

Interpretation

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George Hawley, *The Alt-Right: What Everyone Needs to Know*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019, 264 pp., \$39.42 (paper).

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Until the 2016 presidential election, most Americans had never heard of the so-called alt-right. The nebulous movement was then defined principally by what it opposed, and perhaps above all by its disgust with political correctness and with the perceived weakness of mainstream or “movement” conservatism. Self-professing members of the alt-right at that time held a variety of economic and political positions, from stringent libertarianism to right-wing statism, without necessarily adhering to the racial identity politics of the ethnonationalist part of the movement. When Paul Gottfried first coined the term “alternative right” in 2008, he meant to indicate something like this broad coalition of “post-paleo” critics of what he saw as the regnant neoconservatism of the Republican Party.

By 2017, this relatively broad coalition had fallen apart and the term “alt-right” came to be associated almost exclusively with the purveyors of more or less extreme versions of white identity politics. The principal cause of this change was the violent chaos of the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, VA. Prior to the rally, the alt-right’s political activity (if it can be called that) amounted to little more than engaging in internet trolling and offensive shock humor on social media platforms, chiefly Twitter. The political fallout from the rally, and especially from the high-profile killing of Heather Heyer by a self-described neo-Nazi, led to a split between the ethnonationalists and the rest of the antimainstream right, which has since come to be called the

“alt-lite.” Aside from this change in terminology, it seems that little else has really changed.

That same year, George Hawley published an excellent book on the alt-right. That book, *Making Sense of the Alt-Right*, was a thoughtful, timely, and well-researched profile of the movement; it contained interviews with self-described alt-right authors, a comparison of the alt-right to earlier right-wing criticisms of mainstream conservatism, and even an intellectual history explaining the movement’s theoretical antecedents, such as they are. But that book was published shortly after the Charlottesville rally and so was obviously unable to analyze the rally’s effect on the phenomenon he was attempting to understand. Hawley presents *The Alt-Right: What Everyone Needs to Know* as an attempt to remedy this deficiency, or to follow up the initial profile with an explanation of the changes to the movement post-Charlottesville. According to Hawley, those changes can be summarized as follows: whatever it may have been before Charlottesville, the alt-right has now revealed itself to be principally devoted to racial advocacy for white people, ranging from mere white identity politics to the establishment of a white ethno-state. The other elements of the movement have been purged or brought under the aegis of racial politics. Whereas in *Making Sense of the Alt-Right* Hawley insisted on the “genuinely new character” of the alt-right, in the sequel he seems to have revised that judgment, for the alt-right is now said to be practically indistinguishable from earlier instantiations of white nationalism in America.¹

Hawley writes *The Alt-Right* as a kind of short catechism or quick reference guide: while there are traditional chapter headings, the sections within the chapters all take the form of questions to be answered (“What Is This Book’s Purpose?,” “What Is the Alt-Right?,” “Is There a Connection between the Alt-Right and Russia?,” and so on). Hawley tries to keep the answers short—typically around five to six paragraphs—and, perhaps in part for this reason, the answers tend to be authoritative assertions, with comparatively little in the way of supporting evidence, in keeping with the generally popular character of the book. *The Alt-Right* does not presuppose that the reader is familiar with *Making Sense of the Alt-Right*; some of the book is dedicated to covering the same ground again, or to recapitulating the history of the alt-right in the light of recent developments. The chapters are organized both thematically and historically, with the earlier chapters devoted to the prehistory of the alt-right and

¹ The back of the book says this explicitly: “Although it presents itself as a new phenomenon, the Alt-Right is just the latest iteration of a longstanding radical right-wing political tradition.” However, this may have been the work of an editor or publisher and so I relegate this observation to a footnote.

to its ideological next of kin or near-competitors on the dissident right, and the later chapters devoted to the Trump presidency, the so-called alt-lite, and the potential future of the alt-right. On the whole, the book is informative and displays a great deal of familiarity with the subject matter—which, given the abrasive and shocking character of that matter, is a testament to the author’s commitment to understanding the phenomenon.²

However, the book is not perfect. In the first place, it is difficult to know its intended audience. The subtitle of course indicates that the audience is everyone, or that the book aims to enlighten the general populace. Some of the questions do seem to aim at a reader who is thoroughly innocent of any knowledge of American politics (“What Is Libertarianism?”; “What Is Conservatism?”) or of internet culture (“What is Twitter?”; “What is a Meme?”). At other times, though, it is not at all clear that the question posed would have occurred to such a reader (“What Is the Church of the Creator?”; “What Does ZOG mean?”). And there are questions that even members of the alt-right would never have thought to ask (as Hawley himself admits in the section titled “Who Was Francis Parker Yockey?”). The book thus seems to move between assuming total ignorance and assuming a great deal of familiarity with the subject matter. In general, the question-and-answer format of the book does a disservice to the scholarship contained therein. It breaks up the enlightening prehistory of the alt-right in an artificial way, and throughout the book it renders each section too independent from the surrounding sections. On more than one occasion the reader is left wondering why a certain question was raised, or how it arose from earlier considerations. At other times, the unspoken connections are clear only to a specialist—but then the specialist is unlikely to be satisfied by a few short paragraphs of authorial assertion.

There is also one nagging question that fails to get its own section: Why should I care about the alt-right? Why do I “need to know” any of this? According to Hawley, the alt-right is in free fall, without any significant power, money, or organization; on his telling, their brief prominence was due almost entirely to the fact that many self-professed members of the alt-right did not realize the seriousness of the racial commitments held by the movement’s ethnonationalist core. Once that seriousness became clear, the movement fractured and fell apart. Various tools of social coercion (such as

² If anything, Hawley is at times too generous to the supposed coherency of the alt-right. To take only one example, he asserts that the alt-right “rejects the now-dominant notion that race is a social construct rather than a legitimate biological category.” In fact, Richard Spencer, a leading figure in the alt-right, has asserted both that race is a “biological reality” *and* that all meaning and all categories, including race, are social constructs, in keeping with Spencer’s assertion that the alt-right is a child of postmodernity.

“no-platforming,” i.e., denying venues for alt-right speakers and ideas, and “doxing,” i.e., releasing private information such as home addresses and places of employment) have apparently been very successful at punishing adherents of the movement and Hawley indicates that the movement will, for the time being, only continue to weaken. On Hawley’s own telling, the alt-right appears to be little more than a historical footnote.

Nevertheless, the book is not intended to be of merely antiquarian interest; we should care about the alt-right, according to Hawley, because the far right in general is a perennial threat. He exhorts us not to become complacent in our opposition to the alt-right, despite its weakness. It will almost certainly return in some form, he tells us, and since that “next iteration” will “seek to do better next time,” we must watch and wait, we must read the signs and be vigilant in preventing its rise. As political scientists, then, it would seem that our most pressing and appropriate task would be to investigate the independent variable at work. Put differently, the most important practical question we need to ask about the alt-right is: Why does it exist? What causes surges in far-right sentiment? Why, for instance, did internet troll culture shift in character from the antireligious, broadly libertarian irreverence of, say, Beto O’Rourke’s Cult of the Dead Cow days in the 1980s and ’90s to the curious combination of neopaganism, Crusades apologism, pro-statism, and bloody-minded racism of the present day? Even if it is nothing more than the most recent iteration of American white nationalism, why has the resurgence occurred among nontraditional adherents—disproportionately among internet autodidacts and suburban college students—rather than the backwoods racists and socially isolated criminals of yesterday’s Aryan Nations? If we are to predict in order to fight, we must be able to answer these questions.

There is, of course, a danger in attempting to answer these questions, since every attempt to understand can be construed, especially by a hostile reader, as sympathizing or excusing. To the hostile reader, identifying the cause of an effect is tantamount to blaming the cause or exculpating the effect. We therefore become tempted to treat the evil as causeless, unintelligible, radical evil, or a breaking out of a Manichaeian kingdom of darkness, rather than confronting the possibility that the hateful effect arose from an intelligible cause. It is perhaps then understandable, if disappointing, that this all-important question receives almost no treatment in Hawley’s book. The various questions that approximate it either give in to this temptation or else avoid the question of causes altogether. The answer to “How Did the Alt-Right Begin?” is a purely descriptive, two-paragraph account of Gottfried’s

coining of the term and Richard Spencer's appropriation thereof. In "How Did the Alt-Right Revive?" we learn about the importance of Twitter's word count policy (the term "alt-right" is relatively short). In each case, the answer addresses only the use of the term, not the phenomenon to which it refers.

The closest Hawley comes is in answer to the question "What Events Led People to Join the Alt-Right?" Hawley begins his answer to this question with a disclaimer expressing skepticism about the "post hoc rationalizations" given by "radical ideologues" for their positions. He then explains that, while the media coverage of police shootings of unarmed African-Americans "galvanized advocates for minority communities," "some white Americans witnessed these events and reached a different conclusion"—namely, that the media is "biased and dishonest." Hawley explains that the "racist right" exploited the situation to spin events to its advantage. The true interpretation of events was obscured by fringe media outlets that somehow reached thousands of otherwise normal people. But this is to say that the evil effect preexisted the cause identified; the cause identified was not truly a cause: the racist right already existed and had a readership. In any case, the way in which a majority opinion about the news media (that it is biased and dishonest)³ led to identification with the alt-right is never made clear. The next two (very short) paragraphs come much closer to a clear and relatively unpolemical identification of cause and effect. Hawley notes that "the Alt-Right is reacting to the demographic changes occurring in the United States and other Western countries," and chiefly that "the United States is on track to become a nation with no clear racial majority in a few decades." This is, as far as I can tell, the only admission of a simple fact that, Hawley asserts, gives rise to "white anxieties," anxieties which can make one susceptible to alt-right arguments.

The alt-right is a vile and nihilistic movement; but, beyond intellectual probity, precisely the need to combat movements like the alt-right requires that we understand its true causes. Propaganda does not inscribe itself on a blank slate; it almost always exacerbates problems or divisions that already exist. The alt-right feeds on anxieties felt by people who are not themselves alt-right—what are those anxieties and why do people feel them? If the most important purpose of the book is to prevent the rise or return of the extreme right, this is the question it must answer. The United States is in much better shape in almost every conceivable way than Weimar Germany. Why then

³ Recent polling data from Gallup and Monmouth University indicates that 65–75 percent of the country believes that the media is biased and dishonest.

did we experience a spasm of apparent sympathy for the nihilistic far right? Or perhaps we experienced no such thing—according to Hawley, the “movement” crumbled within a few short years. Was this ever anything more than trolls finding the new and most effective way to outrage conventional sensibilities? *Is there a fertile soil in America for this kind of far-right politics or not?* These are the questions the book should answer in order to achieve its own stated purpose. Unfortunately, it does not.