

sponding to this. Employment, as wage labour, necessarily implies proletarianisation and alienation, whereas for Marx, 'work can be fulfilling only if it ceases to be wage labour and becomes free.' The defence of employment on the part of the left and labour unions is then castigated as a regressive position that, while seeking to secure the 'right to work', only shores up capitalism through its calls for the maintenance of wage labour. Contrariwise, automation has the potential to finally release the subject from the alienation of wage labour so as to engage in unalienated work, properly understood as the pursuit, practice and enjoyment of knowledge. What currently stands in the way of the realisation of fulfilling work, aside from an outmoded defense of employment, Stiegler notes, is the capture of the 'free time' released from employment in consumption, as forms of entertainment and distraction equally devoid of knowledge or its real fulfilment.

Stiegler's critique of automation is inarguably dialectical and, in its mobilisation of the *pharmakon*, impeccably Derridean. Yet it leaves unanswered – for the moment at least, pending a second volume – the question of the means through which the transition from employment to work might be effected. This would surely require not only the powers of individual thought, knowledge, reflection and critique that Stiegler himself affirms and demonstrates in *Automatic Society*, but also their collective practice and mobilisation. What is also passed over in Stiegler's longer term perspectives is the issue of how such collective practices, such as already exist, are to respond to the more immediate and contemporary effects of automation, if not through the direct contestation of the conditions and terms of employment and unemployment.

Douglas Spencer

## Unlikely hegemons

Angela Nagle, *Kill All Normies: Online Culture Wars From 4Chan and Tumblr to Trump and the Alt-Right* (Aldersford: Zero Books, 2017). 136pp., £9.99 pb., 978 1 78535 543 1

*Kill All Normies* sets out to provide an anatomy of the internet spaces in which contemporary 'culture wars' are being fought out, and an account of how the alt-right rose to prominence and power. It examines the aesthetics of transgression, the symbiosis of sadism and sentimentalism, and the effects of alienation in modern life which have been reproduced and amplified by the internet. The text opens with the hope and optimism surrounding the 'horizontal', 'networked', 'leaderless' realm opened up by the internet, heralded by the 2011 Egyptian revolution (the so-called 'Twitter revolution') and the Occupy movement, before moving on to puncture the resultant hubris and complacency. If we let a thousand flowers bloom, some of them are bound to go rotten. It was a pervasive myth at the start of the decade that the methods of communication and organisation opened up by the internet were to the intrinsic advantage of the left. Subsequent events have shown otherwise.

On Nagle's account, Tumblr-liberalism, a form of politics focusing on identities and their recognition, mainly existed on social media before recently breaking out into what she calls 'campus wars'. For some time now, a more general version of identity politics has informed the prevailing world view of professional strata and the liberal press; Tumblr-liberalism is not coextensive with this but rather a radicalised offshoot that grew online. But the internet is a diverse place and, less noticed until relatively recently, on the message boards of 4chan and Men's Rights Activism (MRA) groups, the alt-right was beginning to emerge. Both the alt-right and Tumblr-liberalism are, Nagle argues, insular movements, possessing their own subcultural norms, their 'own vocabulary and style', raising barriers of entry in an effort to exclude the eponymous 'normies'. Both groups saw themselves as *transgressing* a mainstream orthodoxy, of rebelling against the status quo by violating social norms. But the kind of transgres-

sion that once sustained the left cut both ways: 'it was the utterly empty and fraudulent ideas of countercultural transgression that created the void into which anything can now flow as long as it is contemptuous of mainstream values and tastes.' One outcome of 1968 was, on this reading, a celebration of being outside the mainstream simply for the sake of being outside the mainstream. The politics themselves were of secondary importance, what mattered was the 'aesthetics of transgression'. The problem is, however, if opposition to the status quo is all you have, what happens when you start to win? You become a victim of your own success. When feminism goes mainstream, patriarchy becomes an act of rebellion.

Nagle's claim is then something like the following: in valorising identity as the essence of being, and its recognition by others as the political achievement *par excellence*, identity politics, with Tumblr-liberalism as its latest iteration, turned the left away from a project centred on structural critique, and a corresponding politics of transformative universalism that would overcome oppression and exploitation, to one of altering individual behaviours. The goal of ending oppression, by overcoming hierarchies of domination, become replaced by its celebration: to be oppressed was not a condition to escape, but the supreme virtue. A minoritarian political culture developed in which the politics of collectivity and solidarity, and 'bread and butter' issues, were replaced by 'obscure Internet spaces, subcultures and identifications', within which 'a culture of fragility and victimhood mixed with a vicious culture of group attacks, group shaming, and attempts to destroy the reputations and lives of others' was fostered. Nagle provides the example of the late Mark Fisher as someone who was mobbed online for challenging the politics and behaviour of Tumblr-liberalism in his essay 'Exiting the Vampire Castle'.

*Kill All Normies'* general account of a left that has turned from class to identity is a familiar enough thesis. What is distinctive about the book is the ways in which Nagle takes this analysis into the information age. That Tumblr-liberalism is deeply imbued with an exclusionary political culture is critical to her point. Tumblr-liberalism operates on an economy of

virtue-signalling and shaming, and aspires to nothing beyond the accumulation of the former and the doling out of the latter. As she writes: 'virtue is the currency that can make or break the career or social success of an online user in this milieu'. Humiliation takes precedence over education. In doing so, it betrays not just the economic aspirations of the 'old left', but also those lofty aims of the post-68 social movements for gender, racial and LGBT equality. Countercultures can be productive – indeed Tumblr-liberalism and the alt-right are two countercultures that have defined the contours of our times – but they need to become common cultures if they are to endure. Tumblr-liberalism makes a virtue of its marginality, a virtue it has had to work harder and harder to hold on to as it has become more and more normalised.

Nagle's argument is that this marks a shift in the central battlefield from *politics* to *culture*. It was easy for neoliberals to co-opt Tumblr-liberalism precisely because it had ceased to offer any real political challenge. As such, it fell in behind Barack Obama and then Hillary Clinton who dressed up an anti-egalitarian project of distributing wealth upwards in all the correct identitarian terminology: 'In this style of politics, what a political leader actually does often seems entirely secondary to what cultural politics they profess to have.' Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau is perhaps the most notable current practitioner of this 'style'. Once identity is thought of as the winning move on the political chessboard it is no wonder that the alt-right moved to claim the virtues of 'white identity', or doubled down on its assertions of a patriarchal masculinity in its MRA groups. As Richard Spencer, one of the alt-right's leading lights, has put it: 'if Donald Trump would ultimately become about identity, and he would ultimately understand America as historically a white country ... he could just say this is ours, you are not us, this country is for us.' Thus identity becomes the organising principle for neo-Nazism, just as it was in its original form. Now, however, the left has ceded the terrain. If the battle is solely about assertion of identity, any identity will ultimately do.

The alt-right really hit the mainstream when it was harnessed by what Nagle calls the 'Gramscians

of the alt-light'. This motley band of intellectual and media performers built an apparatus of online cultural dissemination that catapulted the alt-right from the message boards of 4chan to the centre of the national conversation. The incoherent rage of an anti-political correctness subculture was transformed into a political force when joined with a grand narrative vision (Steve Bannon, Richard Spencer) and youthful celebrity (Lauren Southern, Milo Yiannopoulos). In doing so, the alt-light carried the day not only over the centre-left and centre-right, but also the well-funded libertarian right. For although the alt-right intersects, in places, with the latter, it remains a decidedly different milieu to the Koch-funded Tea Parties that looked to be the future of the Republican Party only a few years ago. The real impact thus far has come from, in Nagle's view, a 'more mainstream alt-light' who 'made their careers exposing the absurdities of online identity politics'. But to make those careers they had appealed to a constituency of altogether more dangerous 'white segregationists and genuinely hate-filled, occasionally murderous, misogynists and racists.' They may not now be able to reign in what they unleashed. Yiannopoulos was the first casualty of that war.

There is a sense in which any advance of the left is going to inevitably be met with a response from the right – not everyone can be a winner in an egalitarian struggle. Even if it produces an overall collective gain, some are bound to try and defend their privileges. Nagle does not always make this elementary point clear enough, and if her thesis amounted to this it would be neither interesting nor novel. Having people oppose you is not an indictment; neither is having them emulate what made you successful. But Nagle's point is not just that: it is that the success of Tumblr-liberalism has deprived the left of the ideological weapons required to counter the resurgence of the right. Tumblr-liberalism's transgressions have become staid, censorious and authoritarian while the alt-right was able to become the new cool. Its adoption by the mainstream – in politics, in business, in liberal media – made Tumblr-liberalism the new orthodoxy. And this orthodoxy was enforced not by winning consent, but by the Twitter pile-on – a *modus operandi* now utilised to great effect by

the alt-right as well. If you have never had to build a case, to explain precisely why this strategy is better than that strategy, to interrogate and justify your views and assumptions, how do you fight back when challenged? If identity is everything, the epistemic and ethical grounds, what do you do when people who come from oppressed groups start propagating an anti-egalitarian politics?

The socialist left were once the champions of science and reason, of the rationally planned society directed towards meeting the material needs of humanity. The neoliberals stole that crown. But it was, arguably, the poststructuralist collapse that led the left off down the garden path in this respect. When language is cast as the fabric of reality itself, how one *feels* became equivalent to what one *is*. For others to deny that those feelings constitute truth claims about the world is then to erase the core of one's being. The neoliberals' credentials for hard-headed rationalism have also undergone a slow rout since 2008, their supply-side economics shibboleths exposed for what they always were: wealth transfers from labour to capital and a managed decline for the vast majority. In this context the alt-right were able to portray themselves as the reasonable defenders of the ordinary person. And so the great insurgent force of our times came not from the left, but from the fringes of the right.

Nagle makes much of how 'Milo and his 4chan troll fans are in many ways the perfect postmodern offspring, where every statement is wrapped in layers of faux-irony, playfulness and multiple cultural nods and references', but this is really only half the story. It is an important half, because it was no mean feat to make the aged tropes of the far right cool again. The other part is, however, precisely an appeal to rationality and reason. Witness *Rebel Media's* Lauren Southern mobilise science in her anti-feminist crusade. Or how Bannon packages the various motivating concerns of the alt-right into a compelling story of Western decline and how it can be reversed. In an anecdote indicative of the intellectual deprivation of Tumblr-liberalism, Nagle tells of how BuzzFeed published an interview with Bannon 'presumably thinking this was a ready-made hit-piece that would destroy his reputation', but instead he 'came across in

the interview as darkly fascinating and, relative to many BuzzFeed listicle writers, as quite a serious and intriguing person.’ *Vice* journalist Elle Reeve’s interview with Richard Spencer, in which Spencer is awarded open season to portray himself as a wronged and misunderstood individual, might also be cited here. The bar has been set so low, and the left’s resources become so depleted, that Bannon, a Z-list pseudo-intellectual, found himself cast as a luminary of the zeitgeist and a household name across the Anglophone world.

But for all the success of the alt-right in reaching the mainstream, as Tumblr-liberalism did, it remains, as Tumblr-liberalism has, an *elitist* formation. They may have helped catapult Trump to the White House, but ‘behind the “populist” president, the rhetoric of his young online far-right vanguard had long been characterised by an extreme subcul-

tural snobbishness toward the masses and mass culture.’ It is this conception of the popular that underpins the shared problematic – the ordinary person is either an unreformed racist or a feminised loser, depending on which side you ask. The effect is to decisively undermine the currently circulating view that the socialist left should be re-branded as ‘alt-left’. Nagle demonstrates that, if anything, the commonality lies in the other direction. But she, rightly, never goes so far as to make the move and dub Tumblr-liberalism the alt-left. It is implicit, although never adequately stated, that for all its weaknesses Tumblr-liberalism draws from emancipatory discourses. All the edgy gloss of the alt-right should not be permitted to conceal that it remains, by contrast, firmly anchored to a long tradition of dangerous reaction.

Jen Isakson and Ross Speer

