter-Current Publishing, 2015), p. iv.
27. J. Donovan, *The Way of Men* (Milwaukie, OR: Dissonant Hum, 2012).
28. M. Levin, *Why Race Matters: Race Differences and What They Mean* (Oakton, VA: New Century Foundation, 2005 [1997]).

29. Emphasis in original. M. Forney, *Three Years of Hate: The Very Best of In Mala Fide* (2013), pp. 185–186.
30. Taylor, *op cit.*, Ref. 12, p. 292.
31. Johnson, *op. cit.*, Ref. 21, p. 109.
32. The focus on biology and evolution derives from multiple sources, combining ideas on the influence of biology and evolution on human behaviour, and the continuation of evolution on human behaviour in ‘known’ history. See: S. Pinker, *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature* (New York: Penguin Books, 2002); Nicholas Wade, *A Troublesome Inheritance: Genes, Race and Human History* (New York: Penguin Books, 2014).
33. Emphasis added. E. Mayr, ‘The biology of race and the concept of equality’, *Daedalus*, 131 (2002), p. 94.
34. Taylor, *op cit.*, Ref. 12, pp. 113–137.
35. Levin, *op. cit.*, Ref. 28.
36. A. R. Jensen, *Clocking the Mind: Mental Chronometry and Individual Differences* (Oxford: Elsevier, 2006).
37. J. P. Rushton, *Race, Evolution, and Behavior: A Life History Perspective*, 3rd edn. (Port Huron: Charles Darwin Research Institute, 2000).
38. Emphasis in original. Levin, *op. cit.*, Ref. 28, p. 175.
39. Emphasis in original. F. P. Yockey, *Imperium: The Philosophy of History and Politics* (Wentzville, MO: Invictus Books, 2011[1948]), p. 118.
40. L. Baraitser, ‘Delay: On Temporality in Luisa Passerini’s *Autobiography of a Generation: Italy, 1968*’, *European Journal of Women’s Studies*, 19 (2012), p. 381.
41. Emphasis added. Johnson, *op. cit.*, Ref. 21, p. 16.
42. C. G. Ryn, *The New Jacobinism: America as Revolutionary State* (Bowie, MD: National Humanities Institute, 2011), p. 88.
43. A. Hancock, ‘When multiplication doesn’t equal quick addition: examining intersectionality as a research paradigm’, *Perspectives on Politics*, 5 (2007), p. 65.
44. For instance, see: R. T. Azevedo, E. Marcaluso, A. Avenanti, V. Santangelo, V. Cazzato, and S. M. Aglioti, ‘Their pain is not our pain: brain and automatic correlates of empathic resonance with the pain of same and different race individuals’, *Human Brain Mapping*, 34 (2013), pp. 3168–3181.
45. S. R. Jordan, ‘Race, medicine and social justice: pharmacogenetics, diversity and the case of BiDiI’, *Review of Policy Research*, 25 (2008), pp. 53–69. ‘BiDiI’ refers to isosorbide dinitrate/hydralazine hydrochloride, used to treat individuals with congestive heart failure. Controversy over the medication arose from its specific indication for individuals of sub-Saharan African descent, raising questions of the relationship between race and medicine, particularly in the field of pharmacogenetics (which studies the interactions between genetics and pharmacology).
46. T. Skocpol and V. Williamson, *The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 200, p. 201.
47. Here one must distinguish between major alt-right thinkers and a ‘typical’ follower of alt-right ideology. The latter most likely are not strongly engaged in these types of theoretical discussions, being instead engaged in the puerile interactions seen on social media platforms such as Twitter or webpages such as Reddit. However, this does not make the alt-right necessarily different from most other ideologies: generally, ideological followers are taking ideas second- or third-hand, often leading to contradictory or uninformed discourse. The reason for focusing on the thinkers of the alt-right is to analyze the ‘strongest case’ that is presented for the ideology, even if these thinkers are a comparative minority within the ideology. Similarly, to give an older ideology as an example, one wishing to understand Marxism-Leninism would be ill-served by relying on its run-of-the-mill followers: better to focus on its main thinkers, to see the central tenets of the ideology as well as to better comprehend how these tenets become distilled and disseminated among its broader ideological base.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Sara R. Jordan for her comments on earlier versions of this paper, as well as the anonymous reviewers at *Journal of Political Ideologies*. All errors are the author's alone.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

ORCID

Phillip W. Gray  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7220-4251>