

## Politics of Trolling, Alt-Right's insidious extremism

Review of George Hawley's *Making Sense of the Alt-Right*. (New York, Columbia University Press, 2017). (218 pages)

Hicham Tizaoui <sup>1</sup> & Larbi Touaf (Université Mohammed Premier, Oujda)

The ongoing changes in the world's political scene blur not only the laymen's understanding but also many close followers' analysis of the past and current world's events. This is due to the complex and sometimes indefinite nature of the underlying ideologies that spur them. In such situations, misinformation and misrepresentation can easily creep up, sometimes unintentionally but most of the time quite deliberately to serve the agenda of many opportunity takers. It seems then that the need for more efforts to clear these areas from all kinds of obscurity becomes quite a necessity to stop all kinds of brain washing and propaganda defusing.

Although not directly claiming it, this is, in fact, the right goal that George Hawley sets for his book *Making Sense of the Alt-Right*. The book tries to shed light on the newly emerging movement that has been labelled Alt-Right. In the 218 pages of the book, Hawley meticulously investigate the main aspects of Alt-Right, or Alternative Right. It covers its history, inception, transformation and current status; its leading figures, inspirational sources and defenders; its strategies, declared and secret; and its borderlines, similarities and differences to other movements and concepts. Another asset of the book which the reader might well detect as they turn its pages is the diversity of sources that Hawley uses to gather information about Alt-Right, from books and articles, websites and forums, to e-mails and personal interviews.

George Hawley, an associate professor of political science at the University of Alabama, is a devoted researcher to the conservative movement in the United States. Though Alt-Right can by no means be equated with the Republican party, it remains without any doubt a natural derivative of the conservative movement. If conservatism has developed to address socio-political changes, it is quite logical, as Hawley demonstrates, that the movement will witness opposition related to one or other issues and will by consequence affect the trajectory of its growth and the offspring that it might yield. The appearance of both neo-conservatism and more recently paleoconservatism bears witness to the challenges that mainstream conservatism faces. When Alt-Right was still

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<sup>1</sup> PhD candidate, Mohammed Premier University, Oujda.

forming, the battle between the two ‘conservatism prefixes’ was already harsh and the question of who takes the lead was at its peak. However, Alt-Right was born with a quite different agenda. It is even arguable to deny such connection as Hawley highlights “the genealogical link between mainstream conservatives and the Alt-Right, as I have emphasized, is weak. Unlike some commentators, I do not see much of a connection between, say, the Tea Party and the Alt-Right. The Alt-Right views itself as entirely separate from mainstream conservatism—and to a great extent it is.” (P.42)

The Alt-Right has been considered a questionable movement to be allied to or even linked with not only by the mainstream conservatism but also by other seemingly close movements. Alt-Right and mainstream conservatism departs on a number of issues to the extent that one may well consider the other as deserving exclusion. Mainstream conservatism, for example, accuses Alt-Right of racism as it advocates the unity of the white race under one state while excluding other races from any mixing state projects. This white identity politics that Alt-Right endorses plays double and contradictory roles in the accusation exchange between the two camps. In getting engaged in such debates, conservatism finds itself inconsistent with its own principles. “Yet there are parallels between the Alt-Right and certain elements of American conservatism, parallels that lends a certain irony to the conservative war on the Alt-Right. Conservatives have been quick to argue that the Alt-Right should be condemned as a racist movement. But in doing so, conservatives sound just like the so-called commissars of political correctness that they have mocked and condemned for years in articles and entire books. This creates a problem for conservatives, who are in an awkward rhetorical position when faced with the Alt-Right.” (P. 42). This question of race brings the Alt-Right in opposition to other movements like Libertarianism which opposes all kinds of identity politics.

The convergences and divergences of Alt-Right with other movements and ideologies are clearly demonstrated in Hawley’s *Making Sense of the Alt-Right*. While browsing the book the reader is exposed time and again to comparisons between the movement’s principles and other movements that are seemingly close to it. Hawley draws a comparison between the Alt-Right and its predecessors: white supremacy, white nationalism, white separatists, identitarians, to mention but a few. Even though they agree, for example, to a great extent with their vision of race<sup>2</sup>, they still differ in some details especially

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<sup>2</sup> Even if white supremacy, white nationalism and Alt-Right agree on the principle of race identity politics, they still differ, as Hawley shows, in how the white race should deal with other races, namely as separates or a superior-inferior co-existence.

concerning their strategies in dealing with this issue. Alt-Right, as opposed to other white nationalism movements, adopts a non-violent strategy that avoids direct confrontation with the opponents in favor of more distressing provocations. The Alt-Right becomes distinguishable with such innovative strategies as irony and humor. As Hawley mentions, “The Alt-Right presents itself as a fun movement, one using Internet jargon to tech-savvy millennials and eager to needle established journalists, academics, celebrities, and politicians.” (P. 20). Alt-Right members infiltrate online groups, especially mainstream discussions, and inject comments that are meant to disturb the status quo. The internet trolling, that Alt-Right members masterfully use, enables them to reverse the way of thinking of groups without the need of violent confrontation. It is also important to mention here the movement’s concentration on online activities as its members use the internet as their primary source of communication with the world. “The Alt-Right is almost exclusively an online phenomenon. It has no brick-and-mortar think tanks distributing policy papers to congressional staffers. It does not run any print newspapers, have a meaningful presence on television, or broadcast its message on the radio.” (P. 18).

Hawley’s intense endeavor to bring every aspect of Alt-Right under scrutiny pushed him to go beyond library research and make as much contact as possible with every possible name associated with the group. These vary from personal interviews, email exchanges to forum and closed groups penetration. Hawley, in fact, tries to follow every trace of the group even if this was not easy due to its secret nature. The group does not possess, as aforementioned, any locale to turn to when in need of documentation; even worse is its lack of genuine leading figures.

It is no wonder then that with this lack of authority over the group, it is hard to substantiate any fact about the Alt-Right. Contrary to all the other groups and movements, Alt-Right has no leader to control and direct it, nor authorities to turn to. Even its members are not publicly known, as Hawley mentions: “No major politician or mainstream pundit is a self-described Alt-Right supporter. It is predominantly anonymous.” (P. 18) This is exactly why Alt-right has been defined differently and associated wrongly with many movements, and this is also why the search for documentation about the group can frequently lead to frustrations. And that is exactly the value added to this book; it is among the few academic published works on the topic. Hawley deserves much praise for entering a real challenge on doing research about a group that is both distracting and discreet.

One of the book's merits that should not, and probably will not, go unnoticed is Hawley's use of political events as basis for his analysis. The very beginning of the book evokes the story of a heckler who stopped Hilary Clinton's speech on an election day with the word 'Pepe'. Many would not understand the event and connect it to Alt-Right; in fact, 'Pepe became the mascot of the "Alt-Right"'. (P. 2)

The most remarkable event that brought Alt-Right to the spotlight was the election of the US president Donald Trump. If there is any leader whose ideas would be most likely associated with the views of the Alt-Right, then Trump seems to be the right person for that position. His ideas about immigration are so extreme that Alt-Right could see Trump a kind of spokesman for the group. Although many have made such association between Trump and Alt-Right, Hawley rejects any connection. "There is no evidence that Trump or any significant figure in the White House desires the mass expulsion of all nonwhites from all or part of the United States, which is the core belief of white nationalists. Trump and his administration can and should be criticized for their significance of tenuous connections between the White House and the Alt-Right is potentially dangerous." (PP. 132-3)

Reading *Making Sense of the Alt-Right* will only raise more curiosity to read more about the group and the related movements. Hawley invites us to think with him about a number of issues without the pressure of an ideologue and leads us convincingly to examine evidences before making judgements by adopting a rigorous procedure. And through his academic intuition about its future that Hawley concluded his work about Alt-Right. The group's future seems not flourishing if it does not institutionalize itself for the purpose of changing the politics of the United States.