



**George Hawley.** *Making Sense of the Alt-Right*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2017. 208 pp. \$28.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-231-18512-7.

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In the weeks following Donald Trump's upset victory in the 2016 presidential election, a social media campaign urged people not to use the term "Alt-Right." Claiming that the label was created to hide the racist views of some of Trump's most ardent supporters, a number of critics called on political activists and media outlets to replace "Alt-Right" with "white nationalist," "white supremacist," or "neo-Nazi."<sup>[1]</sup> Although intended to inject more honesty into political discourse, the campaign reflected confusion and lack of information about how the Alt-Right came into being, how it operates politically, and what makes it unique.

*Making Sense of the Alt-Right*, by University of Alabama political scientist George Hawley, argues that the Alt-Right is indeed racist, routinely derogating people of color as biologically distinct from and inferior to whites, but that generic terms are inadequate to describe the movement. In contrast to old-style white supremacists, who wanted whites to rule over nonwhites as in the Jim Crow South, the Alt-Right is white nationalist, in that it advocates a fully separate "white ethnostate" in North America. Further, some but not all Alt-Rightists are neo-Nazis, who identify directly with Adolf Hitler's genocidal ideology. Yet "the Alt-Right is unlike any racist movement we have ever seen. It is atomized, amorphous, predominantly online, and mostly anonymous" (p. 3). It has

grown not by recruiting people into organizations or adding them to mailing lists, but mainly by "master[ing] the art of trolling" (p. 19), using insults, bigotry, and inflammatory rhetoric to harass, bully, and pick fights on the Internet. And unlike older white nationalist groups, which have mostly presented themselves as earnest and serious, many Alt-Rightists specialize in satire, mockery, and jokes.

Hawley's aim is to help readers understand the Alt-Right's history, tactics, and political prospects by letting the movement speak for itself. The book is a model of what fascism scholar Roger Griffin calls "methodological empathy," the principle that analysis of a political movement's ideas and beliefs should be based on how its proponents themselves articulate them. As testimony, Greg Johnson, one of the Alt-Right's intellectual leaders whom Hawley interviewed, gave *Making Sense of the Alt-Right* a glowing review on his website *Counter-Currents*. "Although Hawley obviously has no sympathy with the Alt Right," Johnson writes, "he maintains a refreshingly even-handed and cool-headed tone."<sup>[2]</sup>

Hawley's first chapter highlights the central role of white nationalism within the movement, while noting that Alt-Rightists disagree about specific political goals and are often vague about how to achieve them. He also briefly traces a number

of the Alt-Right's main historical roots and later influences: nineteenth- and twentieth-century white racial movements, such as the Ku Klux Klan and neo-Nazi organizations; dissident right-wing movements of recent decades, including paleo-conservatism, radical libertarianism, and the European New Right (ENR); and other recent online initiatives, particularly Neo-Reaction (which rejects democracy and egalitarianism in principle) and Gamergate (a 2014 antifeminist campaign that pioneered coordinated use of the Internet to harass and vilify political targets).

The book then details the Alt-Right's own development since Richard Spencer coined the term "Alternative Right" in 2008. Hawley usefully divides this history into two phases. The early period centered on the online journal *AlternativeRight.com*, which Spencer founded and edited from 2010 to 2012. The Alt-Right initially encompassed a range of intellectual voices at odds with mainstream conservatism, but its meaning gradually narrowed to focus specifically on white identity politics or white nationalism. After a period of decline, the term Alt-Right was revived in 2015 by a new generation of online activists who gave the movement a dramatically different character: "ostentatiously vulgar and offensive" (p. 68), emphasizing irony and humor, and skillfully using Internet memes and trolling to spread their message and attack opponents.

Hawley cautions that discussion of the Alt-Right's demographics is impeded by its anonymity and decentralization yet argues that the movement's adherents are relatively young and well educated. He asks: "In the past, the stereotypical young white nationalist was an angry, bitter skinhead with limited skills and prospects. So why would millennials who clearly have marketable skills be drawn into the Alt-Right?" (p. 78). Echoing his interviewees, Hawley suggests "growing racial polarization during the Obama administration" and declining "career prospects of college-educated whites" as factors (pp. 78, 79). He also

suggests that "early white nationalists pined for the America they remember and thus seemed to have a residual patriotism. This new crop of white nationalists ... has never known an America that approximates the white-nationalist vision and thus seem willing to reject America" and its political system (pp. 80-81).

Hawley's examination of the Alt-Right's relationship with mainstream conservatism is one of the book's particular strengths. As he emphasizes, the Alt-Right is not just a racist version of conservatism but rather rejects the conservative movement's main premises, "the so-called three-legged stool of moral traditionalism, economic liberty, and strong national defense" (p. 4). This attack on conservatism grows out of the Alt-Right's rejection of classical Enlightenment principles, such as liberty and equality, and also many Alt-Rightists' hostility to politicized Christianity. Hawley argues that while many conservatives are bitterly opposed to the Alt-Right they are unlikely to defeat it, because of their own movement's current weakness, the rise of numerous right-wing websites beyond conservatives' control, and the fact that Alt-Rightists are not interested in "a seat at the conservative table"; they simply want to destroy it (p. 113).

The Alt-Right's relationship with Trump's 2016 presidential campaign also receives thoughtful and nuanced treatment. As Hawley argues, Trump is not a fascist or white nationalist (a fact that most Alt-Rightists have recognized more clearly than some of Trump's opponents), yet most Alt-Rightists enthusiastically supported Trump's campaign not only for his scapegoating of immigrants and Muslims but above all for the "devastating blow" he dealt to organized conservatism (p. 116).

The last chapter describes the Alt-Right's relationship with the so-called Alt-Lite, a penumbra of fellow travelers, such as Milo Yiannopoulos, Mike Cernovich, and Paul Joseph Watson, "whose views on immigration and race relations partially over-

lap with those on the Alt-Right yet do not cross the line into open white nationalism” or antisemitism (p. 144), and who collectively have a much larger audience than the Alt-Right. As Hawley details, Alt-Rightists have been divided over whether to denounce the Alt-Lite for watering down their ideas or welcome them as ambassadors, and the months after the 2016 election saw growing conflict between the two movements. In the book’s conclusion, Hawley considers the Alt-Right’s long-term potential to survive and grow, and assesses some of the ways the movement’s opponents have responded to it.

Hawley’s portrait of the Alt-Right is well researched and carefully argued. However, almost all of what he presents has been well covered before by news organs or antifascist researchers. Hawley’s book gives this analysis the imprimatur of a professional academic and the benefit of fresh interviews with a number of Alt-Right activists, such as Richard Spencer, Greg Johnson, Jared Taylor, and Lawrence Murray. Yet I had hoped Hawley would do more to put the Alt-Right in a broader political context. For example, the movement’s profound debt to the ENR and engagement with ENR figures—Alain de Benoist, Guillaume Faye, and Aleksandr Dugin—deserves much more attention than it receives. I also wish that Hawley had probed more deeply into some of the issues he touches on only in passing, for example, the pivotal role that anti-Jewish scapegoating plays in white nationalist ideology, the Alt-Right’s discussions of foreign policy, or its debates around homosexuality or abortion. Exploration of these topics would have given a fuller picture of the movement’s inner dynamics, political philosophies, and interplay with other far-right currents.

The book’s limited scope is particularly problematic when it comes to the Alt-Right’s gender politics. Hawley’s cursory description of the Alt-Right as antifeminist is accurate as far as it goes but leaves an important story untold. The early Alt-Right encompassed not only explicitly patriar-

chal politics but also calls for greater inclusiveness toward women and criticisms of sex discrimination and sexual harassment within the movement. By contrast, the Alt-Right’s second wave has been dominated by claims that women should have no role in the movement because they are biologically unsuited to political activism or decision making, coupled with widespread use of coordinated sexual harassment (including rape and death threats) against women. This has made the Alt-Right more misogynistic than most of the Christian Right or even some neo-Nazi groups. The shift largely reflects the influence of the so-called manosphere (an online antifeminist subculture that spawned Gamergate and has served as a major stepping stone for entry into the Alt-Right) and of Jack Donovan (an advocate of “male tribalism” who was an influential member of the Alt-Right from 2010 to 2017). Neither Donovan nor the manosphere is mentioned in Hawley’s book.

Hawley’s discussion of strategies for opposing the Alt-Right also suffers from serious gaps. He describes several instances when, in his view, the Alt-Right benefited from unfavorable media coverage, implying that the better approach would be simply to ignore them. While this may be true in some instances, Hawley does not consider the question systematically or address any of the arguments in favor of subjecting the Alt-Right to public exposure and critique. Hawley comes down hardest against violent confrontation as the tactic “least likely to succeed in the long run” (p. 169). Yet the discussion is one-sided and misleading. For example, Hawley criticizes protesters’ use of force in shutting down a speech by Milo Yiannopoulos at the University of California at Berkeley in February 2017 and warns that such tactics could “provoke a counterresponse” (p. 169). But he does not mention that an antifascist protester had been shot and critically wounded outside a Milo speech in Seattle twelve days earlier.

Although Hawley freely criticizes militant antifascist activists' tactics, at no point does he quote from or paraphrase any of the arguments these activists have offered for confronting the Alt-Right with physical force. Antifascist militants have argued, for example, that what passes for speech by Alt-Rightists is in fact political organizing in the service of supremacist or genocidal goals, which often places members of vulnerable communities, such as trans people and undocumented immigrants, in immediate danger.[3] While I support Hawley's use of methodological empathy in discussing the Alt-Right, it is troubling that he does not apply this same principle in his discussion of the Alt-Right's opponents.

#### Notes

[1]. See, for example, Lila MacLellan, "The Trouble with Using the Term 'Alt-Right,'" *Quartz* (November 18, 2016), <https://qz.com/840267/what-is-the-alt-right/>.

[2]. Greg Johnson, "George Hawley's *Making Sense of the Alt-Right*," *Counter-Currents Publishing* (September 18, 2017), <https://www.counter-currents.com/2017/09/george-hawleys-making-sense-of-the-alt-right/>.

[3]. See, for example, Stanislav Vysotsky, "Towards a Broad Left Front against Fascism," *In These Times* (August 24, 2017), <http://inthesetimes.com/article/20458/fascism-antifa-Charlottesville-movement-strategy>; and Matthew N. Lyons, "Militant Tactics in Anti-Fascist Organizing—Interview Transcript," *Three Way Fight* (blog), April 26, 2017, [threewayfight.blogspot.com/2017/04/militant-tactics-in-anti-fascist.html](http://threewayfight.blogspot.com/2017/04/militant-tactics-in-anti-fascist.html).

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