

BOOK REVIEW

Kill All Normies: Online Culture Wars From 4Chan and Tumblr to Trump and the Alt-Right by Angela Nagle. Washington, DC: Zero Books, 2017. \$16.95 U.S. paper. ISBN: 978-1-78535-543-1

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Today it is imperative for everyone on the Left to understand the growth of right-wing extremism around the world, chart its organizations and networks, explicate the strategies and tactics it uses to organize consent, assess its influence upon mainstream politicians, parties and public opinion, and counter its inroads into and noxious effects within working class cultures and communities. In this context, Angela Nagle's *Kill All Normies: Online Culture Wars From 4Chan and Tumblr to Trump and the Alt-Right* is a good introduction to right-wing extremism's millennial cadre, the alt-right, and its liberal foil, the "Tumblr left." Drawing from a five-year study of social media sites, Nagle's book "map[s] the online culture wars that formed the political sensibilities of a generation" (9).

According to Nagle, the alt-right is "a new wave of overtly white segregationist and white nationalist movements and subcultures, typified by spokespeople like Richard Spencer, who has called for a US white ethno-state and a pan-national white Empire modelled on some approximation of the Roman Empire" (12). Orbiting around the hateful core of the alt-right are a bunch of "alt-light" personalities such as Milo Yiannopoulos, Gavin McInness and Mike Cernovich, as well as lots of right-wing political factions that grew semi-independently but joined with the alt-right under the banner of uniting to fight the power of a supposedly mind-controlling and censorious Left-wing culture club. This Tumblr left is Nagle's pejorative for anti-socialist liberals whose politics amount to demanding their group's identity be recognized and affirmed by society's dominant institutions, publicly calling out those who may act or signify in ways oppressive to their group's identity, and chastising others who represent their group's identity without first getting permission to do so. Nagle casts the alt right as an emerging victor in the early years of an online battle with the Tumblr left, and explores how the alt-right crossed over from marginal anonymized websites into "mainstream public and political life" alongside Trump's race for the presidency. Nagle traces the alt-right's mutation from an online subculture in the Obama years into a multi-headed media hydra that Trump rode to the White House. Nagle condemns both the alt-right and the Tumblr left, shooting barbs at both. Some hit their target; others miss the mark. In any case, Nagle provokes the socialist Left to get its act together, online, and with new styles.

Nagle argues that in the same years in which liberal technological determinists and technological optimists were praising the Internet and Web 2.0 for breaking the filters of mainstream corporate media, eliminating the elitist gatekeepers and putting power in the hands of prosumers, the alt-right was busily "creating an Internet-culture and alternative media of their own from the ground up" (41). While some on the Left cheered the Internet as essential to the formation of de-centralized and leaderless social movements like Occupy, Nagle demonstrates that Facebook and smartphones, Twitter and tablets, do not necessarily lean Left. In the same moment that Left

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techno-theorists were championing the rise of rhizomatic and leaderless movements modelled on Internet architecture, white nationalists were using Web 2.0 to build de-centralized networks of neo-Nazis and horizontal movements of hate. During the Obama years, the alt-right developed its own online media empire, and today, the National Policy Institute's Richard Spencer and *The Daily Stormer*'s Andrew Anglin are powerful platform propagandists. Spencer has over eighty thousand Twitter followers, a sum that exceeds Noam Chomsky's followers by about thirty thousand and which outmatches *Jacobin Magazine*'s editor Bhaskar Sunkara's by forty thousand. Anglin takes \$4000 per month on Hatreon, a crowdfunding site that he and other fascists "innovated" after Patreon banned them for violating its hate speech regulations. Save Chapo Trap House and Dead Pundits Society, Patreon socialists are few, and not well funded. In their present configuration, the Internet and digital media technologies are neither essentially Right or Left, but a terrain of struggle. Unfortunately, the alt-right seems to be winning the day on this terrain. As Nagle says, the Internet "has helped to take the right, not the left, to power" (27). True, the "Gramscians of the alt-right" have had "remarkable success in spreading their ideas through their own alternative and almost exclusively online media content in the absence of traditional media, political establishment bodies or other institutional support" (53). The Gramscians of the Left need to develop a social(ist) media strategy for battling the alt-right; if they fail to do this, we will lose.

Nagle also argues that key to the alt-right's rise to power was its embrace of the "transgressive style"—a style that not so long ago was associated with the New Left, interwoven with the liberal art world and connected to critical theoretical developments in humanities and social sciences departments. Nagle says the "transgressive irreverent style of the 60s counterculture was everything the right hated in previous culture wars" (36), but the 4chan shitposters, meme warriors, and doxx hounds of today's alt-right seem to have "more in common with the 1968 left's slogan 'It is forbidden to forbid!' than it does with anything most recognize as part of any traditionalist right" (28). Nagle's thesis about the alt-right's co-optation of the New Left's transgressive style is the weakest part of the book. It says little about this style's co-optation by the cultural industries long ago, and feeds the alt-right's delusional view of itself as a real agent of social change today. To transgress means to offend or go against an established rule, law, or code of conduct. To be genuinely transgressive, a style must cut against the grain of society. While the alt right's ethno-chauvinism, sexism and racism shatter the neoliberal myth of America as a vast middle class and multicultural meritocracy, these deplorable ideologies have been integral to American capitalism and Empire for time immemorial. They are not system outliers, but serviceable to it. Pitting ethnos against ethnos, white against black, man against woman, the alt-right cuts its style from the bourgeois nationalism of the 19th century, not the countercultural 60s. In this regard, the alt-right's transgressive style is not transgressive at all, but conformist: it does not offend the 1%'s concentration of wealth and political power, go against reigning private property laws, or subvert the worker's compulsion to sell their labour for a wage as the only way to survive. Nagle might have better conceptualized the alt-right's style as "pseudo-transgressive," or, a superficially rebellious and resistant style that is substantively intertwined with the system in dominance that is capitalism and compliant with social class power. The Left needs to critique the alt-right's pseudo-transgressive style while creating 21st century socialist styles.

Overall, Nagle's book is a good introduction to the alt-right and the Tumblr left as they were being formed. But one year into Trump's presidency, Nagle's story about alt-right trolls battling Tumblr liberals feels dated. Neoliberal capitalism has been de-legitimized; a space is opening up for history to be made. But who will make it? As of late, the alt-right's culture warriors have shed their pseudo-transgressive style and laid bare the fascist militancy once hidden beneath. Fists and guns are in the streets, and Trump doesn't mind. To fight the alt-right, the socialist Left must not play the Right's caricature of the Tumblr left. Censorship and violence may gratify in the short run, but they are no substitute for building organizations and movements capable of winning and sustaining long term social change. If the Left wants to defeat the alt-right now and for the future, we need to learn how to connect with, guide, organize and perhaps even lead those not already immersed in our echo chambers. We need to make better arguments, write resonant stories, craft more alluring myths, and win large numbers of people to a vision of a better society than this one. Above all, this is what Nagle challenges the Left to do today, and this is perhaps the book's greatest value.