





# FAST CAPITALISM

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Fast Capitalism is an academic journal with a political intent. We publish reviewed scholarship and essays about the impact of rapid information and communication technologies on self, society and culture in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We do not pretend an absolute objectivity; the work we publish is written from the vantages of viewpoint. Our authors examine how heretofore distinct social institutions, such as work and family, education and entertainment, have blurred to the point of near identity in an accelerated, post-Fordist stage of capitalism. This makes it difficult for people to shield themselves from subordination and surveillance. The working day has expanded; there is little down time anymore. People can 'office' anywhere, using laptops and cells to stay in touch. But these invasive technologies that tether us to capital and control can also help us resist these tendencies. People use the Internet as a public sphere in which they express and enlighten themselves and organize others; women, especially, manage their families and nurture children from the job site and on the road, perhaps even 'familizing' traditionally patriarchal and bureaucratic work relations; information technologies afford connection, mitigate isolation, and even make way for social movements. We are convinced that the best way to study an accelerated media culture and its various political economies and existential meanings is dialectically, with nuance, avoiding sheer condemnation and ebullient celebration. We seek to shape these new technologies and social structures in democratic ways.

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# The Manosphere as an Online Protection Racket: How the Red Pill Monetizes Male Need for Security in Modern Society

Eva Bujalka, Ben Rich, and Stuart Bender

To effectively manage, empathize with and respond to the implications and impact of the so-called ‘Manosphere,’ this paper is centered on the premise that researchers require an understanding of the draw factors that lead individuals to engage, affiliate with, and contribute to the various groups that constitute this wider movement. This paper seeks to contribute to the growing body of knowledge around the Manosphere by exploring how thought leaders propagate symbiotic cycles of ontological security and insecurity through YouTube in a manner that resembles a protection racket. It argues that these constructed ontological security cycles provide a powerful impetus to not only draw individuals into the Manosphere, but also to extract material and social resources out of them that can be reinvested to retain them within the movement.

## Introduction

In late October 2021, the 21 Convention—a conference run by a collection of men who make up a portion of the online groups collectively known as the ‘Manosphere’—held its fifteenth annual men’s conference in Orlando, Florida. This event was originally pitched for men, but now is targeted at fathers and women, with the intention of making men (and now women) “great again” by rebuilding patriarchy and by developing men’s capacity for “self-improvement” (21 Studios, 2021a). It is worth noting that even in the midst of a global pandemic, the Manosphere and the men who produce content on popular social media platforms like YouTube continue to organize in-person and online events that maintain and mobilize their community of supporters and retain their popularity and relevance as patriarchal ‘thought leaders.’ The event’s advertising as “America’s last stand for masculinity” (21 Studios, 2021a) indicates a catastrophizing language that proliferates within the Manosphere. Curiously, such framing provides both a diagnosis of and a means to address a current crisis—that is, the promotion for the event declares that there is a crisis in masculinity and that to pay the fee to attend the 21 Convention is to take a stand against this calamity. Over the last five years, the Manosphere has gained increasing attention within academia. Currently, research into the space tends to take up one of three primary focuses: i) identifying the proliferation of ‘categories’ of masculinity and anti-feminist discourse within online spaces (Chang, 2020); ii) speculating the threat that Manosphere content and the men who consume it, present to society (Bates, 2021); or iii) examining the troubling role that social media platforms like YouTube or Facebook play in the distribution and dissemination of this content (for instance, Papadamou (2020) examines the ways that the YouTube algorithm may steer viewers toward such content).

Breaking from the approaches of previous research, this paper adopts a new approach to understanding the Manosphere. That is, to understand the impetus or draw of Manosphere content to its consumer base, our focus is instead on how influential content producers construct a perception of threat in their audience while simultaneously positioning themselves to provide a solution to this same threat. In this paper, we refer to these individuals as ‘thought

leaders.’ In constructing a sense of catastrophe and insecurity around ‘the crisis of masculinity,’ these thought leaders offer an apparent means through which their audiences can regain a sense of security and protection from this same malaise. We argue that influential figures within the Manosphere perpetuate symbiotic cycles of ontological security and insecurity through the YouTube and social media content they produce. Such cycles, we propose, amount to a ‘protection racket’ wherein these influential Manosphere ‘thought leaders’ maintain and grow their audience from whom they extract material, social or political resources. Beyond the influential capacity of these thought leaders, we also highlight the ways in which the neoliberal capitalist system produces ontological insecurity and underpins the ‘solutions’ that these thought leaders peddle. Thus, we show how the broader system of late capitalism is rendered invisible or innocuous to an audience who is committed to these thought leaders and to the crises and solutions they devise.

In mounting this argument, this article adopts the following structure: it first outlines the nature of the Manosphere and the various subgroups that make up this wider online movement. We will frame our outline of the Manosphere through ontological (in)security racketeering theory which we will draw on throughout our analysis. Through this framework, we identify cycles of insecurity and re-security that powerful ‘thought leaders’ use to incite fear and then a sense of security among their audiences—a cycle that simultaneously provides the thought leader with material resources and a consistent audience. Following this, we will define and discuss three representative Manosphere ‘thought leader’ influencers who possess significant followings in the movement and are, we argue, able to stoke anxiety and insecurity within it. We will then use this model to map this very cycle of catastrophization and assuagement onto the online content produced by these three influential Manosphere ‘thought leaders.’ In doing this, we will examine how Manosphere content producers can draw and maintain their audiences and how this cycle can provide financial or other incentives for Manosphere influencers to continue producing media content.

### **The Manosphere: An ontological (in)security theory analysis**

The ‘Manosphere,’ as it has come to be known, is a predominantly online, heterogenous, non-uniform collection of groups, websites, and blogs operated by men who actively address what they have come to identify as a crisis of masculinity in culture, society, economics, and politics. The Manosphere is made up of a number of online (and occasionally in-person-meeting) groups, including the Men’s Rights Movement/Activists (MRMs/MRAs), Pick-Up Artists (PUAs), Involuntary Celibates (Incels), Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOWs), and Proud Boys, among others (Bates, 2021). While these communities share a general concern around a perceived sense of a loss of men’s status, rights, and sense of self, they are disparate and often disagree over the precise cause of and appropriate means of redressing this sense of crisis.

We argue that the enduring sense of crisis that connects these divergent groups (and their disparate beliefs) within the Manosphere can be critically examined through ontological security theory. Ontological security theory has found growing salience within Social Science over the past three decades. Originally conceived within psychiatry by Robert Laing (2010) in the 1960s, the concept was popularised in sociology through several works by Anthony Giddens (1991, 2013). The 2000s saw ontological security increasingly employed by scholars interested in questions around International Relations (IR), beginning with Catarina Kinnvall (2004), Brent Steele (2008), and Jennifer Mitzen (Mitzen, 2006a, 2006b). Beyond IR and Sociology, ontological security theory has experienced something of a renaissance in Social Science. Generally, it is being used to explore topics ranging from populism (Homolar & Scholz, 2019) to immigration (Dingott Alkopher, 2018), the impacts of terrorism (Combes, 2017) and bushfires (Slade, 2020), and even the persistence of private car ownership (Kent, 2016).

This theory provides a useful lens through which to analyze the underlying function of central figures, content producers or, what we will go on to refer to as ‘thought leaders’ within the Manosphere and the ways by which they may reframe breakdowns in identity, routine or at a broader social or cultural level through particular narratives or frameworks (for instance, as we will go onto examine, their adherence to biological determinism or the perceived

threat of a ‘feminist agenda’). In its broadest sense, ontological security can be considered as “confidence or trust that the natural and social worlds are as they appear to be, including the basic existential parameters of self and social identity” (Giddens, 1984, p. 375). In particular, this perception of security is derived from “a sense of continuity and order in events, including those not directly within the perceptual environment of the individual” (Giddens, 2013, pp. 124-125).

One of the major perceived insecurities that underpins Manosphere discourse and anchors an ongoing narrative within the ‘sphere’ is that the world has become disordered, incomprehensible, and ‘unknowable’ to a majority of men. Comparatively, a central principle within ontological security theory is that the pursuit of ontological security, like physical security, can be understood as fundamental to the human condition. Without a sense of knowing the nature of the social, cultural, political, and normative world around them, individuals cannot hope to order their own existence. A perception that the world is in a persistent state of flux, and that one cannot place themselves within it is likely to produce intense existential anxiety in the individual, as they feel they are losing the ability to effectively navigate reality as a result of knowable ends becoming disaggregated from perceivable means. For instance, as per discussion within the Manosphere, this sense of disorder may emerge through a sense that expectations or promised futures (often predicated on gendered assumptions) have been broken or undermined (perhaps through divorce or a man’s inability to secure employment) and that, accordingly, masculinity is in crisis or under threat (be it from the perceived threat of feminism, or from formal structures or institutions that seemingly privilege women over men, whether legally, or with regards to employment opportunities and gender parity). In reordering and navigating their experiences of this disorder or crisis, groups within the Manosphere broadly embrace ‘Red Pill’ philosophy. This philosophy is a conceptual metaphor derived from the 1999 film *The Matrix* and which in the Manosphere is held to reveal the true machinations of the ‘real’ world—a world that economic models of scarcity, biological essentialism, and evolutionary hierarchies fundamentally govern, but which has paradoxically become socially restrained and feminized. Consumers of this Red Pill claim that the harsh realities of the world they perceive remain largely hidden to the social majority, which remains deluded or ignorant thanks to the continual imbibement of the contrasting ‘Blue Pill’ (Ging, 2019, p. 640). Effectively, the Red Pill promises an antidote to what is regarded as modern men’s ‘slavery’ to women and an unjust social hierarchy. Men are informed that they live within a pecking order comprised of a minority of ‘Alphas.’<sup>1</sup> and the majority of so-called Blue-Pill ‘Betas.’<sup>2</sup> The goal of many Red Pill converts then is to transform themselves from a Beta into an Alpha.

While there is significant overlap and migration between Manosphere groups, these communities are typically framed by specific routines and the ways by which they engage with and respond to Red Pill ideology. This formation of routine and identity corresponds with another central principle of ontological security theory: that a significant amount of ontological security is produced by consistent routines that help define an individual’s identity. Routines enforce order on existence by providing the agent sets of values, goals, and considerations by which to adhere and position themselves in relation to as they go about their lives. Routines help define the individual, for example, this may be as a ‘father’ from the complex process of child-rearing or as a ‘home owner’ as one acquires property (Dupuis & Thorns, 1998). Importantly, identity-linked routines help the individual to confront uncertainty and threat in the world by imparting a hierarchy of import, grounding, and constancy that can be especially observable during times of wider uncertainty.<sup>3</sup> Importantly, when these routines become disrupted or undermined (for instance, through divorce or housing or financial troubles), relationality and constancy come into crisis and produce ontological insecurity.

The Red Pill, as a framework, provides a diverse set of Manosphere groups with a particular narrative about how and why men’s lives have become increasingly difficult and insecure and provide new categories and routines through which to concretize a sense of self. For example, PUAs embrace the Red Pill in their adherence to the idea that men need to adopt non-Blue Pill strategies and game the ‘system’ to successfully meet and seduce women (and often seem to enjoy the thrill of the ‘chase’ more than the outcome) (O’Neill, 2018). By contrast, while MGTOWs adhere to the same aspects of the Red Pill framework (i.e., that being Blue Pill leads to poor interactions with women and inevitably a miserable and dead-end marriage for betas), they conclude that a non-alpha man is best off avoiding

women altogether. Thus, they pursue a life without women. MRAs are interested in raising social awareness for issues that affect men negatively and which they believe are the result of a predominantly Blue Pill society. For example, they often highlight how outcomes of divorce proceedings seem to unfairly limit a man's access to his children while simultaneously transferring a disproportionate amount of his financial assets to the woman (an outcome referred to as "divorce-rape" in both Red Pill and MRA contexts (Khan, 2019)). Lastly, those in the incel community also commit to the Red Pill concept that women 'date up' (by seeking 'high-value men'); however, they typically believe that PUA strategies will not work for them due to factors around biological determinism and evolutionary psychology that preclude them from being a viable partner for a woman.<sup>4</sup>

The Manosphere can be said to render something of a community through these complex processes by which conflicted and unstable identities and routines become resecured through particular Manosphere groups and shared narratives. Community and communal ties are a central principle in the pursuit of ontological security. Indeed, communal connection not only gives individuals a sense of place within which to enmesh themselves, but also imparts a sense of authenticity, legitimacy, and continuity to the identities and routines they produce (for instance, the specific language or sets of beliefs developed within the Manosphere that undergird the Red Pill's 'us vs them' dichotomy). This is particularly true of 'hardened' communities such as religious fundamentalists and ultranationalists, that present and view themselves in starkly immovable terms and thus help to present their views and the world they live in in binary terms (Kinnvall, 2004, p. 742)—which, within the Manosphere, are frequently predicated on an essentialist and biologized gender binary.

One of the consistent guiding features of thought across the Manosphere is a persistent anti-feminist ideology (Nagle, 2017, p. 86). Indeed, in this space, feminism is broadly conflated with misandry—as is occasionally women's liberation and women's formal rights (Ging, 2019, p. 640)—and is identified by some of the members in these groups as a leading factor in the 'decline' of western culture and civilization. Specifically, such groups identify the source of this cultural malaise in the decline of men's traditional social, political, and physical primacy and their increased insecurities and anxieties around comportment, dating, domestic life, and work (For examples, see King, 2018; & Votey, 2021). Yet, it is through feminist frameworks that men's rights first gained social and institutional leverage. The Men's Liberation Movement (MLM) of the 1970s, which has its origins in second-wave feminism, has been identified as one of the earliest groups that became the foundation for the Manosphere today (Ging, 2019, p. 639; Nagle, 2017, p. 87). While the MLM emerged to critically examine men's roles in society, privilege, and male violence against women, a schism between MLM factions produced an anti-feminist branch. This wing disavowed the concept of 'male privilege' and employed a conservative understanding of sex and gender roles (Ging, 2019, p. 639). It is important to note that the fragmentation of the MLM was not the only factor that led to the development of the Manosphere, given its emergence as a phenomenon of the early-2000s, and it would be disingenuous to suggest that the insecurities that men experienced in the 1970s are precisely the same as those that men identify and experience currently. Today, the term, 'Manosphere,' which emerged around 2009 in Ian Ironwood's writing about the collection of blogs and websites he noticed that were primarily concerned with men's rights, has come to gain mass media attention focusing on its misogynistic language, death and rape threats and both on- and offline violence. The Manosphere has also been connected with the harassment that female gamers and journalists received following the 2014 Gamergate controversy, as well as with a number of doxing scandals of prominent female journalists, critics, and developers in the gaming space (for instance, the 2011 Register-Her.net scandal).

Indeed, it is not unreasonable to concede that there *is* very much a crisis within masculinity today. However, rather than locate this crisis as an issue with feminism, political correctness, or 'cancel culture' specifically, as is the Manosphere's focus, there are many clear causes for such a crisis linked to neoliberalism. These include the effects of downward mobility, inflation, wage cuts, wage stagnation, underemployment, overwork and burnout, housing insecurity, the growing cost of education as well as the demand for increasingly skilled workers, increasing precarity and the outsourcing of labor, the privatization of health services, and the atomization of the individual who is compelled to spend increasing periods of time isolated and online. Such contingent historical and social events have

all, unsurprisingly, led to a culture of more anxious, more insecure, and understandably disillusioned, angry men who may well question whether they are 'privileged' in the ways they may be told that they are, and who are seeking legible and accessible answers and narratives that explain the disparities they exist within (Ging, 2019, p. 652; Kimmel, 2017a, p. 22; 2017b, p. 16; Nagle, 2017, pp. 86-87). To this end, it is important to note that these crises and insecurities are not attributable to women, though they may be the target of this crisis, but to the limitations of globalization, economic necessity and neoliberalism, and life under capitalism.

In ontological security theory, these very kinds of social change, discord, and unpredictability are frequently understood as corrosive to a sense of security and thus undermine it. Within ontological security scholarship, such change has typically been associated with forces intensified under globalization and late/liquid modernity, such as mass migration and border weakening, labor insecurity, the erosion of traditional community, technology-driven alienation, and a perceived collapse of space and time via digital media, leading to a common view that we live in a particularly ontologically insecure time (Bauman, 2013; Fukuyama, 2018; Young, 2007). Of course, this is not to say that ontological insecurity is a modern phenomenon itself, but only limited work has attempted to apply its concepts outside of a contemporary context (Rich, 2017), and its effects have intensified dramatically due to the alienating and dislocating effects of late capitalism.

Indeed, technology-driven alienation and a perceived collapse of space and time via digital media have had a complex effect on the development and proliferation of Manosphere content, and, with the increase of online activity and the development of greater online communities, this technological change has played a significant role in centralizing the Manosphere and the disparate groups that form and inform it. Each area of the Manosphere has its own key influencers on YouTube and elsewhere on the internet, and these influencers are incredibly prolific content producers. Due to the ever-expanding nature of the Manosphere on YouTube specifically, for the purposes of this article, we opt to focus on Red Pill content creators broadly, rather than specific PUA, MRA, incel, or MGTOW types. While there are interesting differences between these groups, which often result in arguments and animated debate within and between these communities, it is nonetheless common for someone clicking through recommended videos on YouTube to find their way from an MRA video to one from a PUA through to a MGTOW or incel video (Papadamou et al., 2020). Indeed, many thought leaders frequently appear as guests in each other's videos. For example, Rollo Tomassi (Red Pill) may host an interview with a PUA. Alternatively, Better Bachelor (MGTOW and somewhat of an MRA) might refer to content published by Rollo Tomassi. Further, YouTube studio and group channels, like 21 Studios and the Red Man Group, have hosted a number of Manosphere influencers in dialogue or at conferences, such as Stephen Molyneux, Anthony 'Dream' Johnson, and Elliot Hulse.

Central to the activities of such Manosphere influencers are the ways in which their content, blogs, and especially multimodal resources on platforms such as YouTube provide a way for men to understand the everyday lived crises they experience. These include bitter divorces, battles for custody of children, and a noticeable lack of support services for men who have been sexually, physically, or emotionally abused or who are trying to escape domestic violence. In response to these, Manosphere influencers provide meaningful frameworks, a sense of security, comfort, and community for men who are suffering or who feel undermined and under-represented. Our interest in this study is not to excuse or overlook the misogynistic or violent threats, content, or actions that have become attributable to these sites and figures, but to attempt to 'thread the needle' as it were, taking men's concerns and insecurities seriously, and aiming to understand the sense of meaning, identity, and security that the Manosphere provides them. We believe that it is important to identify how men may be exploited by 'thought leaders' within these online communities who are able to deepen ontological insecurity around such issues towards material gain. Further, we take seriously the questions: what does the 'Manosphere' provide these users? What sense of meaning, routine, or security do the groups and charismatic influencers offer or exploit? To which crises within masculinity and within culture do these influencers respond, and in which ways do they exploit their roles in providing a sense of security to their audience? And what role does financial remuneration, subscription, or support play for Manosphere influencers and their perpetuation of materials, content, and (in)security among their audience?

## Thought leaders within the Manosphere

In what follows, we identify the roles, content-production, and strategies of three ‘thought leaders’ within the Manosphere. We examine the posts, pages, subscriber numbers, and tactics of a selection of three significant influencers who—whether PUA, MRA, MGTOW, or otherwise—variously subscribe to aspects of Red Pill ideology and provide their audience with a sense of leadership, pseudo-paternity, guidance, and camaraderie. Such a review of these thought leaders, we propose, will provide an avenue through which to examine the ways by which the cycle of catastrophic thinking is perpetuated through and among the audience and who, in turn, provide subscription numbers and financial incentives for these leaders to continue producing content which feeds a positive feedback loop that generates insecurity.

It is important to note that this short-list of Manosphere ‘thought leaders,’ whose content we discuss below, is in no way exhaustive, and it should instead be read as indicative and will set the scene for future research that takes the discursive strategies of the Manosphere seriously. Indeed, the difficulties of identifying and defining what constitutes a thought leader within the Manosphere are numerous. For instance, can such ‘leadership’ qualities be judged to which criteria or metric, degree of notoriety, or perceived longevity within the sphere? Further, how or in which ways ought the ‘old guard’ of the Manosphere—for example, those formative, prolific stalwarts who are still active but may not have as many subscribers as their newer or fledgling Red Pill counterparts—be read and interpreted today? What of those who have recently been de-platformed and whose audience or subscriber numbers are unclear to researchers?

It is additionally important to clarify that we elected to examine only the channels and posts of YouTubers whose content is publicly accessible and neither paywalled nor requiring login nor membership to access. Our intention was to only observe content and, accordingly, we did not ‘like,’ ‘comment,’ or ‘subscribe’ to any of the videos or channels. Given the public accessibility of these channels and videos, our research did not require ethical clearance. Indeed, a secondary interest in our research project is with the significance of the very availability and accessibility of these channels and videos—that is, that they are not paywalled and do not require login but are instead open and accessible to their audiences who are invited to freely decide whether to like, subscribe, comment, or provide other social or financial support to these thought leaders. Our examination of their YouTube channels and social media sites was conducted in late October of 2021, and all numbers and figures listed below indicate the numbers of subscribers, views, and uploads by the end of the month.

In selecting the thought leaders for this study, we have opted to not only consider influencers with 100,000 or more YouTube subscribers, but also to consider their respective notoriety, history, and output within the Manosphere. Among an increasing number of online influencers in the Manosphere, standout figures we suggest are identifiable by their charisma, influence, and large subscription or follower numbers who possess a correspondingly large degree of ‘clout’ in the sphere. For instance, we have identified Red Pill writer and YouTuber Rollo Tomassi as one such leader. Tomassi produces long-form YouTube videos and interviews with other Manosphere and Red Pill influencers (these videos typically run for 2-3.5 hours). His Rational Male YouTube channel, which as of October 2021 has 128K subscribers, 305 videos, and 13, 378, 462 views since 2016 (Tomassi also has 82.2K Twitter followers) streams live videos every two or three days which gather between 15-370K views. Tomassi also uploads monologue videos every second or third day. His Livestream videos occasionally include a running chat bar for viewers to post questions or comments, and viewers are encouraged to make in-stream payments directly to his channel. Tomassi is revered within Manosphere channels for his series of books (*The Rational Male*, which are available via Amazon and which he spruiks on his website and YouTube channel), for having popularised the concept of hypergamy.<sup>5</sup> (Tomassi, 2018), and for his incorporation of evolutionary psychology in discussing gender roles and differences, dating, and relationships. For an example of Tomassi’s direct influence on other Manosphere figures, see Richard Cooper’s (aka Entrepreneurs in Cars) 2018 testimonial YouTube video “How Rollo Tomassi & The Rational Male Improved My Life...”

One of the enduring aspects of the Manosphere is a fascination with the entrepreneurial: with being one's own boss, taking control of one's life, and making wise financial and relationship decisions. Richard Cooper, or Entrepreneurs in Cars, provides this focus through his YouTube videos and Unplugged Alpha podcast and book series. Curiously, Cooper does not list his number of subscribers on his Entrepreneurs in Cars YouTube channel (his channel, which, as of October 2021, has 1,038 videos, has gained 90, 385, 555 views since he joined YouTube in 2014), though his second channel, Rich Cooper Clips, has, as of October 2021, 117K subscribers and his 353 videos have received 16, 261, 589 views since the channel opened in 2020. It thus can be assumed that Cooper's main channel has significantly more followers. Cooper's videos run from between 3 minutes to 1-and-a-half hours. On Twitter, Rich Cooper also has 72.6K followers, and his Twitter bio proposes: "I unplug men from comforting lies, with cold, hard, uncomfortable truths about life & women" (@Rich\_Cooper). While initially launched as a channel about luxury cars and entrepreneurship, Cooper "took the red pill" (2021a), as he notes on his website, and his YouTube channel and social media sites became focused on the 'truths' that are hidden from men about women, relationships, divorce, testosterone replacement therapies, and overall lifestyle success. His "Unplugged Alpha" podcast series *Before the Train Wreck* is on Apple Podcasts, and he has several books available via Amazon, including *The Unplugged Alpha: The No Bullsh\*t Guide to Winning with Women & Life*, as well as *Dark Psychology Secrets and Enough is Enough: The DIY Debt Settlement Guide Your Creditors Don't Want You to Know About*, among others.

The Manosphere is also made up of thought leaders and influencers whose concern is not just with men's mental health and mindset but also physical health and wellness. For instance, Men's Right Activist Elliot Hulse's catchphrase, "Make Men Strong Again," is central to his "King Transformation" fitness system, which costs \$997USD. Hulse claims that adherence to his program will allow men to become stronger, more successful, and confident and "command respect from women" (For the full speech, see Hulse, 2020). Across his website and YouTube channel, Hulse provides personal testimonials and biographic backstories to advertise and promote his workout regimen. With 821K subscribers and 901 videos on YouTube which have gathered 100, 818, 732 views since starting the channel in 2012, Hulse has become a popular speaker and figure within the Manosphere and, like Rollo Tomassi, has made appearances at Red Pill and men's rights conventions. Hulse's YouTube uploads run from between 2-25 minutes and address topics around his intolerance of laziness, his advice on pursuing financial success, his dietary and exercise routines, and relationship advice. Like other Manosphere influencers on YouTube, Hulse also interviews and teams up with numerous Manosphere personalities. For instance, he has appeared with "The Certified Health Nut" and wellness 'guru' Troy Casey, who has his own YouTube channel and website where he promotes a reclamation of 'masculinity' and various diet, supplement and exercise tips for wellness (Hulse, 2019).

## Themes of catastrophe and solution

While we acknowledge that a full outline of all the ideas presented by these content creators is beyond the scope of analysis here, it is possible to identify common themes and patterns which are prevalent across their videos and posts regarding threats to masculinity and men, generally. Typically, the themes that emerge from the corpus of Manosphere thought leaders' YouTube videos can be read as fitting one of the following two categories: threat proliferation and threat solution. The first of these themes represents a position that contends a clear binary exists in the social, cultural, and legal environments in which men are threatened, even as they are typically framed as being privileged and holding all of the power in the common consciousness. The second category represents a self-help solution paradigm in which viewers are encouraged to take control of their own lives to cope with the disparity outlined by the themes in the first position and avoid the existential threats to themselves and others.

The first category, in which a binary is set up with the audience and its privileged access to occluded knowledge on one side and the ignorant society on the other, is very much steeped in Red Pill philosophy. These include, for example, the view that women are hypergamous by nature and constantly seeking to maximize their reproductive success with a 'better' man. This is presented as a traumatic contradiction to the Blue Pill idea that most women can be expected to be faithful to a man who is kind, caring, and understanding toward them. In addition, taking the Red



Pill supposedly enables men to understand that the legal system is set up *against* them—for example, various aspects of the manosphere contend that during divorce proceedings, the man can expect the court to work unfairly against him. This is further compounded by the understanding that *culture* is against men; for example, they can be expected to be presented as ‘dead-beat’ fathers by popular media. These ideas maintain conflict between a stereotype of traditional values and modern ideas about gender, relationships, workplace relations, and even workplace conditions and structures and present men and masculinity as under attack and existentially threatened by forces that mainstream society is unable or unwilling to recognize. It is thus a totalizing philosophy and worldview. Most importantly, the framing of these ideas is one in which the content creator is presenting the ideas *to* the audience, for the uninitiated audience to undertake a kind of revelatory experience of understanding this worldview and for the converted to have their understanding of this hidden knowledge reaffirmed.

The second category of themes and ideas in the manosphere, in which audience members are encouraged to take control of their own lives to ensure success (with women, relationships, family, work, health etc.), offers a solution to the problem identified above. By understanding the true nature of a world against him, a Red Pill man apparently can discard the Blue Pill fantasies that are a part of the ‘conditioning’ or brainwashing that keep him in perpetual existential peril. Repeatedly, the audience is informed that they can remain in their existing Blue Pill mindset and suffer or accept Red Pill orthodoxy and follow the path(s) to success outlined by Manosphere content creators. The kind of suffering promised to those who refuse the Red Pill is not simply a future in which the man does not achieve success. Rather, it is a future in which the man is unable to find sex with a woman and fulfill one of the fundamental tenets of masculinity. Moreover, the suffering extends even to the Blue Pill man who does manage to find a partner; he is told that without the Red Pill he will be unable to keep the partner due to his failing as a man and his life will then be destroyed through brutal divorce. The intensity of this failure is presented in existential terms as total life destruction by Manosphere thought leaders.

These two primary thematic categories are immutably connected, with the first positioning the agent as inevitably suffering unless they recognize the state of the world presented to them, which primes them for the second category, which offers a solution to avoid the same suffering and misery. In this latter theme, the disparate subgroups of the Manosphere manifest their ideological divergences. For example, the MGTOW solution to avoiding the suffering of mainstream society is to ‘go their own way’ and avoid women, marriage, etc. Meanwhile, the PUA solution to the changing social conditions is to ‘learn game’ and focus on building social status to not miss out on sexual opportunities. Regardless of their diverse prescriptions, as we show within the context of ontological security, each of these solutions ultimately represents one key step in a broader feedback loop of exploitation between thought leaders and their audiences.

## Ontological Racketeering within the Manosphere

The activities of many thought leaders within the Manosphere can be broadly understood via an ‘identity racketeering’ model within ontological security theory. As we have noted, beyond IR and Sociology, there has been something of a recent renewed interest in ontological security theory in the Social Sciences more generally. Curiously, despite clear potential applications, the theory has only been used in limited instances to explore issues around political extremism, movements, and ideas (Agius, Rosamond, & Kinnvall, 2020; Kaunert, de Deus Pereira, & Edwards, 2020; Morein, 2020; Rich, 2021). In particular, little attention has been paid to how individuals or groups (like content producers in the Manosphere) might deliberately proliferate, instill, and exploit such ontological insecurity in target audiences towards specific cynical ends. Indeed, ontological insecurity has generally been thought to be generated as a passive by-product of social, political, and economic phenomena and conditions, rather than as a tool that can be employed and manipulated proactively and wilfully by conscious actors. Although such intentional approaches may be inferred from certain research and analysis (Agius et al., 2020; Homolar & Scholz, 2019; Steele & Homolar, 2019), it has largely escaped direct consideration in the literature on ontological security.

One exception to this general omission can be found in the work of Rich and MacQueen (2017) in their work exploring the historical relationship between the authoritarian Saudi state and its religious revivalist subjects. Through the application of an ontological security framework, the authors propose a four-stage model of ‘identity racketeering’ whereby:

- A thought leader can exploit, catalyze, focus and securitize (Eroukhmanoff, 2017, p. 104) a series of latent existential anxieties around identity within a given population via various instruments afforded by its power, privilege, and legitimacy vis-à-vis the target audience.
- Having spread ontological insecurity, the actor uses their position of authority in relation to the observers to offer a solution to that same source of threat.
- In so doing, the securitizing agent will also extract resources from the audience in the form of money, materials, social capital, and clout.
- Finally, the thought leader will reinvest some of this capital back into its capacity to promote anxiety in a positive feedback loop around the generation of ontological insecurity.

Although this model was originally built to account for the activities of a state in relation to a large-scale religious movement, its essential components nevertheless possess a degree of transferability to other time periods and contexts involving ontological security. As will be demonstrated below, thought leaders in the Manosphere have demonstrated significant capacity to generate ontological insecurity in their audiences, offer solutions to these insecurities, extract resources through this, and redirect some of these same resources to restart and sustain the process. In particular, drawing upon the ontological threat of change as a potential creator of anxiety (Gustafsson & Krickel-Choi, 2020), this article will identify the Manosphere’s confection of an unstable and changing cultural environment as a key element of its generation of ontological insecurity.

The first element of this process can be seen in how thought leaders draw on and focus latent anxieties in the Manosphere towards a securitized end that presents masculinity in a state of systemic existential threat. Videos put out by the aforementioned leaders commonly possess provocative titles that describe aspects of modern life as a man in a state of siege. Hulse, for example, has put out media with such descriptions as “NEVER Trust What Women Say (Her Actions Reveal Everything!),” “The Satanic Seduction Behind Women,” and “There Are No More Virtuous Women”. Similarly, Tomassi has published content with titles such as “Modern Women Can’t Teach Men,” “Women run the world, Patriarchy is a lie,” and “Women want Mandatory Vasectomies for Beta Males.” Cooper provides similar, with media such as “Single Moms Raising Boys as Girls,” “Why Marriages End When She Makes More Money Than Him,” and “Society Doesn’t Care About Men (And That’s Ok).” Although varied in their particular focus, all such videos make their primary focus catastrophizing the state of men, othering and securitizing women, and proliferating ontological insecurity around the issue of masculinity to the audience. Hulse and Cooper intersperse such content with more innocuous self-help material, with titles such as “How to Read More Books in Less Time,” “Real Estate Tips Post COVID – Should I Buy a House?” while Tomassi spends most of his effort on the aforementioned alarmism.

Stoking ontological insecurity in their audiences, manosphere thought leaders inevitably move to offer a solution to the identified ills. These are not presented as suggestions up for discussion, but as definitive truths by the enlightened and paternal guide. Viewers MUST enact these actions or face ruin as an impotent beta male. Such guidance manifests in multiple formats. Both Cooper and Hulse often provide directions via short clips of approximately one minute, with titles such as “Attracting Women 101,” “Rise to The Top of The Hierarchy,” “STOP Overthinking and TAKE ACTION.” Beyond punchy short takes, all three YouTubers also offer long-form content that engage in deep dives to further elaborate methods of threat mitigation that can last several hours as either video essays starring the individual, or group discussion live streams pulling in guests from the wider Manosphere community. A clear implication throughout all the proffered antidotes to beta status is the need to stay vigilant for inevitable future emergent challenges, the threat of which requires the viewer to remain connected in a para-social

relationship to the thought leader for further guidance. It seems that even if one transcends beta status and becomes an alpha man by deploying Red Pill wisdom in their life, they must then be constantly on their guard for society's (and women's) attempts to topple them. Thus, the threat to one's ontological security is forever renewed, and, as shown below, the avid audience member must listen to another YouTube video, or perhaps buy another online course, or perhaps purchase another ebook.

The solutions to the constructed ontological threat offered by the thought leaders above are not provided altruistically, but inevitably come with an attempt to extract some form of material resource from the audience. As outlined in all their descriptions, Tomassi, Cooper, and Hulse all advertise various books, self-help courses, exclusive communities, and other purchasable media that claim to provide the reader with a method of redressing the sources of ontological insecurity they simultaneously spend their digital careers highlighting. Such materials are not simply promoted in profile descriptions but are often continually cited within discussions of threat by the creators or otherwise embedded as native advertising. Tomassi, for example, features Amazon links to his published books as a footnote border to his short takes. At the same time, Cooper continually refers to his books in his videos, his coaching services, as well as his subscription-based community "The 1 Percent" which promises members greater guidance in actualizing themselves as alphas and proofing themselves against insecurity. Beyond this direct form of extraction, all three of these Manosphere thought leaders monetize their channels through YouTube and, in some instances, have gained sponsorship deals, allowing them to gain passive advertising and promotional revenue from their audiences.

Having extracted resources from their audiences through offers of protection, Manosphere thought leaders can reinvest some profits into their threat promotion activities. This enables them to continue cultivating anxiety, evolving ideas, and sustaining and growing their community base at a high tempo. Between August and September of 2021, for example, Elliot Hulse produced approximately 60 pieces of manosphere content on YouTube. During this same period, Tomassi generated around 10 pieces of content, although these tended to be far longer in length and more complicated in production. Cooper fell between these two poles, with around 20 pieces of content with a wider variance of length and complexity. Having gained resources from offering to cultivate the promised sense of ontological security, the Manosphere thought leaders are then positioned to begin the racketeering cycle anew, thus helping to maintain an environment in which they paradoxically serve as the constructor of threat, as well as a vital alleviator of it for their audiences.

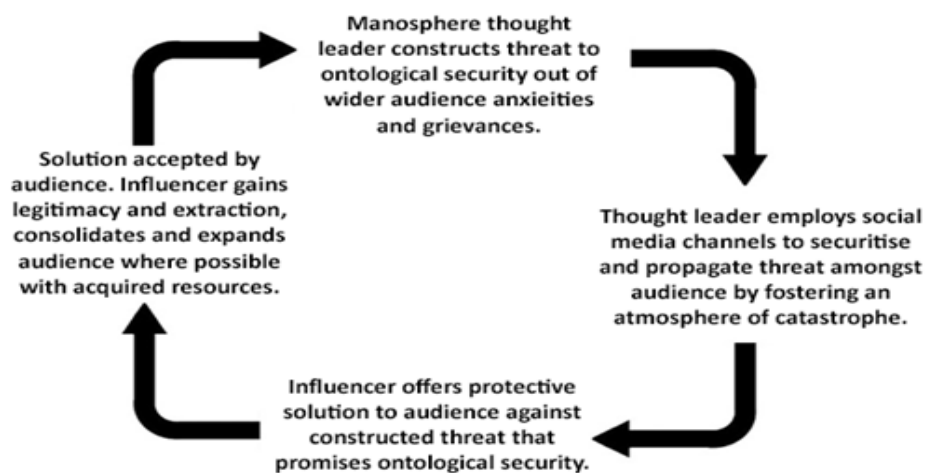


Figure 1: Ontological racketeering within the manosphere.

## A note on neoliberalism and the Manosphere

While this research is primarily focused on the role of the Manosphere influencer or ‘thought leader,’ it would be remiss to avoid reference to the audience and, in particular, to the cultural and systemic framework that positions them as amenable to the content in these thought leaders’ posts. Why is it that audiences are moved by their posts, and why is it that they don’t instead look to other systemic frameworks or structures in making sense of their anxieties and insecurities?<sup>7</sup> In this regard, it is important to consider not only the role that neoliberal capitalism plays in facilitating ontological insecurity but also the ways by which the social effects of neoliberal capitalism have sunk so deeply into our cultural unconscious that it provides both the very logic and the very narratives of success and of failure (for instance see Mirowski’s writing on ‘everyday neoliberalism’) that a Manosphere YouTuber’s audience, or indeed a great many of us in our day-to-day lives, unwittingly use to make sense of or frame our sense of self-worth, identity, and security.

The social and material effects of neoliberal capitalism, certainly, can facilitate disruption, breakdown, and the loss of identity and routine and can provoke a sense that the world is in a state of disorder—these, the principles of ontological insecurity, we have already discussed in our examination of ontological security theory and the Manosphere. As we have noted previously, the breakdown of community, the proliferation of precarity (in housing and employment), the privatization and dissolution of social services, increasing atomization, and the imperative to work and spend time online are all real-world symptoms of neoliberal/late capitalism that can and do produce insecurity and instability in people’s daily lives. However, for Philip Mirowski, this is a system that has not only been rendered invisible and seemingly non-ideological, but it is also a system wherein neoliberal capitalist solutions are the go-to in addressing the very problems that neoliberal capitalism has produced: it is a system that “offers more, better neoliberalism as the counter to sputtering neoliberalism, all the while disguising any acknowledgment of that fact” (Mirowski, 2014, p. 92).

Increasingly, the popular means of addressing precarity, isolation, and insecurity have, within a neoliberal capitalist framework, come to take up the individualist imperative that one only needs to better self-manage, to self-improve, to ‘entrepreneurialise,’ rather than, say, take up political action—a trend that Christopher Lasch has discussed since the late 1970s and a common theme, as we have noted, in Manosphere posts that are framed, albeit within a Red Pill logic, through the language of self-help. Against the threat of an incoherent world, a disrupted sense of routine and identity, the ‘entrepreneurial individual’—the competitive, self-expressing, risk-bearing individual—becomes the iconic story of neoliberal success. Indeed, for Jodi Dean, the neoliberal dictum of ‘enjoyment’ through which we are enjoined to self-fashion our individual success and betterment or risk failure, has become the imperative of our time: “*I must be fit; I must be stylish; I must realize my dreams. I must because I can – everyone wins. If I don’t, not only am I loser, but I am not a person at all; I am not part of everyone*” (Dean, 2008, p. 62). In this way, it is perhaps unsurprising that Manosphere content producers spruik neoliberal capitalist solutions to the insecurities this same system produces, where, in response to the perceived loss of ‘traditional’ male identities and ‘qualities,’ the breakdown of routines (say, through a divorce), men are instructed on how to improve their entrepreneurialism and excellence; their individualist, Alpha/Sigma-mindset; their financial or physical or romantic successes (be it through exercise regimens or ‘pick-up’ advice); their acquisition of material goods like cars or properties. Rich Cooper Clips, for instance, posts a number of videos that identify the ‘traits’ of the ‘top’ 5% men—again, the figure of the neoliberal entrepreneur who, unquestionably, is presented as a subject of desire both for their male audience (to be) and for women (to have). Whether or not their audience members really want to develop these ‘traits’—to be entrepreneurial, to have the 1.62 hip-to-shoulder ‘golden ratio,’ to instrumentalize relationships with women—such Manosphere videos are predicated nevertheless on the seemingly unquestionable assumption that these ‘traits’ are not only demonstrative of (an abstract idea of) success but also that by taking the Red Pill and adhering to new routines, attitudes and regimens, their audience too, can secure themselves against the insecurities that affect their lives.

## Conclusion

Through this paper, we have outlined the ways that three Manosphere ‘thought leaders’—charismatic and influential individuals—employ social media platforms like YouTube to generate and catalyze a series of latent existential anxieties around male and masculine identity within their audiences. Subsequently, these influencers variously promote their own books, online courses, in-person retreats, workshops, online video-conference services, vitamins and supplements, exercise regimens, and podcasts and video series as a panacea to these same ills. These thought leaders, we have argued, cultivate ontological insecurity in their audiences around issues of masculinity, securitizing issues around transforming gender roles, male virility, loneliness and isolation, relationships, and the effects of feminism on modern society. Their use of online platforms like YouTube provides Manosphere influencers enormous outreach in fostering and maintaining an audience and in continuing ‘business as usual’ even during periods of lockdown or social distancing. Audiences are also increasingly savvy to the possibilities afforded these influencers and to the significance of the capacity for such outreach. For instance, as one YouTube commenter noted in response to Elliot Hulse’s address at The 21 Convention conference in Florida in 2020:

*The big difference we have between the time we are living in now and civilizations that crumbled in the past is that now we have the ability to communicate with one another on a global scale. Like antibodies fighting off an infection, the Red Pill has sprung up as a response to this cultural Marxism. Thanks to the internet, we have the ability to reach millions of men and fight the decline in ways that the people of ancient Rome never could. By promoting men and masculinity, I think we can pull ourselves out of the decline. (Made by an anonymous commenter on Hulse, 2020)*

The potential for Manosphere influencers to conduct business at a global scale—to engage their audience within a complex cycle of insecurity and re-security and perpetuate an unresolvable tension that has significant flow-on effects in shaping culture and society—is noteworthy in ongoing research and analyses of this online space. In this paper, we have made a small step towards addressing this by examining the reach and popularity of a select number of Manosphere thought leaders and how their ideas can sustain and proliferate. However, in taking such an approach, we have endeavored to remain transparent about the limitations that arise in identifying or discussing Manosphere thought leaders. In devising further research, it will be imperative to address several other questions in locating and anchoring discussion: in particular, examining how individuals gain enough legitimacy to become thought leaders, exploring the ways that an individual might fall out of being a thought leader, and examining how ideas in the manosphere appear to exist in parallel to wider critiques of capitalist alienation, yet never seem to coalesce with them.

In closing out this discussion, we propose that the use of ontological security theory also offers an alternative understanding of how to detach people caught in cycles of the Manosphere—that attacking the ideology directly or attempting to disprove individuals may not be as effective as providing alternative means of achieving a sense of ontological security. As we have argued in this article, while these ‘thought leaders’ offer apparent solutions to the source of consternation that they have constructed, the responses they provide also serve to perpetuate anxieties in a positive feedback loop, which lead to ongoing audience engagement, subscription and often payment—in short, extraction. Indeed, they reaffirm the status quo that they propose to challenge: that, for instance, it is not systemic issues like the neoliberal culture of insecure work, or the lack of social and crisis support services for men under the privatising state that is destroying relationships or undermining men’s sense of security, but is instead located in the natural system around women’s ‘innate hypergamy’ which, according to Red Pill logic, is socially condoned through a mainstream feminist agenda and ultimately is inescapable (Tomassi, 2021a). Much of the appeal of the Red Pill and indeed, much of the appeal of these Manosphere thought leaders specifically, is their apparent ability to ‘remove’ a shroud from their audience’s eyes to reveal an occluded misandrist inequality that persists in plain sight of the unenlightened. However, this very framing of Red Pill ‘knowledge’ as secretive and as being concealed by women (Tomassi, 2018) or by broader society (Van Valkenburgh, 2021), and the security apparently afforded through the revelation the Red Pill provides, reinforces the Manosphere and men as perpetually marginalized and sidelined from women and the mainstream. In doing so, it functions to reaffirm the ongoing catastrophism that

circulates in the Manosphere and which is simultaneously promulgated by, and profited from, these influencers, ironically leaving audiences in a state of ontological vulnerability.

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## Endnotes

1 Men who have achieved top social and sexual status and thus receive respect, admiration, and sex from women. Generally theorized to constitute around 20 percent of the male population.

2 Men who make up the bulk of society, doing what they have been told to do and because of this do not receive respect, admiration, or sex from women.

3 For example, during natural disasters or wartime, the aforementioned routine-linked identities of 'father' or 'homeowner' provide the agent a set of specific tasks and objectives by which to navigate said crises, rather than just be beholden to them – "I must save my children" or "I must protect my land."

4 It is worth noting that incels have also come to largely embrace another 'pill' entirely: 'Black Pill' philosophy, a nihilistic 'pill' that rearticulates the Red Pill concept of a social hierarchy that privileges women, but it is a 'pill' that secures men in only their sense of genetic inferiority and their inability to ever find love or happiness (Preston, Halpin, & Maguire, 2021, p. 4). It is important, however, to note that there is disagreement between incel groups concerning the significance of the 'Black Pill' and, indeed, there are incel groups that reject and attempt to debunk the 'Black Pill' (see, Scientific Anti-Black Pill (Incel Wiki, 2021) versus the Scientific Black Pill (Incels Wiki, 2021)).

5 The idea is that in a post-feminist world, the majority of women only seek sexual gratification from the top twenty percent of men.

6 Often emphasized by the deliberate bolding of specific words in titles.

7 Where the Manosphere does draw on a critical discourse, it is typically by way of a co-option of discursive framing and phrasing. It will, for instance, identify the systemic inequality affecting men's lives as feminism (consider, for example, the popular refrain that, as a result of the mainstreaming of feminism, women now 'steal' men's jobs).

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# Cultural Politics and the Crisis of Education and Political Agency

Henry A. Giroux

## Education in the Age of Fascist Politics

The political war on education is now a central project of the menacing thrust toward authoritarianism in the United States. What is new is that the specter of fascism consists of both a right-wing attack to control and eliminate public and higher education as democratic public spheres and the waging of a full-scale attack on those elements of education that enable young people and others to become informed and critical citizens. This is a deeply anti-democratic movement increasingly embraced by states controlled by the Republican Party. The ideological thrust of this war on education is evident in recent remarks by Larry Arnn, president of Hillsdale College, who stated that “Teaching is our trade; also, I confess, it’s our weapon” (Joyce 2022b). He has also stated that “the philosophic understanding at the heart of modern education is enslavement” (Strauss 2022).

Hillsdale was at the forefront of Trump’s unreservedly propagandistic 1776 Commission, “established to create a ‘patriotic education’ alternative to contemporary scholarship on American racial history” (Strauss *ibid*). Valerie Strauss observes that the tendentious curriculum released in 2021 by the commission “equated American progressives with European fascists” and denied that “the founding fathers were hypocrites for enslaving people while calling for equality in the nation’s founding documents” (Strauss *ibid*). It should be noted that Florida Governor Ron DeSantis once introduced Larry Arnn as “one of the most important people living” (Ceballos and Sommer Brugal 2022). At the heart of this war on American education waged by Hillsdale and its GOP allies have been efforts to privatize public schools, ban books, ban curriculum, eliminate teaching about racism and the history of slavery, and denigrate teachers, school boards, and librarians. Kathryn Joyce (2022a), writing in *Salon*, points to a particularly vicious and dangerous contemporary example of this type of attack on libraries in Oklahoma and Wisconsin. She writes:

The 2022 legislation [in Oklahoma and Wisconsin] includes a lot more mandatory punishment. Oklahoma’s pending bill gives parents the right to object to any book in a public school library. If that book isn’t removed within 30 days, the librarian must be fired and cannot be rehired for two years, and the complainant is eligible for \$10,000 a day in damages until the book is removed. In Wisconsin, there are monetary damages up to \$50,000. It’s obvious these measures are designed to cripple public education. (Joyce 2022a). Hillsdale College’s attack on public education has become symptomatic of a larger conservative movement in Florida, Tennessee, and other right-wing controlled states to build a network of “classical” charter schools,” whose curricula are organized around “Judeo-Christian principles” designed to help students acquire a mature love for America” (Joyce *ibid*). Rooted in a rigid ideological and hyper-nationalistic project, it embraces Western civilization, Christian values, and the alleged great books as the only source of established knowledge. The Hillsdale model of education reinforces a colonial religious fundamentalist mindset with an appeal to white Christian nationalism, both of which are part of a larger goal of erasing “the separation between church and state while

push[ing] Christian values into the public sector.” (Strauss 2022). Fundamental to this reactionary fascist project is the notion that critical education and all forms of progressivism are anti-American. Its ideological and political project amounts to a fascist attack on the political, pedagogical, and cultural conditions that allow conscience, morality, and justice to catch up with reality. For example, Christopher Rufo, who has been attributed with convincing the Republican Party to attack critical race theory, has stated the latter is part of “a deliberate strategy to alienate communities from their local schools.” He has also argued that in order to privatize public schools and universalize school choice, it is necessary to promote among the American public “a premise of universal public-school distrust” (Joyce 2022c). Rufo and Hillsdale College are not alone in producing the Nazification of American education. Conservative think tanks such as the Heritage Foundation and the Manhattan Institute and far-right networks such as Fox News are deeply involved in what Rufo told Michelle Goldberg, a columnist for *The New York Times*, was an ongoing “strategy of laying siege” to public and higher education in America. (Goldberg 2021).

A number of writers, politicians, and academics have warned that these repressive educational policies strengthened the far-right’s efforts to push America into the abyss of an upgraded version of fascist politics. What is even more disturbing is the simultaneous crisis of political agency, historical consciousness, and the breakdown of civic responsibility that has made it possible for the threat against democracy to reach such a perilous moment. Politics in education in the US is no longer grounded in a mutually informing regard for both its citizens and the institutions that provide for their well-being, freedoms, and a vast array of civic rights. In the midst of this widespread assault on education, there is the collapse of conscience and the breakdown of politics as the foundation for a democratic society. What we are witnessing is a full-fledged neo-fascist revival of social domination in the schools, one that finds its counterparts in the right-wing control of the GOP, the courts, and the political system.

### Education and the Struggle over Agency

If the current move towards upgraded fascism in both the United States and across the globe is to be resisted and overcome, it is crucial to develop a new language and understanding regarding how matters of education, agency, identity, and consciousness are shaped in terms that are both repressive and emancipatory. This suggests that the struggle over the relationship between education and the production of agency cannot be separated from the struggle over consciousness, power, identity, and politics. Also at work here is the recognition that politics is defined as much by the educational force of culture as it is by traditional markers of society such as economics, laws, political institutions, and the criminal justice system. The poison of bigotry, anger, hatred, and racism are learned and cannot be removed from matters of culture, education, and the institutions that trade in shaping identities and consciousness.

A long tradition of theoreticians and politicians ranging from Antonio Gramsci, Louis Althusser, and Raymond Williams to Stuart Hall and Vaclav Havel have argued that culture is not a secondary but fundamental dimension of society and politics. Moreover, they have all stated in different terms that politics follows culture in that it is the pedagogical baseline for how subjectivities are formed and inhabited. Theorists such as Paulo Freire and Stanley Aronowitz have rightly argued that matters of agency, subjectivity, and culture should be a starting point for understanding both the politics that individuals inhabit and how the most repressive forms of authoritarianism become internalized and normalized. As Leon Wieseltier acknowledges, people in a time of adversity and personal suffering “turn not to economics but to culture,” to the world of words and identity in order to “see saviors, not programs” (Wieseltier 2016). Havel was particularly prescient in recognizing that power in the twentieth century has been transformed, especially in light of the merging of culture and modern technologies such as the internet and social media. In light of this transformation, he stated that power was inseparable from culture and that it was:

grounded in an omnipresent ideological fiction which can rationalize anything without ever having to brush against the truth. [In addition, he states that] the power of ideologies, systems, apparatus, bureaucracy, artificial

languages, and political slogans [have reshaped] the horizons of our existence...We must resist its complex and wholly alienating pressure, whether it takes the form of consumption, advertising, repression, technology, or cliché — all of which are the blood brothers of fanaticism and the wellspring of totalitarian thought depriv[ing] us — rulers as well as the ruled — of our conscience, of our common sense and natural speech and thereby, of our actual humanity. (Havel 1985)

The role of culture as an educational force raises important, if often ignored, questions about the relationship between culture and power on the one hand and politics and agency on the other. For instance, what ideological and structural mechanisms are at work in corrupting the social imagination, infantilizing a mass public, prioritizing fear over shared democratic values, and transforming robust forms of political agency into an abyss of depoliticized followers? What forces created the conditions in which individuals are willing to give up their ability, if not will, to discern lies from the truth, good from evil? How are such pathologies produced and nourished in the public spaces, cultural apparatuses, and modes of education that shape meaning, identities, politics, and society in the current historical moment? What role does a culturally produced civic illiteracy play as a depoliticizing force, and what are the institutions that produce it? What forms of slow violence create the conditions for the collapse of democratic norms? Crucial to such questions is the need to recognize not only the endpoint of the collapse of democracy into a fascist state but also what the tools of power are that make it possible. At the same time, important questions need to be raised regarding the need for developing a language capable of understanding how these underlying paralyzing conditions work in the service of authoritarianism and how they are being sustained even more aggressively today to the benefit of a totalitarian state in the making. Language in the interest of social change and justice must be reinvented and function as a mode of critique and militant possibility. In part, this suggests the necessity for a language of informed resistance in which education becomes central to politics and furthers the efforts to create the conditions for new and more democratic forms of agency and collective struggle.

It is important to note that I am not suggesting that language is the only basis for power. Power is more expansive than language and also present in the institutions, economic forms, and material relations in which language is produced, legitimated, constrained, and empowered. It is important to note that language has a dialectical quality in that it is both the source of symbolic power and a product of material relations of power. In terms of its relationship to cultural politics, language is defined through notions of literacy, civic culture, and shifting symbolic and material contexts. Matters of language and civic literacy cannot be either instrumentalized or stripped of the power of self-determination, critical agency, and self-reflection. At its core and against the discourse of authoritarianism, cultural politics should be addressed from the point of view of emancipation—enabled through a discourse about education, power, agency, and their relationship to democracy. Cultural politics should be acknowledged and defended as a pedagogical project that is part of a broader political offensive in the fight for a radical democracy and its sustaining institutions.

What we are witnessing in the United States is not merely a threat to democracy but a modernized and dangerous expression of right-wing extremism that is a prelude to a full-blown version of fascist politics. One crucial starting point for mass resistance is articulated by Paul Morrow, who references Hannah Arendt, argues that authoritarian societies do “everything possible to uncouple beliefs from action, conviction from action” (cited in Morrow 2014). Any struggle for resistance must create pedagogical conditions that address the connection between agency and action. The great Frederick Douglass understood this when he stated that knowledge makes a man unfit... to be a slave” (Douglas 2003). While it is generally accepted that power cannot be divorced from knowledge, it is often forgotten that this suggests that agency is the central political category here and that at the heart of authoritarianism is the uniformed individual, an often isolated and depoliticized subject who has relinquished their agency to the cult of the strongman. This means acknowledging the power of cultural politics to connect one’s ideas and beliefs to those vital human needs, desires, and hopes that will persuade people to assert their voices and actions in the building of a new mass movement and a democratic socialist society.

There are three cultural topographies central to analyzing the emergence of an upgraded form of fascist politics in the United States. First, there is the discourse of illiberal democracy, especially as developed in Hungary, which is now informing the politics of the Republican Party and used to legitimate a range of repressive policies. Second, there is the issue of how the racially charged discourse of “Great Replacement Theory” fans the flames of white supremacy and legitimates a range of repressive fascist policies in Florida under the rule of Governor DeSantis. (cf. Filkins 2022, Boot 2022). Third, there is the issue of the ongoing Nazification of American education and its influence in replicating an approach to education used by the Nazis. Relatedly, there is the issue of how it functions to repress historical consciousness and produces educational policies and practices that crush the capacities necessary for young people and others to become knowledgeable and critical citizens.

### **The Organization of Fascist Politics in the Age of White Replacement Theory**

The mobilizing passions of fascism are once again with us, evident in the emergence of diverse regimes of predatory repression and exclusion that increasingly legitimate their hatred of democracy through appeals to a notion of illiberal democracy—a project that calls for the elimination of freedom, dissent, and justice as essential elements of political life, if not democracy itself. Of particular importance is the growing attraction of nationalist Viktor Orbán, the prime minister of Hungary, to conservatives in the United States. Orbán’s popularity is due to his disdain for democracy and his use of political power to implement a range of reactionary policies, especially his belief that “there is a liberal plot to dilute the white populations of the US and European countries through immigration.” (Garamvolgyi and Borger 2022). Expressing a notion of white replacement theory embraced by much of the Republican Party leadership, he has argued that “the western world was ‘committing suicide’ through immigration,” and has declared: “I see the great European population exchange as a suicidal attempt to replace the lack of European, Christian children with adults from other civilizations — migrants” (Garamvolgyi and Borger *ibid*). Orbán’s notion of the nation is purposely at odds with the democratic principles of freedom and equality because they are incompatible with a nation that defines itself assertively through the logic of white supremacy and racial purity.

Orbán has declared war on liberal democracy and, in doing so, appeals not only to anti-communists, right-wing Christians, nativists, and homophobes, but he also provides a model of Christian nationalism for those conservatives in the United States, such as Donald Trump, who want to hollow out liberal democracy from the inside (Tharoor 2022a). Orbán’s notion of “illiberal democracy” is a laboratory for an updated form of fascism and trades in corruption, corporate cronyism, repression, religious fundamentalism, the control of the media, hatred of refugees, a war on women, transgender people, and an attack on critical education and advocates of climate change (cf. Hartmann 2022a, Tharoor 2022c, Joyce 2022d). The historian Heather Richardson lucidly captures the anti-democratic elements at work in Orbán’s notion of “illegal democracy” (Richardson 2022b). She writes:

Orbán is the architect of what he calls “illiberal democracy,” or “Christian democracy.” This form of government holds nominal elections, although their outcome is preordained because the government controls all the media and has silenced opposition. Illiberal democracy rejects modern liberal democracy because the equality it champions means an acceptance of immigrants, LGBTQ rights, and women’s rights and an end to traditionally patriarchal society. Orbán’s model of minority rule promises a return to a white-dominated, religiously based society, and he has pushed his vision by eliminating the independent press, cracking down on political opposition, getting rid of the rule of law, and dominating the economy with a group of crony oligarchs. (Richardson 2022b)

What attracts American conservatives to Orbán is both his frontal attack on democracy and the methods he uses to consolidate power. As a populist authoritarian, he has become a global spokesperson for pathologizing democracy through a concerted and systemic appeal to white replacement theory. Orbán’s support for white nationalism, reactionary family values, and homophobia, among other regressive issues, has translated into a range

of discriminatory policies designed to make social pariahs out of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people. As Ishaan Tharoor has noted, Orbán has “banned adoption by same-sex couples ... made it impossible for transgender people to legally change their gender [and] passed a law that prohibited sharing content with minors seen as promoting homosexuality or sex reassignment” (Tharoor 2022b). In addition, he has waged an attack on schools by implementing “provisions restricting education on homosexuality and establishing a searchable registry of convicted pedophiles” (Tharoor *ibid*).

Echoing fascists of the 1930s, Orbán has created a phantom set of enemies that include alleged threats from left-oriented intellectuals, communists, socialists, people of color, and those groups whose sexual orientation challenges white Christian notions of identity. Under Orbán, white replacement theory has become an ideological and cultural apparatus used to weaponize racial fears and legitimate a wide range of related assaults on education, the law, the press, LGBTQ individuals, progressive books, and corporations that support racial equity women’s reproductive rights, fair elections, and the most vital set of beliefs and values that are crucial to creating the informed citizens necessary to sustain a strong democracy. Orbán’s racist policies provide a direct link to the modern radical Republican Party, white supremacist pundits, reactionary journalists, and conservative educators in the United States who want to turn the United States into a hard-right oligarchy. Orbán has become a hero for those radical Republican politicians and their followers in the United States who believe in racial cleansing, view violence as a tool of political opportunism, use the state to crush their enemies, and promote an anti-democratic consolidation of power. With Orbán in power, they no longer have to take their cues, often hidden, from relevant fascist examples offered in the first half of the 20th century. They now have Orbán to provide them with an updated fascist playbook.

### **The Plague of White Replacement Theory**

While white replacement theory has a long history in the United States and Europe, it has taken on a new urgency given its compatibility with growing fascist politics and militant white nationalism. White replacement theory has become a central tenet of the modern Republican Party, which argues that white people as an alleged “native population” are being replaced by undocumented immigrants, Muslims, and others considered outside of the acceptable parameters of whiteness. Moreover, it is increasingly supported by prominent Republican officials, pundits, and media celebrities such as Fox News’ Tucker Carlson (*cf.* Bump 2022, Bort 2021, Blow 2021). Carlson may be the most prominent advocate of the white replacement theory, given that he has an audience of over 3 million viewers and is host to one of the highest-rated and most-watched cable news programs in the United States. He saturates media space with racist, anti-government rants and calls white supremacy a hoax while defending white replacement theory knowing full well that it was used as a rallying cry for a Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville in 2017 (*cf.* Blest 2021, Cole 2021). The rally was organized by white nationalists and white supremacist groups, including neo-Nazis and Ku Klux Klan members. The marchers chanted slogans reminiscent of rallies held in Nazi Germany by the Hitler Youth, in which they shouted, “Blood and soil!” “You will not replace us!” “Jews will not replace us!” (Heim 2017).

Trump won the presidency in 2016 by bashing immigrants and referencing the public sphere as the privileged space of white Christian nationalism. As Judd Legum has reported, J.D. Vance, the Republican nominee for a 2022 US Senate seat in Ohio, willingly endorsed Trump’s racism by asserting “that Democrats were plotting to let in 15 million additional immigrants because they were confident that 70% would vote Democratic” (Legum 2022). This racist sentiment was repeated by the notorious Texas Lt Governor Dan Patrick, who stated on Fox News that Biden and the Democrats were “trying to take over our country without firing a shot” by allowing millions of immigrants to enter the country. He went on to repeat a central tenet of white replacement theory by claiming that Biden’s policies not only encourage immigrants to come to the US in order to vote for the Democrats but that they will have “two or three children,” adding up to millions of new voters who will take power away from the Republican Party (Legum *ibid*). Orbán’s view of white replacement theory is alive and well in the United States and is endorsed

by a growing range of American politicians in order to both dehumanize non-Christians and non-whites and, in doing so, expel them from any claim to what it means to be an American.

There is more at stake here than a racist discourse that sets up a conflict between racial groups in the United States; there is also a counter-revolutionary movement that denies the “victories of the civil rights, women, and gay rights movements” (Collins 2022). As Adam Tooze observes, this was a movement that began in the seventies and got more radicalized in the 1990s with the rise of the Tea Party and the emergence of Republicans such as “Newt Gingrich and Karl Rove all of which set the tone for a bare-knuckle, brawling style rooted in a friend/enemy world view, white nationalism, the legitimation of violence for political ends, and deep-rooted racism, particularly aimed at the first Black president (cf. Tooze 2019, Peters 2019, DiMaggio 2011a, DiMaggio 2011b). All of these conditions helped set the tone not only for a deep distrust of government responsibility but also set the conditions for the rise of Donald Trump.

This counter-revolutionary movement, then and now, is not merely a struggle over language and ideals. There is also the dangerous notion of racial displacement that fuels violence against those individuals and groups considered responsible for taking the place of whites. As Juliette Kayyem observes, the notion of violence at work here is not just about censoring and erasing “the ideas, or politics, or voting patterns” but about eliminating the very presence of those groups that threaten the power and presence of whites (Kayyem 2022). As has been observed in the mainstream media, the white replacement theory, with its claim that whites are being replaced and threatened by immigrants and people of color, has motivated a number of mass shooters ranging from Dylan Roof to Payton Gendron. White replacement theory has animated them not only to espouse white supremacist views but also the belief that they are foot soldiers in a civil war to protect the existence of white people, if not white civilization itself. One of the most publicized events in which white replacement theory took place and later mentioned in compromising language by then-President Trump took place at a 2017 “Unite the right” rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, where torch-carrying white nationalists and neo-Nazis chanted “you will not replace us” and “Jews will not replace us.” In response to the rally, Trump stated that there were “very fine people on both sides,” a position he still defends (Coaston 2019).

### **Florida is the New Hungary**

Authoritarianism is not merely on the march in Europe and other places in the world. It has secured a strong and dangerous footing in the United States. While the growing fascist threat in America has been made clear by a number of academics and journalists, extending from historians such as Jason Stanley, Timothy Snyder, Ruth Ben-Ghiat to Paul Street, Chris Hedges, and Anthony DiMaggio, to name only a few, what has received too little attention is how the American appropriation of white replacement theory with its fascist undercurrents is producing a range of repressive state policies, many based on Orbán’s governing model. For instance, Orbán’s Hungary has become an exemplar, if not a right-wing utopia, for many conservative politicians, especially Gov. Ron DeSantis. One conservative commentator, Rod Dreher, went so far as to claim that “Florida is becoming our American Hungary” (cited in Tharoor 2022b). Thom Hartmann asserts that “Orbán’s Fidesz Party and the GOP in most Red States have become virtually indistinguishable, from cronies owning the media, to packing the courts, to rigging elections through purging voters and gerrymanders, to putting polluting businesses in charge of regulatory agencies” (Hartmann 2022b). Zach Beauchamp adds to this view writing in Vox claims that “DeSantis is inventing what he calls an “American Orbánism and that “there is no doubt that Hungary, an authoritarian state in all but name, is becoming more and more important in the American right-wing imagination.” (Beauchamp 2022).

Both Orbán and DeSantis have their sights set on the American federal government, with Orbán now inserting himself into American Republican politics in a big way. Such claims are borne out by the fact that DeSantis has taken a number of lessons from Orbán. For instance, he signed the so-called “Don’t Say Gay” bill banning “classroom instruction by school personnel or third parties on sexual orientation or gender identity” up through

third grade.” By cracking down on LGBTQ rights, he expands his war against the youth of color by including another vulnerable population. He also mimics Orbán’s tactic of using state power to punish critics, corporations, educators, and others considered alleged enemies of the right. This is particularly clear in DeSantis’s attack on the Walt Disney Corporation. In retaliation for Walt Disney’s belated opposition to the “Don’t Say Gay” law, DeSantis passed a law terminating the self-governing privileges, special tax regulations, and legal status held by Disney World in Orlando for 55 years. In going to war against Disney and transgender people, DeSantis follows in Orbán’s footsteps of intimidating corporations and groups that refuse to follow his fascist agenda. Just as Orbán wields the power of the state to punish businesses “for not falling in line with his brutal and discriminatory attacks” (Glueck and Robles 2022), DeSantis is using the political power of the state to punish not only Disney but other corporations such as Google and Coca-Cola, all of whom refused to buy into his racist and discriminatory policies.

DeSantis is also punishing the people of Florida, mostly Democratic Party voters in Osceola and Orange County, who will be held responsible for “Disney’s \$2 billion bond debt, which translates into “a 20% to 25% tax hike costing \$2,200 to \$2,800 per family of four [while also picking up] the tab for the operating services that Disney currently provides” (Richardson 2022a). The attack on Disney, in particular, is also part of DeSantis’s attempt to make the false claim that the GOP is protecting their kids from the bogus claim of grooming them for sexual violence. Such attacks are part of the GOP’s broader culture of fear that instructs white Christians to protect themselves not only against Black people, undocumented immigrants, Muslims, people of color, and women defending their reproductive rights, but also trans-gender youth who are now relegated to the status of social pariahs. DeSantis’s attack on transgender youth is particularly vicious because the supporters of the Don’t Say gay bills have adopted the shocking strategy of claiming that supporters of the bill are both sympathetic of pedophiles and “grooming” children to be gay or question their gender” (Bronski 2022).

Ironically, this type of pernicious discourse is put forth by Republicans in the name of protecting children when in fact, it serves to terrorize them, their families, and their caregivers (Strangio 2022). Journalist Will Bunch (2022b) wrote in *The Philadelphia Inquirer* that the GOP’s expanding war on LGBTQ children not only channels hatred against these youth but is creating the conditions for mass violence. One high-profile example of the potential for such violence, while prevented, took place in Idaho on June 12, 2022. On that date, the police arrested thirty-one people linked to the white nationalist group, the Patriot front. The group, armed with metal poles, and a smoke grenade, was on its way to disrupt an annual Pride in the Park event to celebrate gay and lesbian people. The police charged the group with conspiracy to riot. Natasha Lennard writing in *The Intercept*, pointed out that “Earlier this month, self-described “Christian fascists” attempted to force their way into an LGBTQ+ bar in Dallas, Texas, which was hosting a family-friendly drag queen brunch for Pride. The fascists threatened attendees, chanting that the adults were “groomers” — a dangerous, dated trope once again gaining furious traction in right-wing media” (Lennard 2022). Will Bunch provides two terrifying examples of how the Christian fascist insurgency is creating the conditions for deadly violence against schoolteachers who support transgender rights. He writes:

We are now seeing a dangerous loop in which the most extreme voices on the far right — led, ironically, by so-called pastors — are making genocidal comments about our brothers and sisters in the LGBTQ community. . . . The increasingly dangerous, violent rhetoric has been amplified to “11” by the likes of Mark Burns, a prominent South Carolina televangelist and Donald Trump enthusiast who just ran for Congress (and lost, thankfully) and who said this month that LGBTQ-friendly schoolteachers are “a national security threat” guilty of treason, which should be punishable by execution. In Idaho, where that Pride parade violence was narrowly averted, Pastor Joe Jones of Shield of Faith Baptist Church in Boise kicked things up a notch by declaring in a video that subsequently went viral: “God told the nation that he ruled: Put them to death. Put all queers to death.” (Bunch 2022b)

DeSantis, along with Governor Gregg Abbott of Texas, are on the frontlines of a barrage of hate-filled



homophobic language and punitive bills aimed at trans individuals and LGBTQ rights more broadly. These are policies that echo the genocidal discourse of Nazi Germany. DeSantis is an especially dangerous politician who echoes Orbán's embrace of a radicalized notion of white Christianity, a regressive notion of family values, and the use of the state to punish groups, corporations, and institutions that he views as a threat to his power. His association with Orbán's policies is important to stress because it not only reveals the deeply fascist politics in Hungary that he mimics but also provides a blueprint of how Orbán's white replacement theory and brand of authoritarianism is being implemented in the United States. Commenting on DeSantis's danger to the United States, the liberal commentator for *New York Magazine* states that "He has ignored the slice of Republicans who disdain Trump's authoritarianism and courted anti-vaxxers, QAnon believers, and insurrectionists. And he has demonstrated repeatedly a 'no enemies to the right' strategy that inevitably binds him to the party's most fanatical elements" (Chait 2022).

DeSantis's fascist politics and feral contempt for democracy are not just an effort to score campaign points. It is part of a larger project to move the country to an authoritarian state. The attacks on trans people and transgender children are fueled by an expansive notion of white replacement theory that has become the signature narrative to legitimate a range of regressive policies to ensure the concentration of economic, political, and social power in the hands of white Americans. This is a version of white supremacy based on unadulterated fear, one committed to the mobilizing passions of racism, disposability, religious fundamentalism, and racial cleansing. It is rooted in a view of hyper-masculinity that celebrates violence as a crucial element of virility, identity, and agency. It also believes that anyone who does not live up to this masculine code is weak, feminized, and a threat to white Christians. White replacement theory offers the central trope in asserting and acting on the merging of the charge of weakness and impurity with the call to violence.

If DeSantis mirrors a larger version of global fascism, he has created his own model for destroying those institutions that create the conditions for individuals to be critically engaged citizens. DeSantis is one of the larger players in a Republican Party rooted in the politics of retrenchment, a politics embedded in fear, bigotry, and hatred, which is attempting to rewrite history in the image of a militant Confederacy, the fascist politics of the 1930s, and the racist 1950s. Under the reign of the modern Republican Party, the merging of historical amnesia and repressive forms of education have become the major tools in which to produce the language of white supremacy. At stake here is an ongoing attempt to reproduce and legitimate the lie that America is a white nation and that citizenship is exclusively reserved for white Christians.

DeSantis has become a success story and a bellwether for where this fascist project is heading, revealed most recently in the far-right 2020 platform produced by the Texas GOP state party. Setting a hate-filled and racist tone for going into the 2022 election and the presidential race of 2024, the platform embodied an extremist agenda tantamount to what Will Bunch writing in *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, termed "a strikingly antebellum feel" (Bunch 2022a). Among its shamelessly racist and homophobic declarations were the following: the repeal of the Voting rights act of 1965; defining homosexuality as "an abnormal lifestyle choice;" "rejecting the certified results of the 2020 presidential election;" retaining the right to secede from the US; teaching students that life begins at fertilization, and any attempt at gun control is a violation of both the Second Amendment and Texans' God-given rights (Paybarah and Montgomery 2022). There is more at work here than an authoritarian project reeking with the potential for violence, if not a full-fledged insurrection; there is also an attempt to normalize violence while aiming it at specific groups. DeSantis and the Texas Republican Party share the same call to white supremacy and project a future based on a rebranded version of fascism. For DeSantis, Trump, and their allies, white supremacy is the thread that holds together their voter suppression policies and ongoing attacks on critical race theory, Black and Brown people, educators, students, abortion rights, and gay and LGBTQ rights. It is also the bare-knuckle ideology at the heart of politics that has made democracy a meaningless word and inspired Trump's most fanatical and unhinged supporters to inflict violence on anyone who gets in their way. How else to explain that in the United States today, it is dangerous to be a health worker, school-committee member, local alderman, or a public-school

teacher (Nichols 2022). In the age of Trumpism and unchecked violence in the service of political opportunism, it is also dangerous for anyone to question Trump's lawlessness, his utter contempt for the constitution, and his deep-seated disdain for democracy (Street 2022).

What is often missed by liberals and the mainstream media is how these issues are connected as part of a wider totalitarian project, made clear in the war on critical education. It is impossible to fight this fascist project without recognizing how Republicans are making education central to a politics that views history and critical thinking as dangerous. At the forefront of this project is a systemic effort to produce widespread forms of pedagogical repression that whitewash history and, as James Baldwin once noted, define Black people in the American imagination only in reference to slave codes. This is not only a project given new life by Orbán. It has been updated by DeSantis and provides a model for the rest of the country. DeSantis attacks education in order to both mobilize his base and to do away with public education. His repressive educational policies are designed to create the conditions for destroying schools as democratic public spheres while simultaneously undermining the critical tasks of educators to teach young people and others how to be ethical, thoughtful, and engaged citizens.

At the core of this attack is a depoliticizing project whose aim is to teach students how to obey, inhabit a deadening regimen of conformity, and adjust to living in a world in which repression and violence are normalized. DeSantis and his Republican allies live in a moral vacuum that has betrayed the social contract, justice, and democracy itself. White replacement theory fuels the notion that power and whiteness are synonymous, mutually inform each other, and are sanctioned by God. Any criticism of this mutually degrading relationship constitutes one as an enemy to be dehumanized, objectified, and subject to violence. The collective use of us versus them serves as a measure by which to validate whiteness against all others while also "serving as a handy mechanism for crushing opposition" (Buffington et al. 2011). White supremacy is constantly being replenished by a form of historical and social amnesia coupled with the use of right-wing disimagination machines to promote widespread forms of manufactured ignorance. The main instruments for doing so center around right-wing attacks on public and higher education and the educational force of the wider culture, including apparatuses such as social media and the internet that constitute broader forms of miseducation.

DeSantis's ideological war is also matched by a number of policies designed to criminalize dissent and provide the blueprint for turning GOP-led states into laboratories of authoritarianism. For instance, DeSantis has created the Office of Elections crimes, which would enforce with the threat of a felony any alleged electoral violation. The real purpose of this office has little to do with voter fraud since there is almost no evidence it exists at a scale warranting an election police office. On the contrary, it is code for intimidating Black voters and adds another repressive tool to enforce voter suppression (Zhang 2022). In an effort to eliminate any constraints on his power, DeSantis is willing to punish anyone he views as a political enemy, including, as I have mentioned, corporations that refuse to endorse his policies. As Ruth Ben-Ghiat notes, he "punished the popular Tampa Bay Rays for having the temerity to express sadness about the recent mass shooting of children in Texas—and for making a \$50,000 donation to Everytown for Gun Safety's Support fund. Opposing GOP gun rights policies earned the team a veto of their planned \$35 million baseball complex" (Ben-Ghiat 2022a). DeSantis disdains dissent, as was evident in his signing a bill that criminalizes peaceful protests in residential neighborhoods. Moreover, his white supremacist ideology was on full display when he created a poll tax that prevented over a million ex-felons from voting, most of whom are "low-income individuals and racial minorities" (Luscombe 2019).

DeSantis's desire to instill fear in others and engage in a culture of cruelty appears boundless. One of his "most disgraceful new low[s]" included going after the Special Olympics by forcing them to give up a mask mandate among athletes with intellectual disabilities, knowingly endangering the lives of people who are more vulnerable to Covid (Benen 2022). He shamelessly publicly bullied teens to take off their masks while he held a press conference at the University of South Florida" (Ellis 2022). In the same vein of cruelty, just a few days from the five-year anniversary of Orlando's Pulse nightclub massacred, he "vetoed \$150,000 in state funds that would have provided

counseling for survivors — despite a budget that has \$9.5 billion in reserves”(Stantich 2021). In line with his Orbán-like ‘war’ “on LGBTQ+ Floridians, DeSantis “eliminated \$750,000 approved by the Florida Legislature for the Orlando-based Zebra Coalition to create housing for homeless gay and transgender youth” (Stantich *ibid*). Apparently, DeSantis’s drive and cruelty were on display long before he entered politics and have served him well in his attempt to be “the GOPs combatant-in-chief.” One of his former baseball teammates at Yale recalls that “he was the most selfish person I have ever interacted with...He always loved embarrassing and humiliating people. I am speaking for others—he was the biggest dice we knew” (cited in Filkins 2022).

## The Nazification of American Education

The mean-spirited and pugnacious Governor DeSantis and his Republican allies have inverted an insight taken from the renowned late educator John Dewey who recognized that politics required informed judgments, public dialogue, dissent, critical exchange, judicious discrimination, and the ability to discern the truth from lies. Instead of embracing these democratic elements of education as central to creating citizens with an open mind, a willingness to engage in a culture of questioning, and expand and deepen the conditions necessary for a flourishing democracy, DeSantis and the GOP are doing everything they can to remove such practices both from schools and other cultural apparatuses that function as teaching machines. Under such circumstances, DeSantis and the GOP are producing what Dewey claimed amounted to the “eclipse of the public,” which he considered the most serious threat to the fate of democracy (Dewey 1954). DeSantis has put into place a range of reactionary educational policies that range from banning books and critical race theory to “requiring the state’s public universities to survey students and faculty on their political beliefs,” post their syllabi online, restrict tenure, and allow students to film their classes, and much more (Joyce 2022c).

Not only are these laws aimed at minorities of class and color, but this GOP attack on education also is part of a larger war on the very ability to think, question, and engage in politics from the vantage point of being critical, informed, and willing to hold power accountable. More generally, it is part of a concerted effort not only to destroy public education but the very foundations of a political agency (cf. Joyce 2021, Joyce 2022a, Joyce 2022c, Strauss 2022). DeSantis poses a dangerous threat to higher education, which he would like to turn into “a dead zone for killing the social imagination, a place where ideas that don’t have practical results go to die and where faculty and students are punished through the threat of force or harsh disciplinary measures for speaking out, engaging in dissent and holding power accountable.” (Giroux 2014). In this case, the attempt to undermine schooling as a public good and democratic public sphere is accompanied by a systemic attempt to destroy the capacity for critical thinking, compassion for others, critical literacy, moral witnessing, support for the social compact, and the civic imagination. DeSantis justifies these acts of repression by claiming that “Florida schools have become socialism factories” and that students at all levels of education should not be subjected to classroom material that would make them uncomfortable (Horowitz 2021). This is code for a pedagogy of repression that revels in deception, kills the social imagination, depoliticizes students, and transforms schools into militarized punishing machines, propaganda factories, and components of the security-surveillance state. Max Boot, writing in *The Washington Post*, argues that DeSantis’ educational policies represent “one of the most alarming assaults on free speech and academic freedom [reveal] a troubling pattern of authoritarianism and vindictiveness that would be extremely dangerous in the Oval Office” (Boot 2022).

DeSantis’s policies have been particularly cruel and repressive with respect to punishing youth who are marginalized by way of their race, religion, and sexual orientation. He has pushed policies that translate “hate speech into proposed laws that would make societal pariahs out of transgender kids” and has made homophobia a driving force of his politics (Bunch 2022b). He shares the disgraced legacy of Trump and other far-right Republican politicians who believe that the threat of violence, if not its actual use, is not only the best way to resolve issues in the name of political opportunism but also amounts to a display of patriotism (Ben-Ghiat 2022b). DeSantis’s policies reek of fear, intimidation, and the threat of violence against his critics, especially those educators, teachers,

parents, youth, and community groups that reject his attacks on public education and his anti-gay legislation. His policies are also in line with the violence expressed by Christian fascists such as Joe Ottman, founder of Faith, Education, and Commerce United, who, as Paul Rosenberg remarked, “stated on his podcast, *Conservative Daily*, that teachers are ‘recruiting kids to be gay’ and that LGBTQ teachers should be ‘dragged behind a car until their limbs fall off’” (Rosenberg 2021). There is little doubt that such measures echo the infamous anti-communist hysteria reminiscent of the dark days of the McCarthyite period in the 1950s when thousands of people were banned from their jobs for holding left-wing views and, in some cases, jailed. DeSantis’ model of politics and repressive education are not unrelated to the attacks on education and history that took place in Nazi Germany, a point that is almost completely missed in the mainstream and progressive press when analyzing DeSantis’s war on education.

### Education in the Third Reich

Education under the Third Reich offers significant insights into how repressive forms of pedagogy become central to shaping the identities, values, and worldviews of young people. Nazi educational policies also made visible how in the final analysis, education is always political in that it is a struggle over agency, ideology, knowledge, power, and the future. For Hitler, matters of indoctrination, education, and the shaping of the collective consciousness of young people was an integral element of Nazi rule and politics. In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler stated that “Whoever has the youth has the future.” According to Lina Buffington and her co-authors, he viewed this battle to indoctrinate youth as part of a wider strategy of Nazi control over education. As Hitler wrote in *Mein Kampf*, Germany needs an “educational regime [where] young people will learn nothing else but how to think German and act German...And they will never be free again, not in their whole lives” (cited in Buffington et al. 2011). Under this regime, education was reduced to a massive propaganda machine whose purpose was to indoctrinate young people with “robot-like obedience to Nazi ideologies,” while privileging physical strength, racial instruction, and nationalist fanaticism (Buffington et al. 2011). At the same time, the most valued form of knowledge under the Nazi educational system emphasized a pedagogy of racial purity.

Race consciousness was a crucial pedagogical goal which was used to both unify young people and elicit political loyalty based on national honor and a “budding nationalistic fanaticism.” (Simkin 2020). To achieve this goal and reduce resistance to fascist ideology, history books were censored, banned, destroyed, and rewritten to align with Nazi ideology. Any knowledge or information deemed dangerous was not only eliminated from books and the curricula, but also purged “from libraries and bookstores” (Buffington et al. 2011).

Nazi education was designed to mold children rather than educate them. Races deemed “inferior” and “less worthy” were banned from the schools, while any positive reference to them and their history was expunged from history books and other curricula materials. The Nazi educational system was deeply anti-intellectual and created modes of pedagogy that undermined the ability of students to think for themselves. As stressed by the writers of *The Holocaust Explained*, the Nazis “aimed to de-intellectualize education: they did not want education to provoke people to ask questions or think for themselves. They believed this approach would instill obedience and belief in the Nazi worldview, creating the ideal future generation.” (The Wiener Holocaust Library 2020).

Turning Nazi schools into propaganda factories functioned through massive pedagogical machinery of conformity, censorship, repression, and indoctrination. The attack on teachers also took place through Nazi efforts to encourage students and loyal faculty to spy on those considered politically unreliable. Even worse, teachers who did not support either Nazi ideology or the restructuring of education were dismissed, along with Jewish educators who were banned from teaching in the Nazi educational system (Evans: 263-298). Not unlike what we have seen in the United States, particularly under the leadership of DeSantis, with his deeply anti-intellectual view of schooling, banning of books, censoring of history, support for “patriotic education,” the use of fear and intimidation used against teachers, and anti-LGBTQ+ bills, Nazi education exhibited contempt for critical thought, open dialogue, intellectual ability, and those youth considered unworthy.

What critics often fail to acknowledge is that the open glorification of “Aryan” races in Nazi Germany has its counterparts in a range of policies now pushed by Republican politicians. This is not only visible in white replacement theory and the rise of white supremacy in the United States, but also in voter suppression laws, the elimination of the history of oppressed groups from school curricula, the banning of books, and the assault on educators who do not agree with the transformation of American education into right-wing propaganda factories. Not unlike what we have seen in the United States, Nazi education exhibited a contempt for critical thought, open dialogue, provocative books, intellectual ability, and those youth considered unworthy. The comparisons are particularly evident under the leadership of DeSantis, with his deeply anti-intellectual view of schooling, whitewashing of history, outlawing books, support for “patriotic education,” passing of anti-LGBTQ+ bills and the use of perpetual fear and intimidation aimed at teachers, parents, and youth of color. A particularly egregious echo of the fascist past can be seen in the current attack on librarians. Increasingly, they are being harassed, threatened, and called pedophiles by far-right extremists because they have books on their library shelves that deal with LGBTQ rights and racial equality. Some fascist book censors have gone so far as to claim that librarians who refuse to remove banned books are grooming children to be sexually exploited and have attempted to “seek criminal charges against” them (Harris and Alter, 2022).

The model of Nazi Germany’s educational system has a great deal to teach us about the ideologies that produced a society wedded to the related doctrines of racial purity, the banning of books, the suppression of historical memory, ultra-nationalism, and the cult of the strongman (cf. Evans 2005, Pine 2010, Appleby 2013, Wilkins 2022). Under DeSantis, white supremacy, systemic racism, and the indoctrination of youth have the official power of the state on their side. DeSantis’ attacks on youth considered unworthy (LGBTQ youth), his embrace of lower academic standards, subjecting faculty to political litmus tests through “viewpoint diversity surveys” aimed to “gather evidence” on non-compliant faculty, censoring books that do not follow his ideological proclivities, racializing knowledge, incorporating textbooks as crucial tools for spreading propaganda to students, and controlling teacher’s classroom actions are closely related to the Nazi playbook for making education a tool for indoctrination and control.

The horrors of authoritarianism are back supported by white supremacists such as DeSantis (Lavin 2021). The long-simmering mobilizing passions of fascism are evident not only in a range of reactionary GOP policies that extend from undoing women’s reproductive rights and the right to vote but also in a more insidious and less acknowledged attack on America’s educational institutions. These attacks amount to a counter-revolution against essential public institutions, critical agency, informed consciousness, engaged citizenship, and the capacity of individuals and the public to govern themselves. At its core, it is an attack on both the promise of democracy and the social imagination.

Critical education is the scourge of white supremacists because it offers a counterpoint to right-wing educational practices that seduce people into inhabiting the ecospheres of hate, bigotry, and racism. Such anti-racist pedagogies are especially important because of the threat posed by white supremacists to white youths, who are especially vulnerable, given how many of them are alienated, isolated, lack a sense of purpose, excluded, and in need of some sense of community. Racism is learned, and white supremacists have used a number of educational tools, particularly online video games, chat groups, Tik Tok, and other social platforms, to promote and enlist white youths. Ibram X Kendi rightly raises the question of how “white children are being indoctrinated with white supremacist views, what causes them to hate, and how they have become “the prime target of white supremacists” points to this threat (Kendi 2022). He points to a 2021 Anti-Defamation League report which states: “An estimated 2.3 million teens each year are exposed to white-supremacist ideology in chats for multiplayer games [and] that “17 percent of 13-to-17-year-olds ... encounter white-supremacist views on social media.” (Kendi *ibid*). In response to this fascist threat, there is a crucial need to acknowledge the political importance of anti-racist education in teaching young people how to recognize the threats posed by white supremacy, how to resist racism in all of its

forms, and how to turn away from hate, and how to discern truth from falsehoods and right from wrong (cf. Giroux 2020, Giroux 2021, Giroux 2022).

Republicans such as DeSantis reproduce and accelerate the adoption of white supremacist views among many vulnerable white youths. They do this by censoring critical ideas, whitewashing history, banning books, imposing degrading constraints on teachers, and in doing so, it undermines the critical capacities crucial to teaching about systemic racism and its Jim Crow history. His attacks on public and higher education constitute a form of apartheid pedagogy; its consequences, while indirect, are deadly, as we have witnessed from a number of mass shootings, including the massacre of 10 Black shoppers in a Tops grocery store in Buffalo by a young hate-filled racist and self-proclaimed fascist. Of course, critical pedagogy is not just about anti-racist education; it is a much broader project. It is a moral and political pedagogical theory whose purpose is to equip students with the knowledge, skills, values, and social responsibility that enable them to be critical and engaged agents. In this sense, it is the essential foundation, regardless of where it takes place, for creating the informed and socially responsible citizens necessary to combat all elements of fascism while envisioning a social order that deepens and extends power, democratic values, equitable social relations, collective freedom, economic rights, and social justice for everyone.

Democracy needs knowledgeable and socially responsible citizens along with the institutions that create them. Defending critical education and all the sites in which it takes place demands more than a reaction to the ongoing assaults waged by an authoritarian Republican Party. It also suggests going beyond criticizing crude instrumental notions of educational reform traditionally promoted by the Democratic Party, as we saw under Clinton and Obama. What is needed is a new vision of education as a crucial and fundamental public sphere that provides critical learning environments, gives educators control over their classrooms, views young people as a valuable resource for creating a democratic society and future, and connects education with the struggle against racism, economic inequality, ecological justice, and the political, economic, and social rights at the heart of radical democracy. What is needed is a vision of education as the practice of freedom, along with the funding necessary to support the educational institutions that make it possible. Quality and meaningful education should be free for everyone. Once it is viewed as a right rather than an economic investment and/or a right-wing propaganda machine, it will become clear that education is the foundation of a socialist democracy and central to all aspects of political life.

While the times we live in seem dire, it is worthwhile to take heed from Helen Keller, who, on May 9, 1933, addressed students in Germany who intended to burn all books deemed “un-German,” including her books. She wrote: “History has taught you nothing if you think you can kill ideas. Tyrants have tried to do that often before, and the ideas have risen up in their might and destroyed them.” (Keller cited in the Zinn Education Project 2022). For Keller, history without hope is lost and opens the door to fascism, while ideas that draw upon history and combine with mass movements can serve to offer a model for fighting fascism. Ellen Willis builds upon Keller’s sense of hope when she once urged the left to become a movement again. In doing so, she called for a new language, a new understanding of education, and a cultural politics that spoke to people’s needs. Most importantly, she called for a “new vision of what kind of society we want,” along with a mass movement capable of “creating institutions...and new ways of living to figure out how our vision might work” (Willis 1999: 45). Not only were Willis’s insights prescient for the times, they are more urgent now given that the increasing danger of fascism that threatens to engulf and destroy the last vestiges of an already weakened democracy in the United States.

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# “Populism and Identity Politics in the U.S. Heartland”

Ann M. Oberhauser and Daniel Krier

The rise of populism on the political right in the U.S. and Europe in recent decades reflects a significant shift in political culture. This populism has been associated with the rejection of mainstream politics and increased hostility toward immigrants, racialized minorities, and other marginalized groups who are seen as threats to economic security and hegemonic social identities. In the U.S. Heartland, several key states flipped from Democrat to Republican in 2016, sealing Trump’s win and leading to widespread debates about populist political attitudes in this region. This analysis draws from focus group discussions with community leaders in rural and micropolitan Iowa to understand how local discourses about economic and social change intersects with rising populist politics. Three characteristics of community life emerged as areas of concern among these groups; economic destabilization associated with neoliberalism, changes in social composition, and a profound sense of rurality. Our findings reveal how populism and identity movements on the political right are integrated with Heartland political culture, contributing to the recent electoral success of right-wing populist candidates. The discussion concludes with recommendations to promote a progressive and inclusive agenda for the Heartland and the U.S. as a whole.

## Introduction

The recent electoral success of populist leaders and parties in the United States and Europe signals an underlying shift in political culture. Some scholars refer to this period as the fourth wave of populism (Mudde 2019) that portends a new political moment in rural areas (Scoones et al. 2018). Effects of these right-wing political shifts became increasingly evident in events surrounding the 2016 and 2020 U.S. presidential elections, culminating in insurrectionist violence against the U.S. capitol in early 2021. Of note are the six Midwestern states that flipped from Obama in 2008 and 2012 to Trump in 2016, and the close race with a narrow victory by Biden in 2020. These trends have contributed to widespread debates about shifting political attitudes in this region (Berlet and Sunshine 2019; Cramer 2016; Agnew and Shin 2020) and what Johnston et al (2020) claim is increased polarization of the American electorate with nonmetropolitan areas dominated by Republican party candidates.

We define populism as a political movement based on the division of society into separate and opposing groups that stem from a discursive weaving of imaginary representations and ideological concepts along specific social, economic, and political dimensions (Mudde 2007; Brubaker 2017). The recent wave of populism has not only impacted the U.S. but also the European Union, leading to the UK Brexit vote to leave the European Union, and the rise of right-wing nationalist parties in Austria, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Italy, Germany, France, and many other European countries (Mudde 2019; Rooduijn 2018). Right-wing populism has generally been explained as a reactionary response to either economic stresses or cultural resentments (Mudde 2007), however, recent research has revealed that such structural factors are not able to fully account for the rise and fall of populism among the electorate (Amengay and Stockemer 2018). These accounts have prompted scholars to argue for the importance of studying localized and place-based politics (Agnew and Shin 2020; Johnston et al. 2020; Jacobs and Munis 2018) and to comprehend struggles for cultural recognition within populist and white identity appeals (Lamont 2019).

This article contributes to the literature by revealing how the language and discursive framing of populism and identity movements on the political right are integrated into the political culture of rural America. Our study addresses three areas of community life: economic change related to neoliberalism that includes globalization, labor, and trade; changes in social composition due to immigration, increased racial diversity, and gender; and the political implications of a deeply-felt rural identity. While mild in tone, and often with considerable ambivalence, our respondents, representing community leaders, expressed their political concerns in terms consistent with broader populist movements. These concerns included the failure of mainstream politics, stressors associated with the immigration of racialized others, and challenges to long-standing Heartland identities. The identity politics that surfaced in this analysis provide insights into local dimensions of contested political cultures (Melcher 2021; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2012; Silva 2019).

We selected the U.S. Heartland as a focus of our study for several reasons. First, the flip of this region from Blue to Red between 2008 and 2016 is particularly significant. Iowa, Ohio, Michigan, Wisconsin, and Pennsylvania provided important victories for Trump in 2016 (Oberhauser, Krier, and Kusow 2019; Scala and Johnson 2017). Two of these states in the Midwest, Iowa and Ohio, were held by Trump in 2020. Second, the U.S. Heartland embodies the cultural location and core of Americana and U.S. values (Hoganson 2019). This area has been heralded as a regional imaginary with a somewhat contradictory ethos of emerging nativist attitudes that supported Trump's political culture of 'Make America Great Again' (Silva 2019; Monnat and Brown 2017; Oberhauser, Krier, and Kusow 2019) and the historical foundation of egalitarianism, inclusiveness, and tolerance of non-traditional ways of life (Elazar 1980). Third, Iowa, a state that is centrally located in the U.S. Heartland, is home to the first presidential caucus or primary leading up to the general election. Finally, recent studies on rurality and political culture in this region underscore the magnitude and essence of Heartland, or Midwestern, social and economic identities that shape the wider political landscape (Cramer 2016; Metzl 2019; Hoganson 2019).

The empirical focus of this paper draws from the conceptual framework outlined above to examine key socio-economic and geographic characteristics that are related to shifting political attitudes in the Heartland. Previous analyses of political culture in Iowa found that education, whiteness, and rurality were significant indicators in explaining why this state flipped in the 2016 election and retained a Republican strong-hold in 2020 (Oberhauser, Krier, and Kusow 2019). The current study draws from an investigation of selected communities in rural Iowa to better understand how populism and identity movements on the political right interacted with the Heartland's political landscape and social identities. County-level data are examined alongside qualitative analyses of their political attitudes and experiences that highlight the political culture in the U.S. and elsewhere. This research is especially relevant to public policy and social movements that seek to curb the destructive elements of populism and divisiveness that are all too apparent in current political discourse and policies.

The article is divided into six sections. Following the introduction, we review theoretical approaches that have shaped debates about populism and dynamic political landscapes in the U.S. and Europe in recent decades. The focus on economic, social, and geographic issues in this section builds a case for the rise of populism and nativist attitudes in the American Heartland and elsewhere. The methodology and research design are explained in the third section of the paper. Our mostly qualitative approach focuses on data that helps to understand the context of socio-economic and political shifts in the Heartland. The fourth section analyzes the complex, yet increasingly evident aspects of these shifts since the early 2000s. We discuss the rurality and spatial dimensions of populism in the fifth section using results from regional and local studies and conceptualization of these themes. The conclusion provides a summary of our findings and recommendations for moving forward to promote a progressive and inclusive agenda for U.S. society and politics.

## Theorizing social identities and spatial dimensions of populism

Extensive scholarship has analyzed how social identities, economic status, and geography influence political behavior, including the rise of populism and white identity politics in contemporary society (Cramer 2016; Monnat 2016; Lamont 2019; Agnew and Shin 2020; Embrick et al. 2020; Giroux 2021). The rise of Neo-fascist and white-nationalist groups has raised concerns about relationships between growing social polarization and right-wing populism in Europe and the U.S. (Rooduijn 2018; Schaffner, MacWilliams, and Nteta 2018). At its core, populism is a political movement based on the division of society into two opposed groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite,' often expanded in a tight discursive weaving of imagery and concepts along two dimensions, vertical and horizontal (Mudde 2007; Brubaker 2017). Vertically, populism valorizes 'the people' as hard-working, respectable citizens threatened from above by rich, predatory elites and from below by parasitic loafers. Horizontally, populism valorizes 'the people' as natives whose heritage is threatened by impure, alien outsiders. Scholars argue that right-wing populism is driven by a backlash to progressive political and cultural gains, opposition to foreign influences and particularly immigrants (Agnew and Shin 2020), and the defense of hard-working producers of society against lazy, immoral elites and "subordinate" groups (Berlet and Lyons 2000).

Populism has flourished amidst increasing political polarization in recent decades. Electorally non-competitive landslide counties have spread across large portions of the U.S., especially in rural areas. Election outcomes depend upon voter swings in a dwindling number of purple counties that are closely divided among Democrats and Republicans (Johnston, Manley, and Jones 2016). The ideological divergence and geographic sorting of political parties has been accompanied by a polarization of partisan affect that is linked to redistricting with extensive gerrymandering (Johnston, Manley, and Jones 2016). Party membership has become a core identity to voters who attach strong positive affect to members of their own party and project increasingly negative affect upon opposing party members (Iyengar and Krupenkin 2018). Affective polarization poses difficulties for purple counties, especially rural counties with small communities that depend upon moderation and cooperation across party lines (Jacobs and Munis 2018). These conditions fuel the spread of right-wing populism and white identity.

In the U.S., shifting socio-demographics, including those linked to immigration, play an important role in shaping the constituencies, organizations, and geographies of the two major political parties (Abramowitz 2018; Morrill, Knopp, and Brown 2011) and polarization among political elites and party activists (McAdam and Kloos 2014). The surprising flip of several midwestern states that Obama had previously won was crucial to Trump's electoral victory in 2016 and the narrow victory of Biden in 2020. As noted above, two midwestern states, Iowa and Ohio, were held by Trump in 2020, with Iowa's percentage win almost unchanged (52 percent Republican to 42 percent Democrat in 2016 and 53 percent (R) to 45 percent (D) in 2020) (Ballotpedia 2016 and 2020). Of the states that were held by Trump, only Iowa had an unchanged electoral map. In other words, all counties that Trump won in 2016 were held by him in 2020, and all counties won by Clinton in 2016 were held by Biden in 2020. The 2020 Iowa election results also reveal increasing partisan polarization: Biden won the six counties that voted Democratic by a larger percentage than Clinton (average of 3 percent gain for Biden) and Trump won a larger share of the counties that he won in 2020 than he did in 2016 (average of 1 percent gain) (Ballotpedia 2020; MIT 2018). These patterns highlight the persistent shifts toward polarization in America's political landscape.

Recent scholarship on how race, whiteness, gender, and other social identities affect political attitudes offers extensive analyses of current controversies and tensions surrounding growing social and ethnic diversity and tensions in the U.S. and Europe (Gimpel and Lay 2008; Gusterson 2017; Lichter, Parisi, and Taquino 2018). Populist political movements frequently adopt xenophobic attitudes in order to keep privileged racial groups in positions of dominance (Jardina 2019; Melcher 2021). Growing demographic diversity in the U.S. includes shifts to more non-white majority regions with an influx of immigration and refugees from Latin America, the Middle East, and Africa. These trends contribute to what Jardina (2019) refers to as white identity politics. We continue these debates with a nuanced analysis of how economics, social identities, and rurality impact and co-produce the contemporary political climate of a

divided electorate with highly contested opinions about the state of our country. These identities and characteristics overlap and are fluid, but help decipher the complex nature of our contemporary political landscape.

Economic status and class dynamics have generated a considerable amount of attention in explaining the rise of populism and nativism in recent elections. Some scholars have focused upon the ‘white working class’ as a crucial cohort of voters that shifted from Democrat (Obama) to Republican (Trump) in the 2016 presidential election (Morgan and Lee 2018). Other scholars refer to the ‘landscapes of despair’ narrative that resulted in historically working-class areas such as the Industrial Midwest to shift their support to Republicans in 2016 (Monnat and Brown 2017; Hochschild 2016). These studies indicate that working-class people felt abandoned by a Democratic party whose agenda emphasized policies and programs to help the poor, but largely ignored the values of blue-collar workers. Lamont (2019) theorizes right-wing populist support by white, male, working-class voters as a result of perceived ‘recognition gaps.’ These voters believe that they were overlooked and disadvantaged by decades of policy changes and emergent cultural practices that favored immigrants, racial minorities, women, members of the LGBTQ+ community, and coastal elites.

Another factor in the rise of right-wing populism among the electorate are identity issues that include the perceived racial polarization of society. Racial diversity within communities is one aspect of how scholars explain voting preferences in areas within the U.S. Heartland (Lay 2017). In several cases, understandings of racial diversity are examined in relation to the influx of immigrants to rural areas. For example, Lichter, Parisi, and Tazuino (2018) analyze the impact of racially diverse nonmetropolitan areas that lead to rural white exposure to minority populations. The overall increase in ethno-racial diversity tends to change local demographic and economic conditions and thus political attitudes as a way to justify protecting the interests of the dominant (white) majority.

In both the United States and Europe, politics have polarized around attitudes towards immigrants and racially diverse populations in general (Gimpel and Lay 2008; Melcher 2021). According to Alba and Foner (2017), the intensification of negative attitudes towards ethnic or racial minorities, however, tends to be in places with few immigrants and low ethno-racial diversity. Similarly, regions and places with the largest immigrant populations are often those where the native majority holds the most positive attitudes towards diversity. Hainmueller and Hopkins (2014) found that voters’ anti-immigration sentiment was not strongly correlated with the economic impact of migration, but was instead shaped by “sociotropic” concerns with culture and identity. In recent years, right-wing populism and white identity movements center ideological concerns with “White Genocide” and the “Great Replacement” of native ethno-European populations by racially, culturally, and religiously-diverse immigrants (Davey and Ebner 2019). The overtly-racist ideology of these claims called for remigration, or forced deportation of immigrant populations, and the return of communities, property, and opportunities to the native whites who had been disinherited and displaced. Populist politicians representing several of the Heartland communities we studied echoed these white identity themes.

Finally, geography and specifically rural-urban divisions are linked to political attitudes and behavior in the empirical focus of this paper, the Heartland state of Iowa where approximately 40 percent of the population lives in non-metropolitan areas (U.S. Census Bureau 2019). This context reflects not only material or physical aspects of space, but representations of rurality that are linked to racial constructions of place and the predominance of whiteness (Holloway 2007; Kelly and Lobao 2018; Davy and Ebner 2019). Cramer (2016) refers to the ‘politics of resentment’ in describing the attitudes, or rural consciousness, of voters in the upper Midwest, leading to regressive rural politics. Political polarization along rural-urban geographic divides grew in the 2016 election while electoral systems tend to give rural voters disproportionate power over their urban counterparts (Badger, Bui, and Pearce 2016; Emont 2017).

In sum, right-wing populist movements and white identity have been linked in the literature to socially homogenous, economically declining, and rural areas. Results from the 2016 and 2020 U.S. presidential election reflect these socio-economic and rural-urban divides as Trump fared poorly in economically stable, socially diverse, and suburban American cities, while Clinton and Biden did not gain a lot of support among economically distressed,

socially homogenous, and rural voters (Johnston et al. 2020). Growing economic resentment, increasing demographic diversity, and deepening chasms between rural and urban areas are instrumental in explaining the rise of right-wing populism (Scala and Johnson 2017; Badger, Bui, and Pearce 2016; Smith and Hanley 2018). This study documents these relationships in the U.S. Heartland.

## Researching political identities in the U.S. rural heartland: Methods and background

This research employs methods that combine analyses of socio-economic and demographic data and results from focus groups with business and community leaders in two rural regions of Iowa. The project builds on 2018 research that consolidated county-level data from a variety of sources to develop measures of economic stress, threats to social identities, rurality, and voting patterns in Iowa (Oberhauser, Krier, and Kusow 2019). Our analysis focuses on data from both primary and secondary sources to examine relationships among these measures based on individual and regional dimensions of rural voters.

### *Fieldwork and focus groups in rural Iowa*

Qualitative methods such as focus groups allow for a deeper understanding of and interaction with participants in research studies. As noted by Macnaghten and Myers (2007: 65), these discussions give researchers the opportunity to uncover "shared and tacit beliefs, and the way these beliefs emerge in interaction with others in a local setting. ... (They are) used in an exploratory way, when researchers are not entirely sure what categories, links, and perspectives are relevant." Focus groups also facilitate the generation of knowledge and understanding among participants through their interaction and give researchers the ability to analyze their social context. As noted by Holstein and Gubrium (2007: 269), "context is never a settled matter, so we must look at how participants in interaction continue to co-produce that very context they inhabit through that very interaction." We selected this approach because it allowed us to explore the social dynamics and experiences of the participants in their communities.

The primary data gathered through qualitative fieldwork allowed us to better understand the context and lived experiences of individuals and communities in rural Iowa. We visited, observed, and interacted with these participants in their geographic and socio-economic contexts as a way of learning more about this topic (Caretta and Vacchelli 2015). Our focus groups took place in four rural counties of Iowa, and drew from a convenience selection sampling method based on our contacts, location, and time (Figure 1). As relative outsiders, we encountered some difficulties in developing contacts with people in rural Iowa to participate in our research. The sample was intentionally focused on participants who had leadership roles in their communities as a way of gaining broader insights into economic and social trends and political attitudes in the community. Our main entre to these business and community leaders was the university extension service. The research participants represented leaders in Chambers of Commerce, agricultural groups such as the Iowa Corn Growers Association, local industry, and business managers and owners, non-profit groups, economic development organizations, county boards, tourism offices, and city managers. This sampling technique proved to be effective in selecting groups of participants "that offer variety in regard to a particular phenomenon, ... allowing the comparison of subgroups" (Aurini, Heath, and Howells 2016: 57).

Each focus group took two to three hours with six to eight participants. We recorded each of the four focus group discussions with permission from the participants (Aurini, Heath, and Howells 2016). The human subject protocol was explained at the beginning of each group and participants were given consent forms to read and sign. This project was submitted to and approved by the Institutional Review Board at our institution. The discussions were organized according to the topics and themes of our research, beginning with an introduction of the participants, followed by open-ended questions about major issues in the community, the economy and how people are 'getting by,' the sense of community among residents, and political tendencies and behavior. These topics address the connection between economic and social conditions in these locales and trade and immigrant policies of the Republican administration at the time of the fieldwork. We also raised questions about the rise of populism and nativism in rural Iowa communities,

and how these shifts translate to political beliefs and behavior.

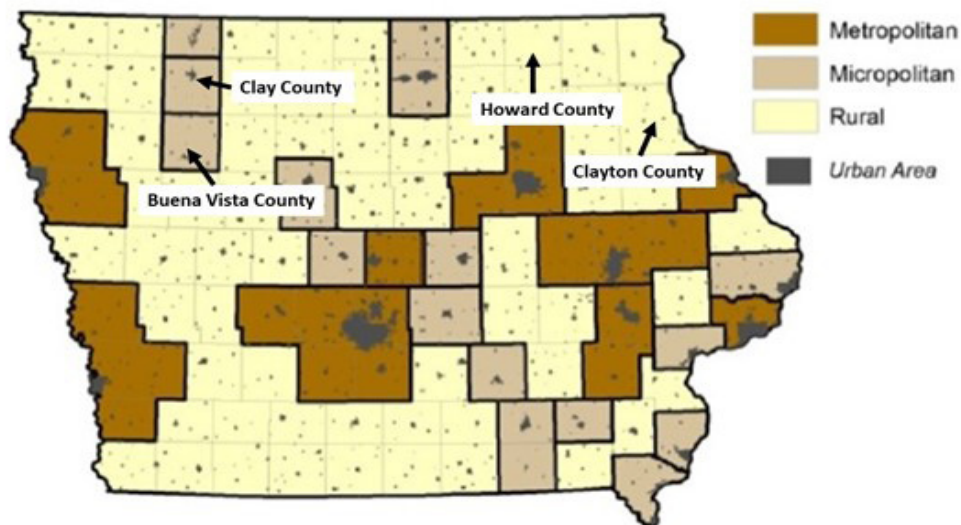
The focus group discussions were transcribed verbatim and coded using NVivo12, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis (CAQDAS) program. The coding was conducted first with pre-coding schemes, then with first and second cycle coding schemes. Aurini et al. (2016:189) present this approach as an effective way to organize data in an “iterative process that evolves as the data collection and analysis progresses.” This approach also allows researchers to assign preliminary codes, develop a more descriptive characteristic of the data, and finally, capture the overall essence of the data in the second cycle of coding. We reviewed the codes and organization of our data at different stages of the research analysis to triangulate and critically compare and review the data and coding scheme (Seale et al. 2007).

### Background to case study regions

We conducted the focus groups in Clayton, Howard, Clay, and Buena Vista Counties in the state of Iowa (Figure 1). These counties reflect different levels of rurality, social diversity, economic activities, and political background in the northeast (Clayton and Howard Counties) and the northwest (Clay and Buena Vista Counties) regions of the state. The northeast region has relatively low economic stress, changing demographics, and a rural and diversifying economy. The northwest region also has low to moderate economic stress, a relatively diverse population, and a fairly strong agricultural and industrial economy.

**Figure 1.**

### Rural and Urban Counties in Iowa with Research Sites



Source: ISU Extension and Outreach 2019

At the time of our fieldwork, the economy in these areas was fairly strong, but beginning to show stress in the areas of agricultural production and services from recent tariffs and trade barriers imposed by the Trump administration. Economic data reports relatively high labor force participation rates (LFPR) between nearly 66 and 71 percent in these four counties compared to Iowa’s rate of nearly 67.4 percent (Table 1). The manufacturing sector employs a significant proportion of labor with nearly 25 percent in Howard County and nearly 30 percent in Buena Vista County. The other counties were lower with 13.1 percent manufacturing employment in Clay County and nearly 20



percent in Clayton County. In addition, low unemployment and labor shortages were apparent in some areas, yet many communities are still struggling to recover from jobs lost during the 2008-09 Great Recession (Iowa State University Extension and Outreach 2019).

Table 1. Case Study Counties in Iowa

County	Population (2019)	65years & over (%)	White, non-Latino (%)	Labor Force Participation Rate (% 16 or over in workforce)	Manufacturing employment (%) (2017)	Agriculture, forestry, fishing employment (%) (2017)	Median household income (\$)	BA or higher (25 years old or higher) (%)	Foreign born (%)
Iowa	3,155,070	17.5	85.0	67.4	14.9	3.8	58,580	28.2	5.2
Clayton	17,549	24.4	95.8	65.8	19.6	10.2	52,828	17.2	2.2
Howard	9,158	20.9	96.1	68.2	24.8	8.2	52,742	14.9	0.2
Clay	16,016	21.1	92.9	65.9	13.1	9.1	47,874	22.6	2.4
Buena Vista	19,620	16.7	58.0 (25% Latino)	71.1	29.8	5.9	54,556	19.6	18.5

Source: U.S. Census Bureau 2019

The agricultural sector in these areas of Iowa is comprised of both large-scale commercial and smaller family farms that grow corn and soybeans, along with livestock and hog production. Commercial farms experienced the largest losses and rising debt compared to family or residence farms that increasingly depend on off-farm incomes (ISU Extension and Outreach 2019). Off-farm employment in these counties is largely based on agricultural-based manufacturing, seed and chemical production, and farm support services. In addition, services, including health care, retail, public agencies, and education make up a growing share of this region’s employment (U.S. Census Bureau 2019).

Population declines in these regions have impacted the employment situation and other social issues in rural Iowa. The outmigration of young people to urban locations with more job opportunities and amenities has affected the demographics of these counties (Lay 2017; Lichter and Brown 2011). These shifts are linked to an aging population with 21.1 percent of the population 65 years or older in Clay County, 20.9 percent in Howard County, 24.4 percent in Clayton, and only 16.7 percent in Buena Vista Counties (U.S. Census Bureau 2019) (Table 1). Overall, these areas of Iowa have low population densities and fall within the micropolitan and rural areas of northeast and northwest Iowa (Figure 1).

In the past several decades, many rural areas in Iowa experienced an influx of immigrants, especially Latinos. This trend has led to growing racial and ethnic diversity in Buena Vista County (home of Storm Lake) where approximately 25 percent of the population is Latino/a (U.S. Census Bureau 2019). Many of these immigrants originally came to work in the meat processing industry, construction, agricultural production, and other manufacturing activities (Lay 2017). Junod’s (2014) research on immigration in northwest Iowa’s 4th District explores the impact of and reception among local groups to the increase in predominantly Latino, but also Middle Eastern, and North and East African immigrants in this rural area. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2019), two of our case study counties in northeast Iowa had over 95 percent White population and 2.4 percent or less were foreign-born in three counties (Table 1). In contrast, only 58.0 percent of Buena Vista County residents are White and 18.5 percent were born outside of the U.S. (U.S. Census Bureau 2019). These contrasts in racial diversity present important contexts to this study of populism and white identity.

The economic dynamics, demographic shifts, and social identities noted here influence and are shaped by political values and behavior in rural Iowa and the U.S. Heartland more broadly. Our analysis of rising populism and white identity politics focuses on how the sense of community, strong family ties, and sense of pride in rural-agricultural traditions are reflected in these political attitudes and voting behavior. Rural Iowa is historically conservative and Republican, although as one participant noted, “back then, it was a different kind of Republican,” less ideologically conservative and more tolerant of compromise. The analysis below expands on the tensions among these political values that range from libertarian and individualistic to communitarianism. We also examine how voting patterns were shaped by these socio-economic and geographic characteristics in recent general elections.

## The expansion and deepening of populism in rural Iowa

Populism, or the rejection of mainstream or status quo politics, appeals directly to people who are invested in efforts to restore the political system to a place that valorizes hard-working, respectable citizens whose heritage is threatened by impure, alien outsiders (Agnew and Shin 2020). This section addresses the consequences of these sentiments through an analysis of political identities and behavior in rural Iowa. The discussion centers on economic dynamics, social identities, and rurality as ways to explain the sentiments that provided the basis for the flipped 2016 and recent 2020 U.S. Heartland vote. This analysis also serves to better understand ongoing and forecast future political trends in this region.

### *The economy, labor, and trade issues*

Employment opportunities, labor issues, and trade policies are some of the key economic themes that relate to populism and white identity politics (Cramer 2016; Hochschild 2016; Monnat and Brown 2017). For the most part, the economy and employment have been relatively strong in rural Iowa during the period leading up to and after recent elections. Manufacturing, agricultural, and service-based economic activities provided good jobs, however, employers reported labor shortages among some local businesses. Respondents across the four rural counties also described the need for more economic diversification in these areas to prevent dependency on a few economic sectors.

The labor shortage in this region was evident in several of the small towns we visited with widespread help wanted signs. As one participant from an Iowa farm advocate association stated, “You probably noticed it. There’s help wanted signs that are like bolted to the building, not just a temporary little sign. . . . People don’t want to take that sign down. They’re constantly looking for help.” Given this labor shortage, wages have risen in order to attract workers. For example, the local meat packing plant in Storm Lake has three shifts that operate twenty-four hours a day with bonuses to laborers who work night shifts.

Given the high demand for labor, local employers have turned to recruitment and hiring of immigrant labor through both private and government channels. An economic development person explained how this process worked.

Well, it’s got to do with how, how the employers recruit workers using, uh immigration programs that prioritize people from war-torn countries. Uh, areas of high-risk are, there’s an advantage to recruiting there because it’s, it’s easier to bring in workers. And so large corporations--JVS, Tyson--are quite adept at those programs and that’s how they build their workforce.

The seasonal aspect of labor in rural areas also affects the demand for migrant labor. According to one community leader, “The elevator board that I’m on struggles with labor, especially at fall at times. So, it’s seasonal, so they’ve gone to a migrant worker program. Um, so we will get Hispanic workers out of, um, Texas, Mexico area. They’ll come up and work. Um, that doesn’t help full-time people here you know as far as influx.” Thus, immigrant labor fulfills a demand for local agriculture and businesses as a permanent labor force, as well as seasonal employment during

periods of high labor demand.

In many respects, immigrants and refugees serve important labor needs in rural Midwest communities that have experienced the demographic shifts described above (Cohen 2017; Junod 2014). This situation often reinforces stereotypes of immigrant labor as well-suited for physical and low-skilled employment. For example, the owner of a local manufacturer referred to immigrant laborers in their community as

outdoor people. ... They all want to be – they want to be working on these farms. From my understanding they love it. They like being outside working. And, I never have them apply in my business. Um, you know, they just seem to be the outdoor jobs. You know. And that's all I hear. ... Agricultural labor. And the farmers love 'em. They are so loyal.

Racialized stereotypes of immigrant labor were evident in this description of innate loyalty to employers and strong work ethic.

Another local farmer in Iowa talked about the benefits of attracting immigrant labor to rural areas.

I would say that immigration has been a positive because we have more people in our small towns. ... And we have, uh, actually a more stable workforce for those agriculture enterprises than we had prior. I talked to a friend who ran a large poultry operation and twenty years ago when he first started hiring immigrant workers. And I asked him how he liked it. He said, "I love it." He said, "Our previous workforce, I didn't know who was going to show up. And whether or not they were going to be in a state to actually do that day's work." He said, "These folks show up, they work hard, they spend time with their families. We love it."

This statement underscores the claim that immigrants fulfill the demand for labor based on what is perceived as their consistent and reliable work ethic. They also contribute to repopulating rural areas that have lost people due to the outmigration of young people in particular (Johnson and Lichter 2019). Some of the respondents in our study claimed that these demographic trends undermined some of the anti-immigrant sentiment in rural communities.

We also encountered narratives about immigrant labor that were sympathetic to the precarious legal status of these workers and their families (Lay 2012). One respondent worked for a local non-profit organization that supports the Latino population in their community, noting that

a number of people are not able to work because they don't have the proper paperwork. And whether that's just a matter of time, or whether um, how that's resolved I don't know. But I do know that that happens and then they become dependent on their, their broader family. And so then that, those two wage earners, let's say mom and dad if they're working, are probably also taking care of in-laws or whatever. So, I don't know, I don't know those numbers, ... but I know they're significant here.

Similarly, Nelson, Trautman, and Nelson (2015) describe the precarious nature of immigrant labor recruited in many rural areas of the U.S. to work in services and construction that are stimulated by gentrification. This example, and the need for labor in agriculture and meatpacking, are a way of decentering the urban focus of immigrant labor.

Another dimension of rising populism is the rejection of trade and tariff policies that supposedly decreased markets for agricultural goods and lowered commodity prices. Several participants observed that despite the negative economic impact of these policies that cut off markets to China and greatly reduced the price of corn, soybeans, hogs, and other livestock, people were willing to support Trump (Kurtzleben 2016). Some of the participants in our study accepted this market volatility, claiming, "There's no guarantees in agriculture. I mean that, ... the market's not for sissies and because there's nothing we have control over." One local farmer commented, "Well, we were going to hit

that wall anyway because the ethanol, we're just too damn good at what we do." Up to one-third of corn grown in Iowa goes toward ethanol production, which was also negatively impacted by the sharp drop in price for corn during the period of high trade barriers.

These market shifts also affect local businesses that rely on the agricultural sector. An economic development person in a northwest Iowa community stated,

We have a business that declared bankruptcy this year and shut down. They bought their facility at a time of high commodity prices because their demand for their equipment they sold in the ag industry was so high. Then commodity prices turned down, and they were left with a facility that they did not have the volume to fill. ... And ... when they shut down it was thirty-five uh welding level jobs.

Another local employer who openly supported President Trump described the impact of high prices of materials he imported for his transportation-equipment manufacturing plant in northeast Iowa.

And I have a reason to be fairly upset. ... this whole farming community tariff thing that we're going through. We saw 30 percent increase on our aluminum (prices). We had about 30 percent of our aluminum coming from China. And it can't be replaced in this country. ... We ended up raising our prices ... Well, it didn't cut back on sales as much, but I think it's going to hurt growth.

In our discussion of the Trump administration's claim that these tariffs would bring business back to the U.S., this person believed that the sacrifice was worth it because China was also paying a high price for their unfair trade policies.

Several respondents claimed that farmers have been economically impacted by Trump administration trade policies and low prices. As one person observed, "farmers were really affected by the, uh, fluctuations in the prices based on what they say out of Washington today or tomorrow." However, many Republicans in particular continued to support the Trump administration's promotion of these policies. According to a member of an Iowa crop advocacy association, "... probably the majority - and I don't know what that means, I would say probably 60 to 80 percent of farmers support the current administration as far as what they are doing with trade." When asked to explain why local farmers continue to support Trump when it is not in their best economic interest, this same person replied "... we're still agreeing that this [the trade war] is what needs to be done... farmers continue to be supportive. They were standing firm on that ... even though it's hurting them financially, they're willing to take it." This view was reinforced by a county supervisor and retired teacher who noted that, "I think it's really going to bite 'em. I think they're gonna be really shocked at how really angry we are out here." This exchange reveals how some people are willing to sacrifice in the short term for what they see as long-term gains for their businesses and economic interests.

Overall, attitudes about economic independence and persistent support for the Trump administration was widespread among farmers, local business owners, economic development people, and members of local government in many rural areas. The underestimation of how 'angry we are out here' reflects a polarizing and populist hostility towards elite politicians and others in economic decision-making roles in Washington, D. C. These sentiments are echoed by Cramer (2016), Monnat and Brown (2017), and Jacobs and Munis (2018) who describe how longtime Democratic voters and others in the Heartland felt abandoned by a Democratic Party that appeared to de-emphasize policies benefitting the (white) working class. Rural support for the Trump administration was maintained even when these policies appeared to harm immediate economic interests.

Thus, our research suggests that economic grievances were not the primary drivers of Heartland support for the Trump administration. Despite policies that produced tangible economic hardships such as job losses, closed businesses, and higher prices for manufactured items, many people in these small rural communities continued to

support the Trump administration. They were willing to tighten their belt, so to speak, and endure these economic hardships (Kurtzleben 2016). In contrast, some of our respondents who support, advocate for, and work with Latinos, immigrant laborers, and other marginalized groups in these areas were critical of the impact of Trump administration policies on food security, affordable housing, and other social and economic needs of their communities.

### *Social identities – race, immigration, and gender*

Increasingly diverse populations in rural areas are often linked to the rise of populist movements and political polarization. Tensions in small towns and rural communities reflect resentment among some people towards racial minorities, women, and immigrants (Lay 2012; Lichter, Parisi, and Tazuino 2018; Kelly and Lobao 2018). Some of this resentment is revealed in micro-level aggression and bigoted attitudes and actions. Racial epithets towards immigrant labor that we examined earlier in this paper were evident in comments about immigrant laborers “liking agricultural and physical labor.”

These racialized sentiments and biases affected many social services in rural areas such as those in our study. For example, respondents in our study commented on how education and schools with Latinx and other non-native students have adapted in terms of language, culture, housing, and other social dimensions of an increasingly diverse population. The director of the local economic development group in one community stated,

Um, our neighboring county recruited, um, (immigrant) folks and they brought them up and it’s a different culture and ... they didn’t fit with the school system. They had language barriers, um, housing, um ... And they’re also seen’ that in Delaware County as well. Because they recruited some immigration and um, due to that they’ve got some issues in their schools. ... Things that, you don’t look at the whole circle before you bring ‘em here.

A local leader in agriculture lamented that “it’s just not the same small community that it used to be because of, ya know different cultures.” Another respondent commented about immigrants not fitting into the local community because they strained the police system and did not like the local cuisine.

Heartland communities are largely comprised of European immigrant groups who have “worked toward whiteness,” a process of racial identity reconstruction whereby once-stigmatized immigrant groups became recoded as “white” while adopting racialized attitudes toward new migrant group previously applied to them (Roediger 2005). As new immigration diversifies the communities in our study, respondents note increasing anti-immigrant and xenophobic attitudes associated with white identity politics. One respondent had a child in the local high school and was surprised at the prevalence of racist language. This parent stated, “when I was in school, somebody would’ve told somebody to shut up, and that’s not happening. There’s not that seeming check and balance that there used to be. ... perhaps people are more emboldened than they were before.” Another person added that some schools have attempted to address this racism and bigotry. In one community, school administrators and student leaders got together and developed some protocols and open discussions about racialized dynamics and inclusivity.

Food insecurity has also become a concern in these rural communities as increasing numbers of food banks distribute meals to low-income and immigrant communities. This demand has grown with the impact of COVID-19, reinforcing some of the sentiments that we heard about immigrants ‘living off the system’, or stereotypes about welfare dependency. A respondent who volunteers for a local non-profit organization in support of the Latino community stated that she thinks their community is overall very welcoming and has an appreciation for immigrants keeping their community alive. However, she described negative reactions from local citizens who are

obviously unhappy, ... and misconstruing that everyone in that line is an immigrant. That’s certainly not true. ... We, this is a monthly food distribution. We’re handing out the boxes and somebody drove by in a car or pick up and yelled, “And this is why we need a new school, need to pass a school bond.”

This scenario underscores the commonly-held belief in this community that increasing investment in schools is a result of the influx of immigrants and paid for by taxes from farmers and property owners.

Some of these narratives and biased attitudes towards Latinx, Laotian and other immigrant populations reinforce white supremacy and support for politicians who are seen as tough on immigrants. A local business owner in northeast Iowa commented, “I think the immigration issue was huge on that last race (*2016 presidential election*). Because, you know, Hillary was really talking open borders. I mean it was two extremes ... Between Trump and her, you know, one extreme to the other, between those two. And I think that played into a lot of voters’ minds.”

Another social dimension of right-wing populism is gender and especially the voting behavior of women in the 2016 and 2020 campaign. These aspects of our analysis play into and reflect sentiment towards Trump and conservative political parties. In general, women and especially women of color and working-class women are less supportive of Trump and what is interpreted as rhetoric that seeks to preserve white male supremacy (Gökariksel and Smith 2016; Kelly and Lobao 2018). According to one conservative business owner in northeast Iowa,

Trump’s got a bad, um, um, his MO (mode of operation) is, he’s – he has a problem with women. (pause) You know, he just does. ... Well, he does.... you know, it’s like, my wife would be a great example, because she voted for Trump ... But for me just talking to women in general, and his personality ... is just not great with women.

This respondent went on to report that he was “nervous about the women vote” in the upcoming election. Thus, gender relations and women’s attitudes towards the Trump administration have shifted, even among women who may have supported Trump in 2016. According to some of our respondents, the bigotry and negative rhetoric towards women have significantly changed their opinions about populist leaders.

Finally, health issues present significant social and economic challenges for many people in rural Iowa who are concerned about access to health insurance, the cost and availability of quality care, and the status of mental health among people of all ages. A local farmer who has lived in his home community all of his life stated,

The healthcare thing is a big thing, because even if you have health insurance, the co-pays are high and you know, they’re looking for a way they can afford it. And that reflects on the food thing too, because if you’ve got bills, you need to be healthy in the first place and, and I don’t know, you know access. ... And you know, it just costs so darn much. That’s just a big issue.

Health care is also linked to employment in these areas and the need for jobs that provide decent insurance. Mental health issues are a growing concern and especially the growing use of opioids in many rural communities. The incidence and impact of mental health problems in rural America have been documented in many studies (Monnat and Brown 2016; Peters, Miller, and Hochstetler 2019). Problems stemming from mental health were also prevalent during the Iowa farm crisis of the early 1980s. Although several mental health care institutions are located in their communities, the participants complained about their overcapacity and lack of quality service. In sum, the role of social identities and provision of services such as education and health care are linked to populist attitudes and white identity politics in the Heartland state of Iowa. The rural dimensions of these connections are expanded on in the next section.

### **Rurality, populism, and White identity politics**

Many of the narratives shared by residents of rural Iowa are embedded in the tide of agrarian populism that washed across the U.S. Midwest in the late 19th century (Berlet and Sunshine 2019; Hoganson 2019). In these areas, populism is often expressed in the form of resentment against demographically and economically advantaged urban

areas (Cramer 2016). We encountered echoes of these populist attitudes in our study among respondents who resent what they perceive as fewer resources going to rural areas compared to the more populous and wealthy central Iowa and specifically Des Moines, the center of state government and taxation. One respondent referred to the ‘Golden Circle’ of the capital city where the ornate gold-leaf dome covers Iowa’s capitol building. Populism among our respondents added anti-taxation, anti-government, and anti-regulation to the base of rural agrarianism.

Community leaders complained of recent consolidation in regional governance districts that further alienated them from access to services. They expressed frustration that rural counties were overlooked and undervalued by political leaders. One respondent remarked, “sometimes we feel like the ugly stepchild to the rest of Iowa.” An aggrieved sense of alienation from Iowa’s urban power-centers was reinforced by a respondent who joked, “they wanted to give U.S. (rural counties in southern Iowa) to Missouri a couple months ago.” These sentiments resonate with Cramer’s (2016) research on rural resentment and feelings among residents in rural areas that they are left behind as urban centers grow. As one local economic development director stated, “it’d be nice to see assistance to come back to the rural communities to help provide some kind of training for adults that would want to take” classes for advanced degrees. These populist sentiments help explain why, despite ongoing difficulties that rural farmers, businesses, and others experience with trade fluctuations and low prices, many people in the Heartland still identify with Trumpism.

As noted above, the outmigration of young people from these rural areas also increased resentment among rural groups towards urban areas. In many cases, small rural towns lack the amenities that many young people seek. One local businessman described how his adult son felt when he returned to their community after living on the West Coast. “Young people here think the culture ... is lacking. It’s not the same kind of culture they have out there.” Such concerns are similar to those of ‘identitarian nativism,’ a movement that emphasizes the loss of cultural values through an ‘exchange of population’ through low autochthonous birthrate, out-migration of native children, aging of native population, and immigration (Goetz 2021). Further, resentment and hostility towards larger urban areas reinforce support for right-wing populism, libertarian distrust of centralized taxation, and the privileging of local needs and decision-making (Silva 2019). Many rural communities recognize the shortcomings in their lives and locations, and resent that political emphasis and state expenditures seem to flow to larger cities. These populist views translate into support for Trumpism’s rhetorical valorization of ‘Real America’ that places ‘America First’ over the interest of ‘globalists’ and ‘caravans of migrants’. These populist sentiments underlay Trump administration policies toward China, especially the trade and tariff wars that were disrupting Heartland agriculture, as well as immigration policies that emphasized border walls, refugee internment camps, and restrictions on migration.

Two counties in this study are located in former Republican congressman Steve King’s district where respondents discussed their concerns about the contemporary political climate. Mr. King was a divisive, polarizing political personage who embraced populist rhetoric and white supremacy, achieving national notoriety for his disparaging comments about immigrants and immigration (Junod 2014; Lay 2017). As an Iowa congressman, Mr. King was a prominent advocate for ideas associated with the Great Replacement, boasting that he had “market tested” the Trump administration’s immigration policies in Iowa for 14 years. King was removed from his congressional committees by Republican party leadership after he asserted the positive value of white identity: “White nationalist, white supremacist, western civilization – how did that language become offensive? Why did I sit in classes teaching me about the merits of our history and civilization” (Gabriel 2019). While considerable support was expressed for Mr. King in our interviews, some of the strongest tropes associated with him and with Great Replacement ideology more broadly, such as conspiratorial antisemitism, dystopianism, fear of racial impurities, and immigrants as an existential threat were muted or altogether absent in the discourse of our respondents. Our respondents spoke in milder tones, emphasizing “in-group love” more than “out-group hate” (Jardina 2020). Rather than express strong animus toward outgroups, they tended to speak of positive feelings associated with their rural way of life, their traditional communities, and rural values. Jardina and Mickey (2022) have found that even such mild expressions of white identity can translate into support for authoritarian politics and anti-democracy movements.

Though already accustomed to King, many of our respondents detected an increase in populist rhetoric and nativism within their communities in the wake of Trump's ascendancy as president. One person from this region who was a lifelong Democrat shared how one of her friends was politically galvanized upon attending one of Trump's rallies. Trump's populism divided and polarized her circle of friends in a rural Iowa county when she discovered they "...all voted for Trump, except for me. So, twice last year I had to leave and go home early because I made them uncomfortable... it's very tense and very awful." Polarization associated with right-wing populism in these rural communities has made the exchange of political views all but impossible. "They don't want any [contradictory] information. ...If I were to bring that up to her, we probably wouldn't talk for a while... it would be [a long] time before we could get back to where we were." Respondents reported self-exclusion from social groups that supported Trump's presidency. Since the thoughtful exchange of views was impossible, withdrawal from social groups was the respondents' only option: "Cause I can't keep my mouth shut. They will talk amongst themselves, but then I got to go home early."

In another rural Iowa county, populist rhetoric surrounding the Trump presidency divided family and friendship networks, disrupting social ties in the local community. A respondent said Trump divided her network so that long-standing social ties were cut separating avid supporters from avid detractors.

Yes, there are people in my life that I've stopped talking to. Not entirely because of their support of President Trump, but that was sort of just the tipping point. But on the other side, there are people that I have stopped engaging with because of their total hostility and inability to think clearly about who the president is.

For many rural community members, the only way to navigate a polarized political community under stress is to avoid talking about political topics altogether: "you just don't talk ... you just don't talk about it."

Several of our participants indicated that Trump's populism was more divisive than previous presidential administrations. Trump was described as very polarizing and his election emboldened partisans to become more heated and more vocal in their support. A respondent who worked a Republican party booth at a local fair indicated that during the 2016 campaign, Trump supporters "wouldn't say it real loud, but [whispering], "I hope he gets in." By 2019 "a lot of people would come by and tap [loudly] on the table, "Let's go! We gotta git it again." This is a blue-collar and traditionally more Democratic area but voted against Clinton and other Democratic candidates in the 2016 election. Another respondent noted that after the 2016 election, communities were divided into ardent supporters and avid detractors of Trump, both of whom were bolder about their political opinions, overshadowing the voices of middle-of-the-road types who were no longer encountered. In these areas, Trump's populism had raised the emotional temperature surrounding political discussion and debate among community members. "I think people feel more comfortable saying how they feel about it than perhaps they did before. Either side has become emboldened."

Like most rural communities in the Heartland, the counties we visited have historically depended upon civility, mutuality, and cooperation, as reflected in the oft-used colloquialism 'Iowa nice.' Polarized politics and loss of civility resulting from Trumpism were identified as a corrosive influence upon such rural community culture. Social media was identified as a carrier of populist political rhetoric and a divisive agent of polarization. People in these communities feel that they must choose sides as Republican or Democrat, and make their partisan affiliation a hardened identity. According to one participant, it is "difficult to walk back on your opinion anymore. We've created a culture where the only thing you can't do is admit you were wrong." Another respondent noted that strongly-worded partisan posts on social media inhibit relationships across party lines, and friendships and potential business contacts are abandoned because "they say the worst things about people that are maybe the other political side."

Support for Trump and conservative nativism also impacts local churches as the rising tide of populism led ministers and congregations to sort along polarized lines. One of our respondents described how members of their church had "literally gone to their minister and said, 'Where do you stand on Trump?' If the minister was a pro-Trump person, they'd be gone." Another rural Iowa respondent explained that Trump and political populism were



altering the impact of churches and the communities that they serve.

In rural Iowa, you know that’s a strong component of who we are. And, and you know people always speak very delicately usually in the church community because that’s just the way it’s always been. But um, now it seems to be where the politics are, is it’s really, the, your faith and your concept of what your, your religious [belief] is really on the line almost immediately. And, and it’s causing this super divide in the evangelical community for sure, um, because there’s, there’s just no middle ground. It’s just completely butting heads. ... I just think that’s, it’s polarized.

While rural churches traditionally unite residents into “moral communities,” the rise of right-wing populism created discord and division even within a single denomination, leaving congregations siloed within politically-homogenous churches, further eliminating the “middle ground” necessary for community functioning.

In general, respondents varied in their acceptance of Trumpism’s populist rhetoric: some thought it gave voice to their considerable resentment regarding the economic, political, and social disadvantages of rurality. The majority of our respondents recognized that Trumpism was polarizing and divisive, ardently embraced by some and despised by others. The affective polarization in their communities disrupted social networks, stressed community religious institutions, and undermined trust and mutuality essential to small-town and rural life.

In sum, our study reveals how right-wing populism proceeds within the context of localized rural politics by enhancing divisions, rhetorically defining dampened variants of ‘the people’ who must be defended against enemies in the form of elites, loafers, and racialized newcomers. Scholars have attributed the rise of right-wing populism associated with Trumpism to economic stress, threats to social identity, and rural resentment (Monnat and Brown 2017; Smith and Hanley 2018; Schaffner, MacWilliams, and Nteta 2018). The relatively prosperous and growing counties in our study, where unemployment was low, indicate that respondents were nevertheless deeply concerned about economic matters and expressed overall support for the ‘America First’ policies of the Trump administration. They worried about urban elites gaining an advantage at their expense. They were concerned about the impact of demographic change, and while not expressed in the harsh tones of Great Replacement rhetoric articulated by Iowa Congressman Steve King, they nevertheless voiced support for Trumpism’s white nationalist immigration policies. Though stated mildly and with ambivalence, our respondents framed their community concerns in complicated and sometimes unexpected ways parallel to populism and white identity politics. The language and imagery of these political movements associated with Trumpism was mirrored in muted form within the political discourse of respondents in rural communities and was especially evident when describing unstable economic conditions, changing social identities, and the salience of rurality to their way of life.

## **Conclusion: Contesting political populism and white identity politics**

The rise of populism on the political right and identity politics in voting behavior, party affiliation, and political movements is increasingly evident in both the U.S. and Europe. The discourse of populist ideology separates society into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the people’ and ‘the corrupt elite.’ Right-wing populism is simultaneously a reaction to neoliberalism and a backlash to progressive political change. In the form of Trumpism, populism mobilized opposition to foreign influences, globalists, cities, and government (Agnew and Shin 2020; Berlet and Lyons 2000), and lead to the marginalization of immigrants, people of color, religious minorities, and the impoverished (Alba and Foner 2017; Gimpel and Celeste 2008), thereby incorporating central tenants of white identity. In this article, we document how the language and discursive framing of populism and identity movements on the political right are integrated into the political culture of rural America. When community leaders discussed the economy, changes in demographic composition or their rural identity the terms used were often consistent with these broader political movements.

This article analyzes the current political climate and what we argue are shifts to populism and rising white identity politics in the U.S. Heartland. Former President Trump ascended to the White House by flipping several key Heartland states, signaling a political shift toward right-wing populism and white identity politics. Identity politics draw from broader frameworks that help to conceptualize these political and social movements, and give insights into local dimensions of economic instability, contested politics, and spatial dynamics (Gusterson 2017; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2012; Silva 2019).

Affective polarization and political messaging about populism shaped the 2016 and 2020 elections and will likely shape political identities and behavior in the Heartland going forward. This research also leads to reconceptualizing the urban-rural divide and the importance of place in the context of these shifting political geographies (Jacobs and Munis 2018). Following Lichter, Parisi, and Taquino (2018) and others, rurality is no longer a clean geographic construct but is itself a social identity. Many rural residents are economically, culturally, and socially tied to urban living while many urban, suburban, and exurban residents are culturally and socially tied to rurality. Iowa is distinct from, yet similar to the rest of the Heartland. The geographic makeup of this state is largely rural with a few large urban and semi-urban centers.

While Iowa is not completely representative of the Heartland, let alone the U.S. as a whole, political sentiment and behavior reflect mainstream attitudes towards people of color, immigrants, women, economic challenges and prosperity, and rural resentment towards wealthier, more diverse urban areas (Cramer 2016; Lay 2017; Silva 2019). Whiteness, racial diversity, and ethno-nationalist messaging about migration was prominent in Trump's campaign and presidency in this region. We share the concerns of other scholars that hate-filled rhetoric and policies are part of growing misogynist, racist, ethnocentric, and xenophobic narratives among elected representatives and their followers (Junod 2014; Monnat 2016). These factors should be strongly considered in analyses of political campaigns and messaging to appeal to Iowa voters and those of the broader Heartland and nation.

In conclusion, extensive scholarship and critical debates have developed around the rise of populism and white identity politics in diverse political landscapes in the U.S. and Europe. Our focus on economic status, social identities, and geographies of place draw attention to crucial ways of understanding the complexity of why people vote the way they do, or what shapes political attitudes. The fundamental shift in recent elections and rise of candidates and political parties that promote populist and nativist platforms is cause for concern among many. Understanding this shift is crucial to leading a more progressive and inclusive movement for change.

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# The Dialectic of De-Holocenation: Waste and Wealth in the Anthropocene\*

Timothy W. Luke

## I. Introduction: The Dynamics of Degradation

A brief 2021 news item provides a curious, but important, point of departure to examine the accelerating pace of environmental degradation associated with rapid climate change. After decades of destructive hurricane landfalls from the 1821 Norfolk and Long Island Hurricane, the 1893 New York, or “Midnight Storm” Hurricane, the 1903 New Jersey, or “Vagabond,” Hurricane, 1938 New England, or “Long Island Express” Hurricane, and then Hurricanes Donna (1960), Floyd (1999), Irene (2011) plus Superstorm Sandy (2012), environmental conditions have changed across New York. In turn, hard new realities hit home for Manhattanites during September 2021 with Hurricane Ida’s damage.

In the aftermath of this devastating hurricane, New York City resolved to hire its own municipal weather forecaster. The job description called for a provider with the capacity to make precise neighborhood-centered weather predictions. These reports are meant to serve as more accurate, focused, and timely “second opinions” to daily National Weather Service forecasts, which have circulated in the New York metropolitan area since the Weather Bureau of the United States was established in 1870 by President Grant. In making the announcement, Mayor Bill De Blasio compared this decision to the city’s establishment of its own counter-terrorism and intelligence unit in the NYPD after the terrorist attacks of 9/11.

Before Hurricane Ida, the Mayor had been advised that the city would get between 3 to 6 inches of rain for the entire day. At its peak, however, 3.15 inches of rain fell in only one hour in Central Park, along with 4 to 8 inches in a few hours at other locations across the city. This unprecedented level and rate of precipitation triggered the first-ever “flash flood emergency” in New York City. Rain rapidly swamped streets, deluged subway stations, stalled trains, flooded basements, trapped hundreds of motorists in their vehicles, and killed 13 people who drowned in basement apartments, unaware such a calamity could ever befall them.

This rainfall also totally overwhelmed the city’s existing storm sewer systems, which have been constructed gradually over nearly 175 years to handle no more than half this volume of rain run-off at the far lower rates that were characteristic of “a whole different reality” before extensive fossil fuel use. With so many impervious urban surfaces, New York City is not designed to deal with intense rains. Yet, this type of rainfall is more frequent and linked to rapid climate change conditions, which follows to a significant extent from fossil capitalism’s (Malm,

2016) machinations in various markets based in New York City for over two centuries [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c1jLBp2RfvI&t=874s>].

On Monday, September 27, 2021, Mayor De Blasio announced at a broadcast news conference, “we learned from Ida that we have to do some very, very different things,” concluding that “this is a brand-new world” (*Roanoke Times*, September 29, 2021: A 10). At the same time, however, New York City and its residents were put on notice about how ill-adapted they and their city are to face current and dynamically worsening environmental conditions. To rebuild New York City’s infrastructure to adapt to such changes, the Mayor estimated would cost \$100 billion.” [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c1jLBp2RfvI&t=874s>]

As a modern state formation, the city responded to this new challenge by *not* “doing some very, very different things.” Rather the Major just put a price tag on how to apply more measures of new technologies to New York’s climate change challenges, trapping the city and its residents in the same one-dimensional ideology of advanced industrial society, causing these clusters of crises. This study looks back to the critical analyses of “technological rationality” by Herbert Marcuse in *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (1964) to puzzle through these developments.

## II. A Brand New World Mixing with a Grand Old World

What is this “brand new world”? To answer the question, one must probe the fuzzy conditions along the boundary layers between the Holocene (today’s recognized geological epoch of approximately the past 12,000 years) and Anthropocene (a concept of a great debate over if and when the Holocene might be understood as ending) in human and natural history (Schwägerl, 2015). As economies and environments now merge in the waste and wealth of planetary urbanization, this analysis considers how conditions of scarcity and abundance intermix in “de-holocentation” and “anthropocentation” and looks to Marcuse’s critique of advanced industrial society for an understanding of how the world has become “brand new” in the 2020s.

After nearly 250 plus years of fossil fuel combustion across Europe, North America, and around the globe, the 2020s are increasingly marred by unprecedented ecological disasters, like Hurricane Ida’s impact on New York, which arguably are attributable to the growing concentration of greenhouse gases, like CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere. The Dutch established a trading post on Governor’s Island in New York Harbor in 1624 and then started building Fort Amsterdam on Manhattan Island in 1625. The colonists then began constructing a larger settlement, New Amsterdam. It pushed north from the south end of Manhattan up today’s Wall Street where they erected a high defensive wall in 1653 to ward off English and Native American raids. Yet, the English soon took control of this small fur trapping and trading city in 1664. It was, in turn, granted as a territorial concession to London after the Second Anglo-Dutch war in 1667 and renamed as New York. The concentration of atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> over New Amsterdam/New York was at the pre-industrial marker level of 350 ppm (parts per million).

Over the next century, New York expanded in area and population as a major commercial hub for Britain’s North American colonies and an international port for transatlantic slaving since enslaved laborers were used extensively to build out the city as England’s 13 American colonies grew rapidly during the eighteenth century. During these same decades, the industrial era was dawning around today’s metropolitan New York region, including the initial

installations of steam engines in North America. Philip Schuyler ordered a steam engine from Cornwall in 1748 to drain a flooded copper mine close to Newark; Christopher Coles built two steam engines -- the first for a Philadelphia distillery in 1773 and the second for a public water pumping station in New York City in 1776 (Pursell, 1969); and, a third unit was installed in 1780 to drain water from a mine in Cranston, Rhode Island (Pursell, 1969). Before the 1787 Constitution of the United States of America came into force, then, CO<sub>2</sub> and particulate pollution from wood and coal were rising from New York and other nearby states, contributing to today's greenhouse gassing problems.

With nearly 9 million people living compactly today on barely 300 square miles, the heart of this nearly 400-year-old city still is centered on Manhattan Island. From what was created first as a small outpost to support an extractive colonial economy served by European settlers, slave labor, and sailing ships, New York gradually became one of the core nodes for industrial modernity's "urban revolution" (Lefebvre, 2003). It was briefly the center of British military operations during the American Revolution from 1776 to 1783. It also hosted the first capital of the United States' government under the Articles of Confederation and then The Constitution during the 1780s.

Perhaps New York's most significant addition to today's growing disasters of de-holocenation, however, began with the *North River Steamboat* (also known as the *Clermont*). In 1807, this vessel, designed by Robert Fulton, entered service as the world's first steam-powered riverboat, carrying passengers from New York City up the Hudson River to Albany and back. A second vessel, *Car of Neptune*, was put into commission by Fulton in 1809 (Sale, 2001). During 1810, these were the only two steamers in service on Hudson, but by 1840 travelers could book passage on over 100 steamboats running this route. With this technological breakthrough, New Yorkers solidified the city's important role in the fossil-fueled cascades of de-holocenation of the present as newer generations of steamships displaced sail around the world during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Sale, 2001).

One must look at New York City as well as America, then, in terms of abundance, especially the extraordinary cornucopian bounty that coevolves as the waste and wealth of "the American Dream" in the Industrial Revolution. This hybridization of waste and wealth also brought the unified opposites of deformation and formation, closing and opening, cessation, and origination of creative economic destruction, constituting the dialectic of de-holocenation. The complex workings of worldwide industrial production and consumption, first, leave behind massive amounts of noxious by-products, like carbon dioxide, methane, nitrous oxide, and chlorofluorocarbons, or industrial "waste," They have been part and parcel of creating new waves of needed products, or manufactured "wealth," rising with the still increasing consumption of fossil fuels in the Holocene for more than 250 years. Second, the relative environmental stability of the Holocene as "Nature," in turn, suffered concomitant waves of disruptive ecological degradation as the dual development of "waste" and "wealth" spun up together in the detrital wash of the new "Denature" associated with the emergent Anthropocene.

While no one "wants" the abundant toxic effluents of such waste, everyone still "gets" them as embedded and pervasive outcomes of fossil-fueled economic growth. They are inescapable and indivisible in the tremendous output of scarcer pleasing products everyone allegedly "needs" as the wealth sought by the citizens of "carbon democracy" (Mitchell, 2011) as they extract and exploit fossil fuels. While the displeasing by-products and pleasing products share common origins, the maze ways of commodity fetishism in global markets enable the pleasure of products to render the displeasure of their by-products mostly invisible, or at least tolerable externalities. In the immaterial and material flood of goods celebrated with great lust, the issues associated with waste are eclipsed by the ideological



delight of satisfying material stuff, which legitimates contemporary liberal and illiberal institutional arrangements for “industrial democracy.” Celebrating how they “deliver the goods” entails simultaneously how to “downplay the bads.”

This growing abundance of waste, however, promotes, in part, disruptive rapid climate change that now overshadows the pursuit and enjoyment of wealth in the gradual warming of the planet’s entire atmosphere, four oceans, two polar regions, and soil temperatures everywhere. The affluence of industrial wastes from Society is recasting nature in a dangerous dialectic of “de-holocenation.” Even though it is touted as the “advent of affluence,” its ideological distortions and material degradations undercut the enjoyment of industrial wealth. It is these world ecologies of affluence, which occlude the many corrosive effluents such affluence never escapes, also shape the Denatured foundations of the Anthropocene. As the energy regime of urban industrial democracy -- both liberal and illiberal -- plunges deeply into greater fossil fuel use, especially the oil and gas extracted from subterranean rock formations, its sites, spaces, structures, services, and systems become modernity’s forces of petromorphic creation and destruction. Indeed, oil, gas, and coal gradually coat, to some extent, everything produced and consumed, as waste and wealth, for humans and nonhumans alike.

A dialectical appraisal of the entanglements of cityscape with countryside, urban life and rural living, industrial and agricultural existence, mental and manual labor, urban streets, and wild country reveals the perverse dimensions behind the humanization of the Earth, especially how the contradictions of commodities, as waste and wealth, mediate the madness of a human “noosphere” blossoming from hydrocarbonic materials extracted from the natural “biosphere.” The historic shift around the North Atlantic basin towards greater urbanization and fossil fuel use after 1815 infiltrates this waste and wealth -- culturally, economically, and technologically -- through all dimensions of everyday life.

Without oil, gas, and coal, there is little or no food, shelter, water, clothing, transport, information, or order. Ultimately, fossil capitalism (Malm, 2016) and carbon democracy (Mitchell, 2011) are amalgamated elements of the petrocratic order of fossil-fueled existence. As its time, space, and meaning all are reshaped around oil, gas, and coal, they proliferate at petrochronic rates, in petrotopic forms, for petrosemic communities in a world civilization of petrovores whose biopolitics rests upon the petronomic power unleashed by extracting new energy flows long fossilized in the remains of prehistoric life (Luke, 2013: 39-48).

These currents of fluid historical change collide with once far more obdurate biological contingency, as Foucault observed, (1990: 135-159) that reconfigures the contingent possibilities for human freedom as well as the determinate force of nonhuman necessity. Adorno also scans the significance of these transformations in his observations about Nature and Society, namely, by the nineteenth century, “philosophy had succeeded in refining the concept of natural history by taking up this theme of the awakening of an enciphered and petrified object” (Adorno, 1984: 119) in the enduring changes of nature celebrated by philosophers, physicists or poets. Hence, “the deepest point where history and nature converge lies precisely in this element of transience. If Lukács demonstrates the transformation of the historical, as that which has been, into nature, then here is the other side of the phenomenon: nature itself is seen as transitory nature, as history” (Adorno, 1984: 119).

One must track the dialectics of by-products and products, waste and wealth, displeasure and pleasure in these historic climate changes. They are indeed rapid, profound, and fundamental shifts in the turbulent boundary layers

separating two geological epochs. The whirling chaos spinning up from this new unwanted, and yet man-made, global environment, in turn, seems to require a discrete epoch for its critical interpretation. The terms of a climatological conception of history, due to the immanent catastrophic consequences of unrelenting by-production and production of waste and wealth by petrocratic powers, increasingly lead many now to regard this epoch as “the Anthropocene.”

With rapidly rising levels of industrial by-products and waste, Humanity, Society, and Technology are “processing Nature” of the Holocene into more unpredictable and uncertain forms of “Denature,” leading to quantitatively rising tides of degrading de-holocenation. In the work of established anthropological, biological, and climatological science, today’s rapid climate changes are confounding human responses to halting or reversing them due to their remarkable unpredictability, scope, and rapidity. In this “anthropocenation,” the waste and wealth of contemporary global capitalism’s degraded life amalgamate as disaster and delight in the “damaged life” (Adorno, 2005) left to the planet, given the qualitatively emerging attributes of the Anthropocene.

### III. One-Dimensionality and Overdevelopment

After nearly 250 plus years of fossil fuel burning across Europe, North America, and around the globe, their meaning in the 2020s is being recast as the prelude to clusters of major ecological disasters worsened by rising concentration of CO<sub>2</sub> and other greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. The grand old world in which much of New York City was built basically assumed the conditions of “a world” at the 293 ppm of CO<sub>2</sub> prevailing in 1900 (NOAA, 2021) would persist, even though the banks and corporations of Manhattan were nurturing more than one brand new world defined by the widely-celebrated powers of “technological rationality” described by Marcuse in *One-Dimensional Man*. In this work of highly critical *Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*, he expressed severe frustration. The tremendous material and intellectual potential of “the affluent society” of the post-1945 Western world was largely misspent on the containment of its opponents -- foreign and domestic -- through “the sheer quantity of goods, services, work, and recreation” (Marcuse, 1964: 242).

A once potentially liberating “alternative future” for humanity has become lost to a failed “*reduction of overdevelopment*” in the irresponsible “atrocious present” of petrocratic one-dimensionality. Rooted in “moronization, the perpetuation of toil, and the promotion of frustration”, it continues by thoroughly repressing a qualitative transformation of the individual and society “in the cult of fitness, strength, and regularity” (Marcuse, 1964: 242) celebrated by fossil capitalists and carbon democrats. Rather than attaining truly tangible levels of collective liberation and individual autonomy, “the apparatus” of contemporary advanced industrial society “imposes its economic and political requirements for defense and expansion on labor time and free time, on material and intellectual culture” from its base in a manner that “tends to be totalitarian” (Marcuse, 1964: 3) in accord with its energetic petronomic logic.

Marcuse’s critical exploration of “alternative futures” for humanity recounts how these unique new forms of oppressive totalitarianism were not “a terroristic political coordination of society” but rather, ironically, “a non-terroristic economic-technical coordination which operates through the manipulation of needs by vested interests,” precluding at the same time “the emergence of an effective political opposition against the whole” (1964: 3). Whether it was clocked in the hours of his own atrocious present in which the Goldwaterite “conscience of conservatism” assailed “the Great Society” of LBJ that had declared “the war on crime” at home and “the war against Communism” in Indochina; or, instead, our own atrocious present of Bidenite dreams for “Building Back Better” against the

insurrections for Trumpification by “the MAGA movement,” the outcomes are plain. The oppressive totalitarian order of “a specific system of production and distribution” in carbon democracy continues to prove itself in the US to be quite “compatible with a ‘pluralism’ of parties, newspapers, “countervailing powers, etc.” (Marcuse, 1964: 3).

The paralysis of an effective political opposition ready to fight for authentic liberation for now over 55 years undoubtedly solidified during the neoliberal turns of the 1970s and 1980s. These potent counterrevolutionary energies, as Marcuse (1964: 4) might observe, continue “implanting of material and intellectual needs that perpetuate obsolete forms of the struggle for existence.” Today, they prize atomized, hypercompetitive “winner takes all” markets, which fundamentally operate even more perversely through the non-stop manipulation of needs in “the surveillance capitalism” of newer vested interests, like Amazon, Alphabet, Apple, Facebook, and Microsoft. The most distinctive mark of “advanced industrial society is its effective suffocation of those needs that demand liberation -- liberation also from that which is tolerable and rewarding and comfortable -- while it sustains and dissolves the destructive power and repressive function of the affluent society. . . .the social controls exact the overwhelming need for the production and consumption of waste” (Marcuse, 1964: 7).

Marcuse (1964: 16) highlighted these contradictions in the conventional faith in “Progress,” because “advanced industrial society is approaching the stage where continued progress would demand the radical subversion of the prevailing direction and organization of progress.” Yet, is another radical twist needed here today? In one sense, “all freedom depends on the conquest of alien necessity and the realization of freedom depends on the *techniques* of this conquest” (Marcuse, 1964: 18). Then as now, however, advanced industrial society rests upon the techniques of “fossil capital” (Malm, 2016). Despite the din raised by Bill McKibben and 350.org, Greta Thunberg and Fridays for the Future or even the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) with its Process and Meetings from the Kyoto Protocol (1997), the Paris Agreement (2015) as well 2021’s COP 26 session in Glasgow, the prodigious consumption of oil, gas, and coal continues to increase (United Nations Climate Change, 2022). It still powers “the highest productivity of labor,” “the most efficient industrialization,” and the fullest “restriction and manipulation of needs” (Marcuse, 1964: 18) in today’s dialectic of waste and wealth.

To shine another light on the one-dimensionality of de-holocenation, “technological rationality” has become the greatest vehicle of “sustainable degradation” (Luke, 2006) in the illiberal and liberal forms of today’s “carbon democracy.” This greatly deformed political regime continues to be “a truly totalitarian universe in which society and nature, mind and body are kept in a state of permanent mobilization for the defense of this universe” (Marcuse, 1964: 18), but it increasingly administers the degradations of technological rationality in restricting *abundance* for the few, while rapidly worsening scarcity for the many. An adaptative spin is put on ecological degradation, “in the guise of affluence and liberty -- extends to all spheres of private and public existence, integrates all authentic opposition, absorbs all alternatives” (Marcuse, 1964: 18) by promising techno-fix after techno-fix to suffuse, soften and slow the ill-effects of rapid climate change.

The current means of production “in the struggle for the pacification of nature and society” (Marcuse, 1964: 16) rest upon sustained systemic waste, which is both invasive and invidious. It promotes, in part, rapid climate change that attends this pursuit and enjoyment of wealth with the widening wrath of global warming -- prolonged drought, more frequent hurricanes, sea rise, fiercer forest fires, incredible flooding, devastating widespread desertification, and lost glaciers. Marcuse believed the “pacification of existence” could lead to “conditions where the competing needs,

desires, and aspirations are no longer organized by vested interests in domination and scarcity,” but this hope is much weaker in the de-holocenating decades of the Anthropocene as the alliance of fossil capital and carbon democracy persists as “an organization which perpetuates the destructive forms of struggle” (Marcuse, 1964: 16).

Decades of avoidance have preceded facing these realities. NASA scientists briefed President Johnson about these trends in November 1965 (President’s Science Advisory Committee (1965). Exxon Mobil, Royal Dutch Shell, and British Petroleum anticipated these degrading developments after conducting extensive internal research during the 1970s and 1980s (Banerjee, 2015; and Hall, 2015). The National Academy of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine published a report on Energy and Climate in 1977 (National Academy of Science, 1977), tying coal consumption to the greenhouse effect. Furthermore, James Hansen testified to the US Senate in 1988 that he was 99 percent certain that increasing levels of human industrial pollution were the cause of rising global temperature trends (Revkin, 1988: 51-61).

In another register, Marcuse captured the psychosocial implications of how “as beneficial products become more available to more individuals in more social classes, the indoctrination they carry ceases to be publicity; it becomes a way of life. . . and militates against qualitative change. Thus, emerges a pattern of *one-dimensional thought and behavior* in which ideas, aspirations, and objectives that, by their content, transcend the established universe of discourse and action are either repelled or reduced to the terms of this universe” (Marcuse, 1964: 12). Amid the intense floods of industrial wastes from society in nature, carbon democracies continue to thrive as fossil capitalism invents new pricing points, robust markets, and rising demands to truck, barter, exchange, and trade noxious by-products along with neat products for those who can afford them.

Indeed, “validated by the accomplishments of science and technology, justified by its growing productivity, the status quo defies all transcendence. . . Operationalism, in theory and practice, becomes the theory and practice of *containment*” (Marcuse, 1964: 17). Such strategies for reshaping, reformulating and recasting nature in perniciously enduring ways, therefore, embrace, on the one hand, the ardent pleas of climate change denialism certain that the devastation of the Anthropocene is a hoax as well as, on the other hand, the smug confidence of climate change managerialism positive that it can steer the side-effects of accelerating de-holocenation away from alarming endangerment toward a new enlightenment to be found in a “good Anthropocene”(Shellenberger, 2020).

“The Great Acceleration” (McNeill and Engelke, 2014) of the Anthropocene began speeding up after V-J Day, and the causes and effects at play in the Anthropocene’s advent were already apparent in the 1950s and 1960s: a degraded environment, a significant wealth gap, uneven development, and depleted fossil fuels. As these negative trends built upon each other over the decades, the political response today at international climate change conferences staged by the UNFCCC is largely, as it has been since the 1990s, more promises to do too little, too late to do anything more than guarantee their acceleration.

#### IV. Destroying Nature to Save Society

By the time Marcuse was working with the Institute for Social Research’s offices in exile at Columbia University in 1940, then, the first stirrings of the Anthropocene were surfacing from nature. Human technological powers and economic activities were already becoming terraformative forces. They were eclipsing the autogenesis of cosmic chance in nature’s material metabolisms and displacing the theogenesis of divine design in human social imaginaries.

Between 1940 and 1945,

Human beings had already violated the Earth's 'natural laws' by staging a controlled nuclear chain reaction. By 1945, with the machining of rare natural elements, like uranium, into explosive devices, human beings began to warp nature by accelerating matter into new artificial realms of transuranic denature, introducing into the environment many new materials, like neptunium and plutonium that hitherto did not exist in nature as it had been known. . . Nature now becomes in many respects truly anthropogenic, not autogenic or theogenic, and the powers causing its anthropogenesis also arguably begin to implode many existing cultural, political, and social systems predicated upon stable natural realisms (Luke, 1996: 499).

The nuclear revolution is the anthropogenic core of the Anthropocene, which brought the physics of "the stars down to Earth." It was followed by cascades of long-lived super-toxic chemicals, plumes from petrochemically-contrived plastics, and floods of noxious fossil fuel greenhouse gases. From this fusion of cosmic energy and telluric matter, the Great Acceleration has devastated the existing conditions of human beings' long-lived cultural, economic, political, and social practices (McNeil and Engelke, 2014).

Does a new biopolitical nexus, then, take hold after 1945 with the Great Acceleration's continuous technological, social, and cultural remix of the natural as the historical as the valorizing cycles of M-C-M' accelerate in carbon capitalist forms of life? Ecological degradation coevolves in parallel with greenhouse gases. Carbon dioxide as parts per million in the atmosphere rose from around 280 ppm in 1700, as New York City came under British control, to only 293 ppm by 1900 -- even after coal-fired steamships crowded most sailing ships out of global trade lanes and steam-powered locomotives still dominated the world's railways. By 1940, however, CO2 levels had jumped to 307 ppm. And by 1970, when Marcuse still was teaching at the University of California-San Diego, CO2 had reached 325 ppm. Despite three years of COVID-19 buffered economic growth, this main greenhouse gas is hovering today around 420 ppm, or 50 percent higher than in 1700 (NOAA, 2021).

Pulling the planet into this increasingly destabilized chemical crucible, multiple crises are mounting from the conditions Marcuse identified as "the pacification of nature and existence" (1964: 16). Life on planet Earth has become a "one-dimensional" as greater levels of by-productive and productive "artificiality" soak into the natural facticity of the planet's diverse environments with de-holocenation. Nature under the gas greenhouse still can be imagined, especially by die-hard environmentalists, to be raw, untamed, or wild. Yet, these attributes now are virtually ideological relics, scattered around the world in isolated wilderness reserves or long-abandoned ruins, while being honored continuously in BBC, CNN, or PBS televisual tributes to the planet's last wildernesses.

"In an era of industrial culture," as Buck-Morss (1989: x) has suggested, "consciousness exists in a mythic, dream state, against which historical knowledge is the only antidote. But the particular kind of historical knowledge that is needed to free the present from myth is not easily uncovered. Discarded and forgotten, it lies buried within surviving culture. . . ." What is buried, how it is forgotten, and why it is discarded are challenging questions. Such pieces of knowledge often are regarded as neglected, invisible or buried due to their uselessness to anyone in power." Ecological knowledge about these trends is mostly discarded because those in power have little use for popularizing lost alternative ways of life that are no longer viable in the changing conditions of human and nonhuman life across the planet.

## V. Conclusion: The Workings of Vested Interests

Marcuse lends significant added texture to the dialectic of de-holocenation and anthropocenation. Once the allure of hydrocarbon energy, high productivity, and holistic efficiency dominate advanced industrial society with its abundance of waste and wealth, “the concept of alienation seems to become questionable” inasmuch as individuals completely “identify themselves the existence which is imposed upon them and have in their own development and satisfaction. . . .the subject which is alienated is swallowed up by its alienated existence. There is only one dimension, and it is everywhere and in all forms” (Marcuse, 1964: 11). The petropolitics of vested economic interests in advanced industrial society consequently fuel the biopolitics of de-holocenation and anthropocenation.

The concept of the Anthropocene thrives as another polysemic expression, which closely tracks, “the prevailing technological reality” tagged by the climatological conception of history. Despite decades of hand-wringing and proclamations about the imperatives of decarbonization, degrowth, and decommodification, “the productive apparatus and the goods and services it produces ‘sell’ or impose the social system as a whole” (Marcuse, 1964; 11). Waste and wealth are totally conflated in “the so-called consumer economy and the politics of corporate capitalism have created a second nature of man which ties him libidinally and aggressively to the commodity form” (Marcuse, 1969, 14). Not surprisingly, then, the sunset of fossil-fueled capitalism continues to be postponed from 1990 to 2010, 2030, or 2050. Despite the by-products of waste and its displeasure, the products of wealth and their pleasures “indoctrinate and manipulate,” which undergirds this “pattern of *one-dimensional thought and behavior* in which ideas, aspirations and objectives that, by their content transcend the established universe of discourse and action are either repelled or reduced to the terms of this universe” (Marcuse, 1964: 11, 12).

The disruptions of rapid climate change are becoming more pervasive; but, at the same time, Marcuse would observe it is the ordinary everyday work behind “taking care of business” that still stands behind the dialectic of waste and wealth:

the need for possessing, consuming, handling, and constantly renewing the gadgets, devices, instruments, engines, offered to and imposed upon the people, for using these wares even at the danger of one’s own destruction has become a “biological” need in the sense just defined. The second nature of man thus militates against any change that would disrupt and perhaps even abolish this dependence of man on a market ever more densely filled with merchandise -- abolish his existence as a consumer consuming himself in buying and selling (Marcuse, 1969, 14).

Basic bureaucratic banalities then rest at the core of this looming catastrophe (Luke, 2009). Marcuse simply anticipates how the age of de-holocenating anthropocenation manifests itself as green aluminum water bottles, plug-in Priuses, carpets made from recycled soda bottles and carbon off-sets for vacations to the Seychelles.

As Marcuse maintains, these symbolic circuits of wasteful wealthy activity reveal how ecological endangerment is carried by economic empowerment since government works “only when it succeeds in mobilizing, organizing and exploiting the technical, scientific, and mechanical productivity available to industrial civilization” (1964: 3). Having made this move, advanced industrial society attains the “effective suffocation of those needs which demand liberation” to let “social controls exact the overwhelming need for the production and consumption of waste” (Marcuse, 1964: 7). Ensnared in the given naturalization of alienation, the green state in the Anthropocene morphs into “the rule of a repressive whole” in which “liberty can be made into a powerful instrument of domination” (Marcuse, 1964: 7).

Empowered with liberal responsibilities to protect against endangering emergencies, governance itself becomes a service for “the more rational, productive, technical, and total” administrative repression of society {Marcuse, 1964: 6) by linking in the US, for example, controlling authority vested in the “Environmental Protection Agency” plus continual assignments for the “Federal Emergency Management Agency.” EPA and FEMA policies shield the givenness of the existing alienated social order, which the academic sustainability studies curricula have constructed as “the environment,” as it comes under the sustainable management of these “epafemarchs.” The dialectic of wealth and waste pulls for, on the one hand, more resources for industrial production, while its pernicious by-products, on the other hand, push forth climate change, severe drought, massive fires, and super storms. When and where “environmental protection agents” cannot contain or prevent natural disasters threatening the producing and consuming public, then the public may apply for material relief from “emergency management agents.”

Policing ecological crises in the Anthropocene now is the mission of a green governance-services complex built upon the well-meaning mainstream labor of academic sustainability programs/third sector organizations/international climate conferences. This fully emergent “epafemarchy” of experts, on the one hand, “protects environments” as sites for resource preservation, extraction, and consumption against more severe natural hazards. And, on the other hand, its “emergency managers” guard the apparatuses generating the by-products and products, waste and wealth, displeasure and pleasure of one-dimensional anthropogenic life when natural disasters trigger social catastrophes. Meanwhile, this order sustainably degrades the Earth before our eyes all around us (Luke, 2006: 99-112).

This “natural history” is petrified today in the multiple layers of “ecological modernization” developed under the guidance of fossil capitalists and carbon democrats. In such sustainable development schemas, the Anthropocene enables the replication of alienation as liberation. Even New York City has been caught between the vested interests as Washington’s epafemarchs work elsewhere around the US.

Given Mayor De Blasio’s shock and awe after Hurricane Ida in 2021, why did he overlook Mayor Michael Bloomberg’s “NYC Green Infrastructure Plan” from 2010? It was celebrated heartily at the time by Marcia Bystryn, the president of the New York League of Conservation Voters, who claimed “the NYC Green Infrastructure Plan is a comprehensive response that will reduce pollution, protect critical habitat and make investments where they will have the greatest impact. We applaud Mayor Bloomberg, Commissioner Holloway, Deputy Commissioner Strickland and everyone involved for this important step toward a more sustainable city” (Surfrider Foundation, 2022).

Leveraging the best green technological rationality of that moment, its layered ecological modernization program proposed that “a mix of technologies and solutions will be implemented to not only reduce water contamination so that more waterways can be made available for recreation, but also green and cool the city and improve air quality,” since the design for “green infrastructure uses vegetation, soils, and other structural elements to mimic natural hydrologic cycles by slowing down, absorbing, and evaporating stormwater. The new plan is estimated to reduce the city’s long-term sewer management costs by \$2.4 billion over the next 20 years, helping to hold down future water bills” (Surfrider Foundation, 2022). Many “green roofs” were planted on high-rises all over Manhattan, but those efforts neither anticipated nor avoided the brand new world from which Hurricane Ida came to New Yorkers and the city a decade later.

The ongoing entanglements of overdevelopment with one-dimensionality continue to overlook the chaotic shift along the boundaries of advanced industrial society's de-holocenating and anthropocenating disruptions. Therefore, epafemarchs at the national, state, and local levels of government plainly have their work cut out for them in the next eight to ten years as global greenhouse gas emissions threaten to make it impossible to keep global warming under 2 degrees Centigrade for decades to come. All of the science asserts that time is very tight. As the co-chair of Working Group III of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), Jim Skea, declares, "it's now or never, if we want to limit global warming to 1.5C (2.7F); without immediate and deep emissions reductions across all sectors, it will be impossible. This assessment shows that limiting warming to around 2C (3.6F) still requires global greenhouse gas emissions to peak before 2025 at the latest, and be reduced by a quarter by 2030" (United Nations, 2022).

Meanwhile, such guidance is ignored. The daily drift of industrial materiel available to one-dimensional men and women makes their meaning. The weekly whirl of destructive commercial exchange is their environmental order. The monthly calculus of industrial commerce constitutes their basic services, but the yearly accounting of the Earth's ecological "overshoot" in greenhouse gassing concentrations, marked mainly by atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> in ppm, documents the ecological ruination that is becoming their most emblematic artifact.



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## Endnotes

\*Different versions of this paper were presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Seattle, WA, September 30-October 3, 2021; and, the International Herbert Marcuse Conference, "Alternative Futures: Marcuse's Dialectic of Technology," Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ, October 7-9, 2021.

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# Culture After Work? Intellectual Property in Post-Scarcity Discourses

Ryan Nolan

*Holly+* is a project from the musician and sound artist Holly Herndon and collaborator Mat Dryhurst, centered around a platformed ‘voice model’ that enables users to upload their own audio and have it sung back to them in Herndon’s voice.<sup>1</sup> As a tool for composition and sonic experimentation, *Holly+* is a product of machine learning and a deep neural network, an impressive contribution to the historical entanglement between music and technology. It is an excellent example of what Eric Hobsbawm (1998) saw as music’s tendency (alongside, for instance, cinema) to lead the arts into new frontiers. However, technological questions are not the primary concern of this article. For while the modernity of the project (the inherent *logic of the new* that underpins a great deal of ‘cutting-edge’ computer music practice) is fascinating, it also raises questions of rights ownership and creative sovereignty. In other words, it presents an opportunity to think through the changing form of intellectual property, function, and standing in the context of cultural work under contemporary capitalism and recent attempts to imagine society otherwise.

Until the launch of *Holly+* in 2021, Herndon’s voice was a scarce resource. On the one hand, her voice is the unique result of her physiology and embodied materiality. On the other, it was protected by artificial mechanisms such as copyright law and histories of legal precedent in recorded form.<sup>2</sup> Adopting principles that stem from the ‘free software’ movement, including certain ‘copyleft’ and ‘open source’ practices, users can produce their own music using Herndon’s voice theoretically in perpetuity (or for as long as the technology is maintained). Indeed, this might extend beyond the artist’s lifetime, exploding the boundaries imposed by increasingly restrictive licensing technologies whose purpose is to impede modification and creative appropriation. In other words, *Holly+* might be conceived as an experiment in artistic and cultural ‘post-scarcity,’ at least from the perspective of this one detail; from the perspective of others, this may not be the case. But I will return to this example in the final section.

This article is concerned with culture *after* work, which is not to say a culture free from labor. In a rather straightforward sense, it follows a Bourdieuan concern with cultural production, situating cultural practice in the expanded social and economic conditions from which they are formed and where they circulate (Bourdieu, 1994). More specifically, I am interested in bringing the fields of cultural production to speculation on the future of work, which has been largely passed over in resurgent streams of the current discourse in favor of various service, platformed, low-skilled, and ‘menial’ forms of labor (low skilled and menial in the estimations of capitalism, that is). Recognizing this tendency is not to suggest that scholarly attention has been misplaced; the above are significant sites of struggle and have rightly been the subject of much humanistic and social scientific study. The decline of manufacturing and the unparalleled growth of service work demands rigorous social and political engagement. However, I want to understand this impact and the implications for the future through the specific lens of the cultural industries—whose workers no doubt engage in other precarious forms of work across the broad spectrum of the economy.

The last decade has seen the publication of numerous writings on post-work, post-capitalism, and post-scarcity that have been invariably linked to debates surrounding technological advances in machine learning, Artificial

Intelligence, automation, and other so-called ‘smart machines’ (Smith, 2020), the gig economy, cognitive labor, the digital economy, universal basic income, and platform capitalism. As others have highlighted, all of this is accumulating to such a degree that a nascent stage of what might be called ‘post-work studies’ has begun to emerge (Hester and Stronge, 2020). There is, of course, a longer history of thought and social struggle that underpins this concurrence of recent output—from Thomas More’s *Utopia* to various socialist projects of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—but I will not recall these genealogies here (see Benanav, 2021; Beech, 2019; Morris, 1993). Proclamations of ‘work’ that do not include ‘the worker’ as we currently know it abound, pointing to a future of increased leisure time where one might be free to pursue their passions without the worry of earning a living by selling their capacity to labor (a technocratic vision that does not match up to current reality, as Phil Jones (2021) has demonstrated). However, what about those for whom the designation ‘work’ is not so clear cut—where distinctions between work and life are blurred, but where unquantifiable amounts of labor have been devoted to honing a craft (Warne Thomas, 2021: 14)—such as the artist, designer, coder or musician? As W.E.B Du Bois (2003) once described, are those lines of work otherwise demarcated by ‘spiritual values and social distinctions’?

Forms of cultural work *do* feature in these writings, though in a more generalized, perhaps even idealized or romantic sense, in that new freedoms and visions of future societal organization call forth the reimagining of all types of labor. There is, however, a distinct lack of explicit engagement in recent literature in this area with musicians, artists, curators, and so on. Perhaps it is for a good reason since they are continually reproduced through contradictory practices. In older socialist and postcapitalist thought, artists and many other cultural workers symbolized the non-alienated worker *par excellence* (Beech, 2019: 4). Now, however, as critical theorist Benjamin Noys has put it, they are the *most* and *least* capitalist subjects—at once resisting while continually pursuing self-valorization through their practice (Noys, 2011: 1). What I argue in this article is that focusing on the particularities of cultural production, some important claims made by those contemporary theorists of the future of work are reinforced while allowing other problems to rise to the surface. When ‘society regulates the general production’ (Marx, 2000: n.p.) and we are no longer tied to demarcated spheres of activity to satisfy our material needs, what will become of culture and of the cultural worker?

I begin by reviewing some of the post-work literature, paying particular attention to Aaron Benanav’s *Automation and the Future of Work* (2021), before turning to consider the question of culture more broadly within this discourse. I point out that culture and cultural practice do figure but largely—and without explication, problematically—in utopian visions of the future, in a world where alienated labor and scarcity have been rendered historical. This is problematic because it implicitly reinforces the notion that artistic and cultural work is not quite work in the same sense as is driving for a food courier platform, or fabricating components is for an automotive assembly line. Adopting Marxist cultural theorist McKenzie Wark’s abstraction of the hacker class, cultural production is situated within an emerging form of capitalist social relations. I turn to consider the kind of private property that cultural producers predominantly deal in, namely intellectual property and products of the imagination (like compositions, paintings, concepts, source code, and so on). Admittedly, this article pursues a narrowed view of ‘cultural production,’ primarily conceived around artistic fields, and I acknowledge that cultural production refers to much more than this.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, this article itself is an exercise in bringing together a couple of influential texts from recent years and is by no means exhaustive. However, the point is to raise the notion that, in the context of the resurgence discourse around post-work and post-scarcity, we must also reconceive legal technologies of artificial scarcity, such as restrictive intellectual property protections. To do so, there must be an orchestrated move away from an individualistic focus on rights-to-property (and the associated motivations for protecting cultural products, like the exploitation of IP) to a more socialized focus on the general intellect and the understanding that any inherent value of cultural products is historically and socially produced.

### Post-work and post-scarcity society

Technological advancements will save us from the toils of work by doing it for us, but since there is no guarantee

of relinquishment from having to labor and live in a market-based economy, what will we do in its place? This is a rather crude formulation of a question posed by scholars working within the remit of a future without work, particularly where ‘fully automated’ processes and advanced robotics are taking over swathes of jobs in a variety of industries, leaving a growing number of workers to compete for dwindling opportunities in their wake (see Bastani, 2019; for an account of this trend, see also Jones, 2021:24). Opportunities that are nevertheless themselves poorly compensated, increasingly precarious, and rarely fulfilling—a set of conditions that defines a more general tendency towards ‘sub-’ or ‘underemployment’ that has been seeping into global economies since the 1970s, to which I’ll return below (Jones, 2021:30; Benanav, 2021:56). Nevertheless, a great deal of post-work literature skews toward a vision of the future defined in many respects by social crises and mass ‘technological unemployment’ (Srnicek and Williams, 2015; Brynjolfsson and McAfee, 2014; Ford, 2015).

As social theorist Aaron Benanav asks in the opening of his book *Automation and the Future of Work*, providing something of a pastiche of those to whom he refers as the ‘automation theorists’:

After all, what would human beings do in a largely automated future? Would we be able to adapt our institutions to realize the dream of human freedom that a new age of intelligent machines might make possible? Or would that dream turn out to be a nightmare of mass technological unemployment? (Benanav, 2021: ix)

Benanav’s analysis is among the most direct of recent critiques leveled at this automated vision of the future, which he contends comes from a heterogeneous group of thinkers “from all points along the political spectrum” (2021: 5). The unifying force that underpins this otherwise inherently fractious or disjunctive automation discourse, Benanav argues, is a set of four principles or apparently deterministic truisms that emerge from the coming technological change. The first is that so-called technological unemployment—the absolute displacement of workers from their jobs by machines—is not only inevitable but already taking place at an alarming rate. Secondly, this creeping tendency will not slow and is a sign of a future dominated by full automation across the full compass of industry. Thirdly, rather than perceiving a workforce of automated machinery and computational organization as human liberation from alienated labor, the need to work to sustain ourselves and our lifestyles will remain intact and invariably lead to social disarray. And lastly, to moderate the crisis of unemployment, automation theorists of all stripes find the need to deploy a universal basic income (UBI) increasingly urgent (Benanav, 2021: 2–3). It is worth highlighting, however, that for various interest groups, instruments such as basic income are a means to radically different social and political ends (for an expanded discussion, see Standing, 2017; and in practice, Autonomy, 2021).

In short, for many automation theorists, technological problems require technocratic solutions. Benanav and others are not so sure and are uneasy at the prospect of ‘fixing’ so-called problems of the market with yet more market-based solutions. There is an agreement, however, that the underlying issue of global capitalism is the system’s inability to produce enough jobs for a growing reserve of potential labor. There is resolutely a crisis of labor, Benanav confirms (to which I will turn below), but while the automation theorists get the cause of the present crisis wrong, utopian visions of the future are required and necessary in order to bring about a future of collective social freedom.

For Benanav, rampant technological change and the subsequent displacement of workers by machines is not the problem. Tracking trends and broader tendencies from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, he shows that the automation of processes and the introduction of new productivity-enhancing technologies have consistently led to job loss at a number of historical junctures and that automation discourse surfaces time and again in response (Benanav, 2021: 6, 8). Rather, the real driver of the labor crisis is a rampant and unceasing technical change in a deindustrialized context of secular stagnation marked in part by global material overcapacity. This is the so-called ‘Age of Stagnation’ (Das, 2016; Smith, 2020). In tracing this trajectory and extrapolating from it—slipping out of the timeline presented in the automation discourse into another (Benanav, 2019: 15)—Benanav necessarily arrives at both a different conceptualization of the current conjuncture (the capitalist present) and of the possible futures that might be brought into being (produced through social struggle). Indeed, the political utility of post-work’s utopianism is

demonstrated through the latter, a version of which I will attempt in relation to cultural production in the final section of this article: it is “utopian thinking is here a tool for orientation and mobilization – a means of thinking outside the present” (Hester and Stronge, 2020).

Departing from the perspective of industrial transformation through robotized processes and automation, Benanav turns attention to the specificity of how the rise in global overcapacity has driven deindustrialization since the Second World War. In particular, through a series of technocratic alignments underpinned by political strategy in the postwar period, Benanav notes how the US—who, at that time, “hosted the most dynamic economy in the world, with the most advanced technologies” (Benanav, 2019: 26)—extended allegiances in the form of material support in raising the industrial manufacturing capacities of competitor nations such as Germany and Japan. This kind of ‘export-led industrialization’ (a mechanism through which a nation drives economic growth through exporting manufactured goods or raw materials) was largely successful for a number of decades. However, by the 1960s, what critical theorist Robert Brenner (2006: 74) called ‘contradictions of internationalization’ began to emerge; thus “rising manufacturing capacity across the globe quickly generated overcapacity, issuing in a ‘long downturn’ in manufacturing output growth rates” (Benanav, 2019: 26).

This economic downturn was marked by the saturation in global markets of manufactured goods, kicking into gear a slowdown of industrialization and a reduction in output growth and profitability that resulted in “deindustrialization in employment terms” (Benanav, 2019: 27). For Benanav, building on others such as Brenner, here lies the correct source of today’s crisis of labor. In contrast to that which is credited in various accounts of automation theory, namely rampant technological change, the observable rise of global overcapacity beginning post-WW2 provides the foundation for our contemporary condition. This is felt and demonstrated in the present in the rise of what Nick Srnicek termed ‘platform capitalism,’ which emerged through increasingly risky investments in the context of the general deindustrialization of high-income economies, where investors are looking to maximize yields by turning to riskier assets like information and technology companies (Srnicek, 2015: 21, 27). But how do we move on from this impasse; where might we turn?

Here, Benanav charts a productive course. As I have recalled from some of his argumentation in *Automation and the Future of Work*, relying on technological advancement (alone) does not provide the conditions necessary for a post-work future or a post-scarcity society. This path leads to, and by the preference of many contemporary theorists of automation, a future that cannot escape market mechanisms like the implementation of some form of basic income. Where answers to society’s problems are policy instruments like basic income, Benanav argues we are asking the wrong questions. Ultimately, the post-work literature has brought with it a sense that it is acceptable to theorize what comes *after* capitalism—to once again treat capitalism as a historically contingent mode of production, a stage of development that can and will pass. As cultural theorist McKenzie Wark has argued, this has seemingly not been the case among Marxist intellectuals for some time. Whether what comes after will be better or worse is yet to be determined (see Wark, 2019). In the positive: images of a world where one could pursue their passions freely, without the worry of exclusion by the market. In the negative: one in which inequality and power imbalance crashes on full-steam ahead; information and finance capitalists continue to drain zombie-workers (both formally and informally employed) of their mental capacity.

In the final chapter of his book, Benanav sketches in broad strokes his vision of a post-scarcity future, which is driven by a fundamental condition: the abolition of private property. This, of course, has interesting and complex ramifications for the domain of culture and all kinds of cultural and artistic production, not least when considering the status of legal forms of ‘artificial scarcity’ such as intellectual property rights (Rekret and Szadkowski, 2021), which I consider below. But first, it is useful to briefly outline Benanav’s post-scarcity paradigm to situate cultural work more specifically.

## ‘Cultural production’ after work

Postcapitalist imaginaries today are difficult to come by (Wark, 2019; Fisher, 2009; Benanav, 2021: 81), perhaps more so than they were in the middle of the last century despite advances in so-called labor-reducing technologies—what Marxist art theorist Dave Beech describes as ‘technologies of rest.’ In part, as Benanav forcefully argues, this is owing to a lack of emancipatory tactics in favor of market-based solutions such as the unconditional circulation of money or even older projects such as central planning and full employment. One of the key threads running through *Automation and the Future of Work* is Benanav’s general admiration for the automation theorist’s outlook; peering beyond the capitalist machine and asking what comes next is a desirable and welcome position. Their fatal error is not their future focus, but the underlying assumption that full automation *will* succeed, that it *will* displace human labor, and the work that needs to be done *now* is that which will provide answers to the coming social crisis driven by technological unemployment. Benanav (2021: 82–84), on the other hand, reverses the logic by first asking what a just and free society might look like—one that is not defined by economic stagnation and gross underemployment—and then turning to questions of how it might be brought into existence through technological and other socially centered means.

“In a fully capacitated world,” in which everyone had access to free education, healthcare, and welfare, “everyone’s passions would be equally worthy of pursuit” (Benanav, 2021: 83). Just as other social theorists before him, including Marx, Benanav’s vision of post-scarcity is not projected into the future but is something that can be built in the present prior to the existence of the absolute automation of production or anything like artificial general intelligence is within reach. Conceived through the organizational principles of ‘freedom’ and ‘necessity,’ we can begin to rebuild social life—through a democratic organization, cooperative justice, and a collective unlearning of historically received and systematically conditioned (ideological) truths.

In the ‘realm of necessity,’ democratically ordered work-sharing would ensure that the basic needs of human reproduction are met. That is, a recognition that the material requirements that need to be met in order to ensure a decent quality of life, such as shelter, sustenance, energy, modes of communication and transportation, essential goods, and raw materials for future production, must continue to be tended to in a post-work future. In this respect, post-capitalism, post-scarcity, and post-work should not be understood as promises for a future free from labor. Rather, they should be conceived as starting points for a new social contract with work that empties out the alienation of the wage relation—which is how at least some automation theorists, such as Srnicek and Williams (2015: 85), have primarily conceived the concept of ‘work’ in their writings. A future of post-scarcity free from ‘work’ is primarily one built upon non-alienated labor (Beech, 2019).

Engaging in organized work-sharing geared towards community values will ensure that some in society don’t end up toiling away for their entire lives while others enjoy the fruits of their surplus. Reimagining the work of necessity would also depend (or prefigure) collapsing distinctions between those domains societally recognized as work and those that often go unnoticed or are invisible, such as unpaid caring and domestic duties (Benanav 2021: 87). For feminist theorists (not least those who are also invested in the post work project), this detail is of vital importance. Indeed, as feminist cultural theorist Helen Hester (2016) has argued, post-work theorization that does deal with the concept of work in this expanded sense does not adequately deal with the social problems it purports to address. The new processes of socially necessary reproductive work will also employ circular production and consumption methods, a further and necessary consideration that takes concerns of the drastically changing climate seriously. Though it is not offered in Benanav’s account, one would assume this circularity is not that of some mainstream ‘circular economy’ models, in which attempts are made to construct engines of sustainable growth—upholding and ultimately propping up a catastrophic capitalist logic of perpetual expansion (for a ‘post-growth’ critique of circular economy, see Valenzuela and Bohm, 2017).

With the basic needs of society taken care of (a project that will be continually in the making), human beings will have the freedom of both mind and body to engage in whatever pleases them. “For most people,” Benanav writes



(2021: 91), “this would be the first time in their lives that they could enter truly voluntary agreements—without the gun to their heads of a pervasive material insecurity.” Federations of housemakers, marine technicians, chefs, collectives of textile professionals, or neuroscientists will assemble to tackle social problems liberated from the cycle of capital accumulation and profit. While Benanav’s thought experiment does not detail how any of this might work in practice—indeed, such a project falls outside the book’s scope—a renewed sense of possibility is fostered that does not depend on the coming technological revolution (or, perhaps, apocalypse). The present state of affairs is ready to be reassembled; post-scarcity futures are possible, but they must be socially constructed.

In a basic sense, it is from within the ‘realm of freedom’ that questions of culture and the artifacts of cultural production (as we might tacitly understand that phrase today) come into view most clearly. With more time and increased mental and physical capacity, people would be free to follow their passions, which for some will have been repressed by the everyday churn of work. Others will ignite new interests, maybe even return to artistic practices lost to the incessant logic of 24/7 capitalist temporalities (which have their own artistic imaginaries, see Crary, 2013). Where cultural and creative concerns arise at all in recent accounts of post-work, it is in this idealized domain where time is no longer scarce and socially necessary labor time is not the measure of humanity: “Learning a musical instrument, reading literature, socializing with friends and playing sports all involve varying degrees of effort – *but these are things that we freely choose to do,*” write Srnicek and Williams (2015: 85, emphasis added). But is this necessarily the case?

My point is not that those theorizing post-work relegate concerns of artistic and cultural production to the category of leisure, to be taken up when humanity has extra time. But rather, that activities such as ‘consuming music’ and ‘reading literature’ rely on globally distributed forms of alienated labor. To take some recent examples from music studies, for instance, sociologist Kyle Devine (2019) has recently demonstrated the global *political ecology* of musical reproduction in relation to three staple commodities that have undergirded its reproduction since around the turn of the twentieth century. Through empirical engagement with popular music formats, such as the shellac disc, cassette tapes, CDs, and data files, he has shown that musical work of the past decade has and continues to mobilize a highly racialized and gendered labor force that also consistently engages in ecologically damaging practices.

Furthermore, these cultural acts—now on the part of the consumer—also enter into the ‘realm of necessity’ and play an important function in the work of ‘social reproduction’ and the possibility of ‘collective flourishing’ (Hesmondhalgh, 2013). That is, something as everyday or ordinary as listening to music has the potential to contribute to our well-being or sets us up to deal with the challenges of a new workday (under current conditions, at least). Drawing both from the ‘praxis turn’ in sociology and historical materialism, social theorist and musicologist Eric Drott (2019) argues that, under the right conditions, music consumption can be effective in terms of its therapeutic properties. With sound studies theorist Marie Thompson (2020), he has written on the salience of music’s care-function in response to the coronavirus pandemic, highlighting its ability to foster connection. As Thompson and Drott (2020: n.p.) highlight, however, these tendencies are co-opted by capital in a variety of ways; it is another ‘cheap’ solution to the crisis of care and social reproduction.

Cultural production, therefore, brings complex issues to the surface when imagining a future of post-work and post-scarcity. Indeed, there are also questions surrounding potential internal transformations in the categories of ‘culture,’ ‘art,’ and ‘leisure’ in a world without ‘work’ in relation to which they are partly defined. Addressing all these issues highlighted above in the context of post-work, and inevitably many more, will be vital to society’s reimagining, and their organization outside of the profit motive will constitute important future projects (not least for this author). However, this momentous task will not be reconciled here. For the remainder of this article, I will consider other concerns that center around the social, legal, and moral status of intellectual property—one of the paradigms contemporary cultural producers operate within most directly—which is to follow Benanav’s lead in recognizing the most significant dimension of conceiving social life after the passing of alienated labor. In doing so, I tentatively point towards some tendencies within digital culture under capitalism that will be developed and challenged in later work.

## Intellectual property after artificial scarcity?

Reimagining cultural work in a world of post-scarcity would be to do away with intellectual property laws in their current form, which largely functions in the interest of a bourgeois rentier class who derive value from owning and controlling artificially scarce legal entities protected by instruments such as patents, trademarks, and copyrights (see Christophers 2020). While in countries like the United Kingdom, IP protections such as copyright are automatically bestowed to creators of literary, musical, software, or filmic works—at least once concepts and ideas are made demonstrably tangible (CDPA, 1988)—what matters most is ownership. Ownership is what cultural producers often lose or sign away in order to engage in various forms of work as it is currently understood. Whether it is tech workers at the largest digital social platforms, precariously employed academics at universities across the world, or consultants at a creative agency, claims over IP often fall to the employer and are legally secured through employment contracts. In the music industry, it is common practice for artists to sign over rights to master recordings (and often much more) to major corporations who exploit them as they wish, often reinforcing unfavorable conditions and structures of remuneration for the artists—the seemingly perpetual desire to chase down a record deal anyway is what sociologist David Arditi (2020) calls the “ideology of getting signed.” So while cultural producers deal in “information [of their own making] that has enough novelty to be recognizable as intellectual property,” they are often not free to access, control or meaningfully intervene in the social lives of said property (Wark, 2019: 13; on the social lives of commodities, see Appadurai, 1986).

In her own contribution to postcapitalist discourse, cultural theorist McKenzie Wark understands the relationship between owners and producers of various types of information as constitutive of a new set of social relations. In *Capital is Dead: Is This Something Worse?* Wark (2019: 7) turns attention to what she argues has been the impasse of the *gentle* Marxist theory of the past few decades, which is a general submission to the capitalist system as an endemic social order. Rather than reading the specificity of the present as another addition to the capitalist order of things, Wark asks if it isn't the case that a new mode of production is emerging—a question that has been met with much criticism (see Steven, 2021). In posing such a question, however, Wark does not think that older capitalist relations are not constantly expanding as surely as the universe but that something else is also occurring that coexists with prior modes of production.

Wark proposes two abstract class categories that ultimately describe the social implications of another abstraction in IP: a set of procedures and precedents that reify products of the imagination to transferable private property. The ‘hacker’ class refers to “everyone who produces new information out of old information, and not just people who code for a living’ but who do not own ‘the means to realize its value’” (Wark, 2019: 13, 14). In this case, hackers are a much broader cohort of people than artistic and cultural workers alone. However, those involved in the broad array of cultural production perform a vital role in the constitution of this informational social relation—not least in the context of unending consumption upon which many of the dominant platforms rely in the context of the global digital political economy. Those who own the infrastructure of digital communications and who consequently dominate flows of IP on a planetary scale, Wark terms the ‘vectoralist’ class. Without tracing the development of the hacker and the vectoralist too closely here, the categories themselves are significant in that they frame the present conditions of IP and cultural production along the lines of class, through which it becomes more clear to see “a common class interest in all kinds of information making, whether in the sciences, technology, media, culture, or art.” (Wark, 2019: 13–14) Such a conception is central in order to bring about the future Benanav envisions, and it is along these lines that artistic and cultural producers must wage their war on the current state of private property rights that serve individualistic ends. This will not be a simple task and requires a radically expanded concept of IP that is premised on the material production of sociality. In other words, we must understand “intellectual property as a site of struggle” (Rekret and Szadkowski, 2021: 1567).

One potential resource for this reconfiguration might be appropriated from arguments made in favor of basic income. Though I have stated Benanav's discomfort with market-based solutions such as a UBI to solve the problems

of capitalist society at large, there is sound logic behind the theoretical defense of basic income that applies here that does not necessarily import the practical rollout of basic income.<sup>4</sup> As Guy Standing (2017: 25–26) writes in defense of the implementation of basic income as a form of social justice, “society’s wealth is collective in character; our incomes and wealth today are due far more to the efforts and achievements of past generations than to anything we may do ourselves.” Might our cultural forms be conceived in the same way? Widespread recognition of the historical and social basis for the construction of ideas, concepts, artistic materials, cultural artifacts and so on would undercut claims over the sovereignty of the individual, whether a singular person or a corporation. As political theorists Paul Rekret and Krystian Szadkowski (2021) have noted, the pillaging of the ‘knowledge commons’ under the logic of capitalist exclusivity is not dissimilar to the colonialist appropriation of common lands—the point being that what now may appear like natural phenomena are deeply historical and are not exempt from the struggles of reclamation and transformation under what Benanav refers to as the domain of freedom.

The further subsumption of cultural practice under the logic of financial capital (see Wark, 2016; 2017) and, among other things, the emergence of novel digital art forms and practices such as Non-Fungible Tokens (NFTs), is perhaps paradigmatic of the opposite tendency. Further claims to authenticity and asset ownership, mediated and securitized through decentralized systems designed for crypto-financial transactions, drive us further away from commonistic understandings of cultural artifacts and the debt owed to the development of artistic and cultural knowledges forged by previous generations. This is especially so in the cases where artworks function like a financial asset. Privileging private ownership over increasingly speculative assets is not a desirable future nor one that coheres with Benanav’s post-work utopia that is lying dormant (though increasingly far away in the context of the digital cultural economy) in the capabilities of the present.

Recall Herndon’s *Holly+* project, which offers an interesting case study that simultaneously embodies certain qualities of the logic described above but which is problematized in others. As I described in the article’s opening, users of the voice model are encouraged to modify and share their new artworks through copyleft licensing—an alternative to copyright that permits the creation of derivative work for non-commercial endeavors. But there is another dimension to the project’s governance that problematizes our ability to hold it up as an exemplar of a more social(ized) approach to the production and circulation of intellectual property.

Management of the rights to the voice model itself is currently overseen by a community of ‘friends, family, collaborators and supporters’ who comprise the *Holly+* DAO, a ‘decentralized autonomous organization.’<sup>5</sup> DAOs have emerged over the past decade as models for collective digital ownership of an enterprise or venture, negating the centralization of decision-making characteristics of VC firms and corporate boards while recording activities on a blockchain for perpetuity. The DAO overseeing the *Holly+* project makes decisions around “licens[ing] out the official use of Herndon’s voice to approved artists, meaning that each creation can be traced back to its original source,” (Sojit Pejcha, 2022) as well as minting new NFTs for sale via the project’s digital auction house. While this is not the place for a detailed engagement with the idea of DAOs, they illustrate an interesting shift in artistic and cultural work by repositioning the function of IP, especially when placed in the historical context of music production and consumption. To join the *Holly+* DAO, would-be members must first purchase a community token, which grants access to the token-holder to contribute to the governance of *Holly+* IP while entitling them ‘to a cut of profits from resales of those works in perpetuity’ (Herndon, 2021).

The ‘community building’ dimension of this project and others like it is, in principle, a task that coheres with Benanav’s call to freedom and necessity, where stewards collectively oversee and undertake the practicalities of management that is reminiscent of a federated or guild-like-logic of organization. However, the interconnected financial and technological barriers to entry drives us perhaps even further away from a post-scarcity future than the business-as-usual of the contemporary creative and cultural industries. More directly, as a project such as *Holly+* demonstrates, while there is a general liberalization in the approach to derivative *works* produced through the voice model than copyright generally permits, artificial scarcity is reintroduced in the structure of the community itself.

Decentered or otherwise, there is a certain discomfort in the pay-to-play or pay-to-govern model of tokenized communities that evokes Wark's vectoralist class. Democratizing the governance, storage, and ownership of the work of artists, musicians, and cultural producers of all kinds is not a revolution in the structure of IP. Rather, it is an exercise in the management of information, as with other speculative assets under capital, the owners of which hope will generate surplus value.

The inherent contradiction at the center of *Holly+* is not novel, however, and should not be restricted to either digital projects that are native to the organizational models of the so-called 'new internet' or other newer forms of production or consumption. Rather, it has characterized the capitalist music and cultural industries for the past century. In its current form, music represents both the best and the worst of what we can be. As Noys (2011, 2) has reminded us, the paradox of the artist has been reconciled in Marxist terms by the notion that the least capitalist subject is also the most capitalist subject and vice versa: "the one most subjected to capitalism is in the position of the one who prefigures the exit from capitalism." While it is to be seen whether digital projects like *Holly+* can transform use and access to musical material to the same extent that is pushing the technological boundaries of artistic production, I heed the stark warning that the artist often "run[s] ahead of capitalism, but only to prefigure it, to capture it in advance, at the level of art. In this way, the self-valorization of the artist, their act of creation, anticipates new modes of capitalism's self-valorization" (Noys, 2011: 4).<sup>6</sup>

## Conclusion

Artistic and cultural production have historically relied upon what legal theorist Joanna Demers (2006: 7) calls 'transformative appropriation' for their development. Transformative appropriation—where artists sample, reference, translate or otherwise borrow from others—is more often than not carried out in solidarity or homage and has facilitated creative innovation, significant breakthroughs in the evolution of artistic practice, and the development of materials (Demers, 2006: 4). Such practices are becoming increasingly difficult to manage in the context of an overly litigious cultural industry and the emergence of technologies such as the NFT and tokenized communities that function as private property on steroids, and the full implications for art and cultural production will largely remain unknown. Projects like *Holly+* are gesturing towards more open conditions of artistic creation, but in the tokenization of community, an individualized logic of property rights surfaces elsewhere (in governance). What the concept of transformative appropriation underlines, however, is the collectivist and social nature of not only artistic and cultural labor but the foundation of all knowledge-based production. The history of knowledge held in common and the historical development of available materials (to strike an Adornian note) are central to social reconfigurations and future understandings of the relevance of intellectual property rights after the end of alienated work. When decentralized, artificial scarcity is consigned to the dustbin of history. 'Intellectual property' as a socialized concept must privilege *making* over *having*, *owning*, or *governing* and non-proprietary forms of creative laboring in order to be fit for purpose in post-alienated-work futures.

This article has not attempted to reconcile the position of cultural or artistic production within the context of post-work 'studies.' Rather, with it, I have raised important questions for thinking through the contradictions of creative forms of labor in recent theoretical visions that point toward a future society freed from the toils of alienated work and artificial scarcity under capital. Whether such a future comes about as a result of technocratic planning and automation, or, perhaps more desirably, the socialization of existing means and technological capacity is to be seen. As a fierce and critically rigorous argument for the latter, Benanav's *Automation and the Future of Work* is certainly productive as a means through which 'post-scarcity' can be brought to the fore of discourse in many fields and disciplines. Benanav's historical analysis in the book's early chapters offers a grounded theory of the present conditions. However, the final more speculative chapters that take up the categories of 'freedom' and 'necessity' sparked the line of thought to which this paper has given initial form. But once society is restructured around freedom to pursue one's passions and the (rightly) continued organization of necessary work, the question of cultural production will remain.

The intellectual property protections, such as copyright, that underpin the commercial cultural industries must be radically reconceived in the context of post-work and post-scarcity. In Wark's parlance, the waking nightmare for hackers under the logic of contemporary capitalism is the perpetual need to make-material novel products of the imagination—content for streaming, the code that underpins the streaming service, and so on—while watching their compensation dwindle away. In a society premised on the extension of freedom and necessity, the hacker's work might not take on a different form but will be organized in the pursuit of dramatically different ends. While capital wants to pay nothing for its inputs (like songs on a streaming platform) and charge high rents for its outputs (through mechanisms like subscription packages), *socialized* intellectual property will be oriented toward social reproduction and self-fulfillment, acknowledging the legacy of creative workers of the past and the historically determined material with which cultural products are formed. Culture after work, in this sense, will still require work and commitment—maybe even more so than now—but perhaps it'll be carried out under conditions of our own making.

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## Endnotes

1 For more information on the project, see Herndon (2021).

2 See, for example, *Midler vs. Ford Motor Co* (1988) and *Waits vs. Frito-Lay* (1992). Herndon (2021) highlights this legal precedent in an introductory text on the project.

3 And indeed, that ‘cultural production’ may not be the most appropriate framing for a radically reconceived theory of art and cultural work after capital. See, for example, O’Connor (2022).

4 Though a basic income trial for artists in Ireland is due to launch in the first quarter of 2022. See ‘Ireland to Launch Basic Income Program for Artists’, Artforum. Available at: <https://www.artforum.com/news/ireland-to-launch-universal-basic-income-program-for-artists-87612>.

5 Herndon explained the launch of the DAO in a 2021 Twitter thread, see: <https://twitter.com/hollyherndon/status/1415347696039301121>.

6 In any case, this is a developing position, and interesting perspectives constantly surface in what is a fast-moving environment (especially in the practices of digital practitioners). Readers are encouraged to read Dryhurst’s essay “Feasible Abundance and the Shock of the Nude” (2022), in which he proposes the irresistible concept of feasible abundance, which stands in contrast to arguments around digital scarcity and formats such as the NFT. Feasible abundance refers to the concurrent condition of satisfying the artist’s financial recuperation with a potentially infinite audience’s freedom to engage with a work of art.

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# Neo-Imperialism and the Precarious Existence of Vietnamese Factory Workers During the Covid-19 Lockdowns in 2021

Scott G. McNall and Ly Quoc Dang

Based on interviews with Vietnamese factory workers we discuss the impact Covid lockdowns had on their lives and illuminate how fragile their economic circumstances are in general. Both the government and major international corporations, such as Samsung and Nike, took extraordinary steps to keep workers on factory floors when covid infections started spreading in 2020. The government and businesses pressed laborers to work, sleep, and eat in their factories to stop the spread of the virus and to keep production lines moving. There was a determined push to get people vaccinated. It wasn't just the Vietnamese government that tried to get jabs in arms; ninety U.S. corporate executives urged the U.S. government to speed vaccine delivery to the country. Japanese, South Korean, and other Southeast Asian companies located in Vietnam also joined in these efforts. The purported reason was that supply chains had been disrupted by covid and exporters feared they would not have products on the shelves for the coming holiday season. We argue that focusing on supply chain disruptions obscures the fact that what is being transferred between developing countries and those in the core is not just television sets and tennis shoes but human labor power. It is a form of economic imperialism in which countries no longer conquer another nation to extract wealth but operate through international corporations unfettered by ties to any specific country. The Vietnamese government offers international corporations significant tax breaks and other benefits to set up shop in industrial zones. Their profit margins are high and come at the expense of workers, who must work overtime and enlist other family members in their labor force to survive. We conclude by identifying actions the Vietnamese government could take to alleviate the plight of factory workers.

Keywords: Vietnam, neo-imperialism, commodity and value chains, precarious labor, Covid lockdowns.

As of April 2022, upwards of 80% of all Vietnamese were fully vaccinated against covid-19. By contrast, the rate in the United States was 66% (Johns Hopkins, 2022). A heavy push to get Vietnamese workers vaccinated came from what might seem an unlikely source: multinational corporations. The reason? Their supply chains were fractured, and they needed products to sell. One business headline claimed, “Nike, Adidas, and Under Armour Face Ongoing Headwinds from Vietnam Factory Closures” (Cimet, 2021). For Nike, which sources 51% of its footwear and 30% of its apparel in Vietnam, closed factories presented a problem. In fact, the pandemic wasn't just a problem for Nike. Ninety CEOs of different U.S. companies urged President Biden to accelerate the donations of vaccines to Vietnam to keep the supply chain moving. After all, 50% of all garments sold in the U.S. at stores, like Walmart, Target, and Kohls, come from Vietnam (Minh, 2021). The investment newsletter, *Bloomberg*, warned in dire tones that tangled Vietnamese supply lines were a direct threat to the entire global economy (Jamrisko and Uyen, 2021).

Two important factors are obscured in discussions of supply-chain disruptions. First, a supply chain delivers not only steel or plastic in a Samsung refrigerator or washing machine. All goods, whether shoes, blouses, or a computer, have human labor embedded in them. The work done by scores of factory employees at each stage in the process of making a refrigerator or a pair of Nikes is as real as its material parts. It is labor that gives value to manufactured

goods. Second, what gets transferred from Vietnam to markets in China, South Korea, the EU, or the United States is not just a washing machine, it is the labor embedded in the product.

It is useful, then, to think of the links between developing and core economies as value chains (Suwandi, 2019) or commodity chains (Hopkins and Wallerstein, 1986). As Suwandi (2019) has ably demonstrated, this process of transferring labor power and its value from developing countries to core economies is a clear form of economic imperialism, though disguised by the fact that the exploitation is often invisible at the point of consumption. In the early stages of imperialism, described by Lenin (1916) and elaborated on by numerous Marxist scholars (Brewer, 1990; McDonough, 1995) imperialism referred to the seizure, usually by military force, of another country's resources and wealth. A prime example would be the British Empire which spanned the globe during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. A handmaiden in Britain's efforts to dominate the world economy was the British East India Company which, supported by Britain's navy and military force, along with its own vast army of 200,000 men, devastated the economy of India reducing its share of global GDP from around 24% to 2% by the time Britain ceded power to India in 1947 (Dalrymple, 2019).

This form of power slowly slipped away during the Post-World War II period. Theorists, such as Kwame Nkrumah, thought, as the title of his book suggests, *Neo-Colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism* (1966) that a new era of political and economic freedom would emerge. Unfortunately, what evolved instead, and did not require military force, was the "free" market, which offers indirect means of exploitation. Instead of the British or Dutch East India companies, we now have multinational corporations whose wealth often exceeds that of the countries where they set up shop.

Exploitation is built into the very DNA of capitalism as owners of the means of production constantly seek out cheap labor power, energy, raw materials, and cheap land. The end result is a form of political economy that divides the world into a Global South and North. Cheng Enfu and Lu Baolin (2021) use the term neo-imperialism to call attention to the fact that imperialism still exists in its raw form throughout the Global South. Grounding their work in Lenin's (1916) brief treatise, *Imperialism, The Highest State of Capitalist Development*, they argue that "neo-imperialism represents a new expansion of international monopoly capitalism, as well as a new system through which a minority of developed countries come to dominate the world and implement a new policy of economic, political, cultural, and military hegemony."

Vietnam offered foreign investors the enticement of cheap labor, land, and low taxes, so they are locked into an international system in which monopoly capital and finance dominate and inequality is exacerbated. Low wages combined with the spread of covid-19 and zero-covid lockdown policies revealed just how precarious the lives of Vietnamese factory workers were. We spoke to twelve different individuals and families to determine just how their lives were impacted by covid lockdowns.

### **Precarious Lives:**

Mrs. Tung<sup>1</sup>, aged 45, and her family migrated from the Mekong Delta to Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) in 2016 to find work. They left their small farm because they could no longer make a living, having been slowly squeezed out by the growth of industrialized agriculture and the deepening impacts of climate change (McNall, Dang, and Sobieszcyk, 2016). She found a job cutting cloth in a Chinese-owned garment factory that employed mostly women, and her husband found work as a security guard in a mall. Her 9-year-old daughter and 19-year-old son came with them. The daughter went to school under a special dispensation program (*tam tru*) for the school-aged children of migrant workers. Normally, all benefits, including the right to education, are tied to the province in which one is born. The son found work in a factory. Covid-19, first detected in early 2020, would not just disrupt supply chains it would worsen the Tung family's precarious financial circumstances, as well as those of many others. The poor would suffer the most.

Opportunities for jobs in the industrial zones surrounding Hanoi and HCMC pulled millions out of rural villages. Few had any education. Many, especially women who worked in garment factories, came alone. They sometimes left children with elderly relatives and sent money home to their extended family. Even a spouse might be left at home. This pattern of migration---sending one or more family members away from home to earn money---has been typical throughout Southeast Asia and the developing world (Massey, et al., 1993).

On July 9, 2021, the Vietnamese government locked down HCMC and other large cities to prevent the continued spread of covid-19. Thousands lost their jobs. Though most of the attention in the West has been focused on large companies, they only make up 2% of the total number of enterprises. Vietnam is a nation of small shopkeepers. In a country of 100 million, there are over 600,000 registered businesses, most of them in the service industry. People, already living close to the poverty line, suffered the brunt of the closures. Street food vendors, small shop owners, taxi drivers, construction workers, tour guides, and many factory workers found themselves without support (Johnson and Nguyen, 2021). HCMC, for the first time in years, quieted down. The din of motorcycles and scooters ceased, and street and nightlife quickly vanished.

The government was under pressure from both their frightened citizens to limit the spread of the virus and from export-oriented firms wanting to keep factories open and to keep goods flowing to consumers. To ensure they had enough workers to meet production targets, Mrs. Tung's firm, like many, instituted the "3 *tai cho*" strategy which required workers to eat, sleep, and work on-site to prevent the spread of covid-19. Though she wanted and needed to work, Mrs. Tung told us she had to take care of her daughter who, like others who could not work, was confined to the boarding house (*nha tro*); schools had closed and gone to virtual learning for those with computers---something her family could not afford. Her husband was also confined to their boarding house as he had contracted covid-19 at his place of work. Mrs. Tung's company had promised 50% of her salary, about \$1002, as compensation for quarantining, but after two months without work, she had not received any of the promised payments, nor did her unemployed husband and son. While in lockdown the family used up their savings on food and rent and relied on donations from non-profits and neighbors for "rice, noodles, vegetables, fruits, and duck eggs." Mrs. Tung also scoured local markets for cheap vegetables. She wanted to flee with her family back to her hometown, but they did not have the money for that because they would have had to pay \$6.50 for each family member to be tested and quarantined once they arrived, and there was no guarantee that their local government could help. They waited for vaccines so they could return to work, not knowing when that would be. When covid restrictions were finally lifted they went back home. So many migrants left HCMC that some factories lost between 30-40% of their workforce. It would take time before they could be lured back with promises of small bonuses and increases in wages.

Many of those who accepted the challenges of eating, sleeping, and working for their companies were unhappy with their situations. Companies put up tents with foil mats and a blanket for sleeping and gave people a box to secure their personal effects. But sleep could be hard to come by. Mr. Mau, a young man of 24, who worked for a Korean tire factory with 5,000 workers, told us that "areas for sleeping were crowded and noisy, because the factory had multiple shifts." One woman confined to her factory complained that her meals consisted only of rice and fish sauce. Many who were born after the end of the civil war in 1975 experienced hunger for the first time. Mr. Mau complained he could never get enough to eat, "the meals are inadequate. I have to buy food on the street, which is difficult because of the lockdown." Mau's greatest worry was that at the beginning of the pandemic there were no clear plans for getting everybody vaccinated and he was afraid he might get covid-19 because people he was working with people who had it. For working under hazardous conditions, his pay was bumped up to \$8.80 a day, about a \$1 increase (Economic Research Institute, 2022). He also received a bonus of one month's pay for staying on-site, was required to be tested every four days, and had to be covid-free to continue working.

When factories closed, workers lost the option of eating and sleeping at their factories. When 24-year-old Mr. Han's factory---a small Vietnamese-owned mattress company---closed, he received half wages of \$4.40 a day from his employer, not enough to survive on his own. He lived with his mother and father. "Only my father works at this

time; we depend on him,” he said. Their family and many others depended on donations of “rice, instant noodles, and vegetables.” Their boarding house owner discounted the rent by 50% of the rental price: “It helps us somehow.” When the mattress factory finally reopened, Mr. Han went back to work; he had no choice if he wanted to help his family.

The choices all workers faced were harsh and limited. If they wanted to eat, they needed to work. Companies treated their employees differently, depending on their resources and the external pressures on them to deliver products. Mr. Dara, 24 years old, worked for a plastics factory owned by a Singapore company. At first, while he was required to quarantine for 14 days, he received his regular salary and goods from the company: 22 lbs. of rice, a bottle of cooking oil, some vegetables, and shampoo. When he decided not to go back because he felt it was too dangerous, he got nothing.

Mrs. Rich and her husband, (both 32 years of age) migrated out of the Mekong Delta town of Soc Trang in 2019 leaving their two children, 3 and 9, in the care of her parents. Neither she nor her husband had any formal education. Like others with no education, they took jobs as unskilled laborers earning between them less than \$500 a month. She worked for a Chinese-owned sportswear company whose workforce totaled 800, most of whom were other women. She packed boxes of clothes for export. Both she and her husband were laid off because of the covid lockdowns, even though he volunteered for the work, sleep, and eat program at his factory. Her company originally offered \$145 a month, about half pay, to wait out the pandemic but that aid ceased after a month. The Riches lived in a boarding house for which they had to pay rent, as well as pay for gas and food. With no income, they relied on donated food and their savings to survive. One of Mrs. Rich’s main concerns was her children. “I was worried because I could not send money home and my parents had no income. I tried to explain to my parents how they could eat less and take care of the children.” Finally, with their savings exhausted and unable to work, they returned home to live with her parents.

Though a job might have been easy to find in pre-pandemic times, housing was not, especially for those migrating to the vibrant South. Some workers had secured accommodation in one of HCMC’s new high-rise apartments that sprang up out of former rice fields next to the glistening new buildings of international corporations such as Intel. A lucky few, with good jobs and better educations, were sometimes able to buy tiny apartments for their families. Though not members of our sample, their circumstances are worth noting. Mrs. Thu purchased a 30 square meter (322 square feet) apartment for her four family members by paying \$65 a month for seven years. Mr. Nhat’s apartment is 60 square meters (645 square feet), which allows his household to have a separate loft for the children to use as a study area with a large common room for sleeping and cooking (Quynh Tran, 2017).

The demand for housing in the many industrial zones of Vietnam is very high; for this reason, the national government is allowing developers to proceed with building apartments of only 25 square meters (270 square feet) to house some of the 1.8 million people working in industrial parks who don’t own their own homes (Tuyen, 2017). Even with the building boom, many workers, including those in our sample, lived in boarding houses where they were confined when not eating, sleeping, and working at a factory. Boarding houses are cheap, small, and often rundown, ranging in price from \$35 to \$53 a month, which can add up to one-fourth of a factory worker’s salary. Many are no more than a small room carved out of somebody’s existing home. Some boarding houses have concrete floors, others only dirt. Frequently an entire family might be crowded into no more than 160 square feet, and blocks of these boarding houses are separated from one another only by a narrow street cluttered with bikes, toys, and other goods that won’t fit inside. Workers will endure such conditions when their goal is to save in order to send money back to family members they have left behind.

The need for rental housing in Ho Chi Minh City with its 22 industrial parks and export processing zones and over 400,000 factory workers is significant, as it is in the industrial zones of the Mekong River Delta. To address this need and to improve the quality of housing for workers and their families, incentives are being provided by the national government to landlords to improve their rentals. Landlords must agree, among other things, to provide

a door and window for the occupants and provide at least five square meters (53 square feet) for each occupant, a significant improvement for many (Vietnam News, 2021).

On October 1, 2021, when the lockdown ended in HCMC, thousands poured out of the city. Buses were crowded: three and sometimes even four people could be seen balancing on motorcycles clutching bundles of their belongings as they headed for their hometowns. Police initially tried to block this exodus, because officials were afraid workers might spread covid-19 to their hometowns. The police eventually gave up as the pleadings and numbers of people were simply too great to hold them all back. People needed to go home, not just because they were hungry, but because in Vietnam where people were born and registered determines where they can receive medical care, childcare, or education for their children while working in an industrial zone. By the time returnees reached their hometowns, many were financially and emotionally exhausted and required the assistance of local councils that strained to find the resources to quarantine them as well as provide food and medical care (English Review, 2022).

Regardless of where people worked---a garment factory, a shoe or tire factory, or some other manufacturing facility---the stories people told us were remarkably similar. They spoke of the hardships imposed by living in the factories, or if in quarantine, the need to rely on friends and family members or charities to help them. Many went into debt if they could even borrow. They worried about children and elderly relatives left at home who depended on them for money but there was none to send home. They also worried about their own personal safety and if, and when, they would receive a vaccine. They were participants in the international division of labor; part of a global value chain that transferred the worth of their efforts to core economies.

Eventually, the Vietnamese government received over 2 hundred million doses of the vaccine, enough so that each of its 100 million people could get two shots. The country received a wide mix of different shots because the kinks in Vietnam's supply chains were a problem for many international companies. Some vaccines came from the international effort (COVAX) to distribute vaccines to low-income countries, and some from individual nations including the U.S., China, India, and Russia. Those firms with some of the highest levels of foreign direct investment (FDI) in Vietnam were South Korea (609 enterprises), China (342), Japan (272), and Singapore (248). South Korea's Samsung has its largest production facilities in the world in Vietnam churning out washing machines, refrigerators, and cell phones for a global market. Samsung employees were among the first to receive their shots.

Vietnam is now the 10th largest trading partner of the United States and is fully integrated into the realm of global capitalism. Though Vietnam refers to itself as a socialist-market economy, it relies on many of the same practices of efficiency as do core economies. It also offers extremely low wage levels and just-in-time manufacturing to attract foreign capital. There are no labor unions; the government and its currency are stable and foreign firms located in export zones are granted considerable tax benefits. Why did a country which sought to free itself from a history of colonialism and war choose the path it took, and what have been the consequences?

### **The Path Chosen:**

Vietnam was historically a poor country. Substantial numbers of its population lived below the poverty line. Its decades-long efforts to drive out imperial powers, including the Japanese, French, and Americans, and unify under a communist government, devastated the country. The United States' involvement, which ended in 1973, was responsible for much of the destruction. Under the leadership of Air Force General Curtis LeMay ("We'll bomb them back to the Stone Age with air power."), tons of bombs were dropped on harbors, ports, cities, factories, bridges, and supply lines. Amadeo (2020) estimates that North Vietnam lost over 1 million soldiers and upwards of 2 million civilians were killed in both the North and South.

By the end of the war, the average per capita income was around \$80; today the World Bank pegs it at around \$2800. By any measure, this represents a major turnaround. Nevertheless, \$2800 may not go very far because, depending on

what a person tries to buy in Vietnam, they will be faced with prices determined internationally. For example, a top-of-the-line Dell laptop computer will cost 66.3 million Dong in Vietnam or \$2893, the same as it would cost at Best Buy in the U.S., and more than many workers make in a year.

After the war's end, Vietnam continued to receive some support from its allies, China and Russia, but it needed to find its own path out of poverty. In 1982 it chose what would in essence be the same model China used in its early stages of economic development; one that would rely on exports fueled by low-waged labor and one that allowed some of their countrymen and women to embrace the free market.

The collective efforts to transform their economy, termed *Doi Moi* (Renovation/Innovation), also provided significant encouragement for foreign companies to invest in Vietnam. Consulting groups such as Healy (2022) have been quick to tout the reasons why. Benefits include reduced tax rates of up to 10% for 15 years, corporate tax exemption for up to four years for approved projects, and a 50% reduction on personal income for foreign employees.

Vietnam's leaders were also determined to rely less on agriculture and more on manufacturing and services. One thing they had learned from the Soviet Union and China was that collective farms were remarkably inefficient, so they broke them up and allocated farm plots to individual families. A major economic transformation occurred in 2000 when the Enterprise Land Law came into effect. It allowed those who had been given land by the government to transfer, exchange, inherit, rent or mortgage it; a key element in any free-enterprise system and a boon for some entrepreneurial Vietnamese, who were able to leverage assets in the land to create new businesses.

As Hong Anh Tuan (2009), former political counselor at the Vietnamese Embassy to the U.S., explained, a major part of *Doi Moi* involved a realization that Vietnam's security and prosperity would depend on maintaining friendly trade and diplomatic relations with *all* countries. After the normalization of relations with China in 1991, the dissolution of the USSR, and the establishment of diplomatic ties with the U.S. in 1995, Vietnam's growth accelerated. Since 1991 it has been one of the five fastest-growing economies in the world.

The International Monetary Fund and the World Bank both contributed to the rebuilding of infrastructure destroyed by warfare and supported Vietnam's transition to a market economy. At the same time, Vietnam became a member of numerous trade organizations that allowed it access to the economies of developed nations. In 2000 it signed a free trade agreement with the U.S. After eight years of negotiation, it became a member of the World Trade Organization in 2007. This freed it from restrictions on textile quotas, as well as restrictions on exporting a vast array of agricultural products and manufactured goods such as furniture to other countries. Since 2007, it has signed over ten free-trade agreements with Southeast Asian countries. This has been a bonus not just for Vietnam but also for the companies that have chosen to locate in Vietnam because they can export into those same markets. As a result, Vietnam is one of the most export intensive of all countries in the world. As the writers for *The Economist* (2021) have calculated, this trade is driven in large part by direct foreign investments, and it is foreign firms that account for the greatest number of exports. Over the past decade, foreign-owned companies' exports have risen by 442%, while domestic firms' exports have risen by 137%.

As we noted earlier, a significant reason foreign companies have flocked to Vietnam are the low wages paid to Vietnamese workers. The government has set minimum wages which vary by region, ranging from a high of \$154 in the industrial zones surrounding HCMC to a low of \$105 for the mountainous and central regions of the country. Nobody can live on the minimum wage alone. Most factory workers usually make double the minimum wage but those working in small grocery stores, noodle shops, or repairing bikes and motorcycles may earn less. But even double wages disguise how difficult factory work is and how little workers benefit from their efforts.

Consider a well-known brand of tennis shoes, Nike. A pair of Men's Air Max 201's listed for \$299 on Amazon in 2022. There are cheaper pairs of Nikes that cost about \$100. The cost of labor and materials to Nike, regardless of

the model, is about the same: \$10 for materials and \$3.00 for labor. By the time the shoe lands in the United States, the total cost to Nike is about \$50; the normal retail markup is 100% or more. Nike is not directly involved in making the shoes; new designs are created in Beaverton, Oregon and then shipped to an affiliate in Korea to design the molds and machines to be used in production. Korean and Taiwanese-owned factories in Vietnam are subcontracted to make the shoes, which means they are responsible for wages and working conditions. The subcontractor's share of each shoe produced is around \$1. These factories are huge; one in Dong Nai province that shut down because of covid-19 employed 42,000 workers (Reuters, 2021).

OXFAM, the British-founded charity organization, tells the story of a 32-year-old woman who works in a shoe factory in Dong Nai province under the sweatshop-like conditions many workers endure. Like many other rural women migrants, Lan had left her children behind with her parents. She sent a fourth of her income home. She works on 1200 pairs of shoes a day, sewing heels and soles together. For this effort, she makes about \$8 a day, which isn't enough to support her family and still pay for her own rent and food. She can't afford to take a break to visit her children and must take two additional jobs: one as a tailor two evenings a week and another working at a restaurant serving food on Sundays, the only day she gets off work (OXFAM, 2021). The salary Lan earns for stitching up thousands of shoes a month would not allow her to buy a single pair of Nike's Air Max.

Though the Vietnamese government has laws on the books to protect workers, they are sometimes reluctant or unable to enforce them, especially at the provincial level. Provincial governments have an interest in keeping factories open. Workers may be forced to stay until they meet quotas, are not given breaks, and are required to work overtime, even if they don't want to. The Fair Labor Association collected data from 13,000 garment workers over a three-year period (Elven, 2019). They found that although workers earned double the minimum wage, which would be about \$250, they still needed to work 50 hours of overtime a month to make ends meet. Overtime is not voluntary; if you don't work extra hours, you can lose your job. With a six-day workweek that's another two hours a day added to an eight-hour shift on a production line making furniture or bent over a sewing machine. The government clearly recognizes the need for overtime because they allow companies to impose up to 200 hours of it a year. To make up for lost production due to covid-19 in 2021, they discussed raising the cap to 300 hours, about 6 more hours a week. One could argue that the government serves as the agent of international corporations by allowing this kind of exploitation.

The garment trades have been singled out as having some of the harshest working conditions. Major fashion brands such as Zara and H&M, and sportswear companies like Under Armour and Nike, are sourced in Vietnam. There are over 6,000 garment factories employing over 3 million people. Ms. Vien, one of our respondents, works for a Chinese-owned clothing manufacturer. She came to HCMC at age 26 as a single woman and lives in a small boarding house. She sends money home to her family, leaving her little to live on. Working six days a week, she has no social life, and she has no money left over for entertainment. Work is her life. Yet even that could be uncertain because of the erratic nature of her work.

A subcontractor making clothes for a major fashion house can experience several abrupt challenges to the flow of work, all of which will have an indirect impact on its workers. A company in Europe, Korea, or the United States, may require samples of fabric and samples of the work to be performed, and then may refuse to pay for these costs. They may ask for a speed-up in delivery of a product or even a delay in accepting the product. They might cancel future deliveries, leaving the producer to search for new customers. The stopping and starting of production lines to switch from one product to another can mean a loss of income for low-skilled workers. Yet for companies seeking to have garments manufactured in Vietnam, speed and low wages are offered as a bonus.

The Vietnamese-owned Dony Garment Company makes uniforms as well as other clothing for major brands. They offer customers the opportunity to develop new designs in multiple colors, print private labels, and a sample fee of only \$100, which will be paid back if a bulk order of at least 500 items is placed. "The lead time is just 3-5 days

for samples and 2-5 weeks for [a] normal order.” If buyers don’t like what they receive, they are offered a 100% return rate (Dony, 2020). Dony pivoted quickly to making masks and personal protective equipment during the pandemic, and overtime was required for this quick transformation. Companies like Dony are the backbone of the “fast fashion” industry.

It isn’t just companies that compete with one another at the expense of low-wage workers; it is also the export processing zones (EZs). The Tan Thuan zone, with a seaport, was losing investors to Long An and Dong Nai, which offered more tax incentives and lower costs for renting land. The Tan Thuan zone countered by building multi-storied workshops of 10,000 square feet each to attract small and medium-sized businesses (Vietnam Briefing, 2018). As in the United States, cities and states offer tax breaks, land, and infrastructure to attract businesses. So does Vietnam. Vietnam has the added advantage of having no independent unions.

Vietnam, with its zero-covid policies, powered through the pandemic, although frequently with high costs to workers. Rahul Kitchlu, the World Bank’s Acting Country Director for Vietnam was optimistic about future economic growth. “While downside risks have heightened, economic fundamentals remain solid in Vietnam, and the economy could converge toward the pre-pandemic GDP growth rate of 6.5 to 7 percent from 2022 onward” (World Bank, 2021).

The Vietnamese government tried to soften the impact of lockdowns and factory closures on workers by implementing Resolution 68 in the summer of 2021. Limited unemployment compensation of \$80 was provided if a person had been out of work for 15 days and \$162, if out of work for a month. If an unemployed worker had children, they were given \$44 per month for each one. A food allowance of \$3.50 per person per day was offered to those being treated for covid-19. Tour guides and artists impacted by the lockdowns were given \$161 a month. They also allowed companies to temporarily reduce contributions to social insurance, a fund for occupational injuries, as well as retirement and death funds (ACCLIME, 2021). The Deputy Prime Minister of Labor, Invalids, and Social Affairs, Vu Duc Dam, urged companies to take care of their own workers instead of relying on the government and in the event of a future outbreak, paying at least part of their salaries (Tienphong News, 2021). The national budget had been stretched thin.

Companies did their best to lure back workers who had fled to their hometowns. Some companies offered small bonuses of around \$88; while others promised a bump in hourly pay of about \$1. HCMC lost upwards of 1.3 million workers between July and September of 2021. The city government offered free transportation and a month’s lodging if they returned to work. By the beginning of the new year, 2022), most businesses had resumed full production.

What gets lost in all the discussions about supply chain disruptions and the pain this might cause companies and consumers is the fact that human labor is embedded at each step in the production process. As companies like Samsung, Nike, and Intel along with major retail distributors like Walmart, Target, and H&M seek out ever cheaper labor and materials, we are seeing the rise of neo-imperialist regimes. Today, imperialism is practiced not by national governments, but by multi-national corporations unfettered to any specific country.

### **Implications and Value Chains:**

When the covid-19 pandemic struck Vietnam in 2020, it revealed the slender grasp many Vietnamese workers had on a decent life. As our interviews with twelve individuals and families made clear, even under normal circumstances, the minimum wages earned were insufficient to meet the basic needs of workers and their families. It did not matter whether they were driving a truck, working in a cement or electronics factory, sewing garments, making shoes, tires, or furniture, their circumstances were remarkably the same and very precarious.



Some workers were trapped inside factories, working, eating, and sleeping there. If they were stuck in place, the quality of food and living conditions were inadequate. If they were confined to a boarding house or their own home, they sometimes had only half of their previous wages or nothing at all. They relied on loans from family, donations of food from non-profits, and sometimes minimal assistance from local councils. When some of the Covid restrictions were lifted in the fall of 2021, upwards of 40% of HCMC's labor force left for their original homes, suggesting that life as a low-waged worker was not worth it. In short, neither the government nor the factories that employed workers were prepared for the pandemic. The plight of the Vietnamese worker was largely hidden from consumers in core countries, who were focused on whether something they wanted was back ordered.

Most of us learned about the impact of the covid-lockdowns in terms of stories about disruptions in the supply chain, meaning people might not get a particular item for the 2021 holiday season. But the concept of the supply chain, which is simply a way of tracing the steps it takes to get a particular item to a customer, hides an important story about the nature of capitalism. As noted above, capitalism, by its nature, will always seek out some combination of the cheapest labor, raw materials, and energy. These do not usually come from the same place. For example, a cell phone will contain precious metals mined in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, code written in India or the United States, designed in Silicon Valley, and an instrument put together in Vietnam or China (OECD, 2022). We don't think of the cell phone as having value added in each country, or at each stage of development; we think of it as coming from the last place to ship it. In business, the purpose of *value chain analysis* is to see how much value can be created at each stage in the creation of a product. In short, a corporation focuses on how to squeeze more value, or increase its margin of profit, out of each stage of the production process (Porter, 1985). Consumers forget that, embedded at each stage of a product's creation and production and giving it value, is human labor power.

Following Suwandi (2019) and Enfu and Baolin (2021), we see value chains as a primary means of expropriating labor power from developing countries and transferring it to core economies. *Value chains are, then, a form of economic imperialism, hidden behind the complex processes by which human labor power from across the globe is embedded in the goods we consume.* As we've noted, though the government has many policies in place to protect workers, there is continued downward pressure on wages, as corporations seek to increase their margin of profit by demanding tax breaks, paying low wages, and failing to provide workers with resources to deal with injuries suffered on the job, or sufficient retirement or sick benefits. Some do not pay into unemployment schemes. Among those in our small sample, only half received any unemployment compensation. Those who did received from \$83 to \$131, depending on how long they were laid off. Others received nothing because they quit, which meant they were not laid off; or they got nothing because they were eating, sleeping, and working in their factory.

What then can be done to enhance worker security? Much of the burden will fall on the government of Vietnam. One of the challenges will be their desire to strengthen the economy by focusing on services and technology. That and the desire to raise rates of productivity will require an educated workforce. At present only 58% of children graduate from high school. As that number pushes up, graduates will demand jobs that pay more than the minimum wage or require them to labor as their parents now do. There are other challenges to be met and some are created by the very model of reform (Doi Moi) the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) adopted in 1982.

The VCP recognized the need to open the country to free trade and at the same time offer up cheap labor and other resources to attract foreign investments and corporations that could put thousands of citizens to work. Over the years the VCP has had to perform a delicate balancing act between meeting favorable conditions for investment and protection of workers from exploitation. It has remained, as Duiker (1989) termed it, "a revolution in transition." Two generations of workers have been trapped in low-waged work with little opportunity to dramatically change their economic circumstances. Pressure continues to be put on the government by international labor and trade organizations to improve wages and working conditions (International Labor Organization, 2016).

Many trade agreements have required Vietnam to agree to protections for laborers. By 2021 they had agreed to ratify 25 International Labor Organization (ILO) conventions including the right to collective bargaining and the prohibition of forced labor or child labor (IOL, 2021). The Party, however, has been slow to implement many of the conventions and has actively stifled civic associations and unions. Unions are under the control of the VCP. They originated, first, in state-owned enterprises (SOE) and then became more common in corporations that grew out of SOE's (Tran, 2017). Virtually all unions are enterprise unions, meaning they affect only one plant, not all of those that make clothes, shoes, or computers. Workers are not able to organize within a sector or within regions or collect fees to build an infrastructure to support worker rights. Under the Labor Law of 1994, bargaining is allowed, but workers are not free to choose who represents them (Tran, 2017). Workers have little recourse, then, when the government decides it is in the interest of the larger economy to side with employers, as they did during the covid lockdowns of 2021. To maintain political and economic stability and protect its own legitimacy the VCP needs to address a range of issues of which they are well aware, and which have also been identified by international organizations such as OXFAM and the ILO.

The government must raise the minimum wages in all zones because, without this step, there will be continued downward pressures to pay only the minimum wage. It should prohibit industrial zones from competing against one another, which would include offering cheap or free land to corporations. Taxes should be raised on all companies in order to build a social safety net for Vietnamese workers. This would include a guaranteed base salary in the event of closures due to a pandemic or other crisis. The government needs to set tighter regulations for overtime and make sure workers have a choice and are adequately compensated for this work. Workers, particularly in the garment industry, must be involved in discussions about how to improve working conditions. A radical step for a socialist-market economy would be to give workers agency and allow them to create industry-wide unions. These, though needed, are not easy or simple steps to undertake, and they will be resisted by export-oriented industries. Yet, to note take them risks social disorder.

More pressure also needs to be exerted internationally, because it has proven effective in initiating change (San Juan, 2020.) Free trade needs to give way to fair trade. If this seems utopian, consider the consumer-driven drive for fair-trade coffee, where growers are now compensated with a sustainable wage. International pressure caused Nike to switch to water-based glues for the soles of their tennis shoes after consumers learned of the deadly effects that solvent-based glues had on workers. Remember, the next time you go to buy a pair of pants, shoes, or a blouse, the markup is 100% or more. Imagine what \$1 more added to the cost would mean if that went to the person who labored to produce those goods.

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## Endnotes

1 All names have been changed. The interviews were conducted by Ly Quoc Dang with families and individuals from the Mekong Delta.

2 The dong to dollar conversion used was \$1 million Dong = \$43.51 USD.

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# Deep-Rooted Images: Situating (Extra) Institutional Appropriations of Deepfakes in the US and India

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The paper aims to map institutional and extra-institutional affordances and appropriations of deepfake images through an analytical framework that accounts for the socio-political contexts of the US and India. Our main argument involves the inevitable leakage of technologies outside institutions and its redressal through corporatized comebacks. Utilizing vernacular and global examples, we trace the perceived ownership and extended modalities of deepfake images and videos. While compositing (Manovich 2006) and habitual media (Chun 2016) predetermine our deep mediatised world (Hepp 2019), deepfakes, as a visual cultural technology newly popular within the political economy of media, offer a novel entry point into locating the neoliberal ethos of both socio-political contexts and their respective apparatuses and valences of control. Thus, the paper articulates the coordinates of deepfake affordances to situate the technological power and political rhetoric that governs our international media situation across differing but interrelated socio-political contexts.

## Introduction

To look at a deepfake image is to encounter synthetic media of the highest order. In other words, deepfake imagery offers verisimilitude to the actual image in a way that the specter of indexical truth comes back to haunt us with a vengeance. Indeed, if we examine the event of local elections in 2022 in India's capital city New Delhi, deepfake videos of the member of governing bodies threatened to collapse the existing ruling government body.<sup>1</sup> In its nascent days, the institutional appropriation of deepfake technology resurfaced the debates around the ontological questions around images (Lund 2021). For contexts downstream of the technological innovation like India, these appropriations translated into pirated renditions where any technophile could manipulate and re-appropriate the technology for mass customized images. Combing through Instagram profiles of deepfake enthusiasts, ephemeral pages carrying deepfake images of Hindi film actors and actresses kept appearing and disappearing from the platform. What remains in a yearlong observation of the keyword "deepfake Bollywood" is the remediation of a Kardashian figure with a Bollywood actor's face. Deepfake enthusiasts like Indian Deepfaker (now dormant on Instagram) drew images from [mr.deepfakes.com](http://mr.deepfakes.com)—a website originating from the US and finding translations across the globe.

Deepfakes are typically known as short videos that directly impose the likeness of someone onto someone else, particularly someone who is quickly culturally recognizable and in such a fashion that the imposition complicates the viewer's visual, subjective perception of both the preliminary body and the intended mimicry that is projected onto the target of the video. These videos are deemed controversial due to this altering of perception and are found throughout most national contexts as memes that go viral, heralded as a widespread technological phenomenon that confuses and disrupts the previously seamless image to convey a different—and usually objectionable—message. Their categorization among the cringe spectrum of memes varies, from shoddy and obvious face-swaps with poorly matched voiceovers to impeccably fabricated, seamless narratives that the human senses could barely distinguish differences between (Paris and Donovan 2018).

Journalists, as well as scholars in communication, media studies, and computer science, have discussed the problems posed by deepfakes and the machine learning technology they are made synonymous with, particularly concerning the phenomenon's potential and realized applications as mechanisms for abjection (Cole 2020a, 2020b, Cole & Maiberg, 2020, van der Nagel 2018). While not making a specifically psychoanalytic argument, we contend that what stems from the anxiety surrounding deepfake technology is a generalized fear of the unknown and the unmeasurable, particularly as these anxieties fuel the polarized political environment of the United States. The construction of identity in democratic societies relies heavily upon the consistency of the image as it correlates to concrete identifying information, stored and maintained by carceral and governing organizations (in order to prove you are whom you say you are, you must have a picture ID that corresponds to a first and last name, the address in which you reside, on your person in case of trouble, or else). In a neoliberal democracy, any aesthetic mechanism meant to disrupt that consistency is duly perceived to disrupt social norms and cause panic among those whose image and information have always aligned. For these reasons and more, deepfake videos pose many ethical and moral dilemmas for intellectual and institutional debate across disciplinary contexts.

Deepfake videos go viral because they cause us to second-guess our perceptions of people we come to know through their appearance and performance of sociocultural identity, like celebrities, influencers, and politicians—and depending on the circumstances, we may find that confusion hilarious. A type of meme, deepfakes make adjacent commentary on the assembled relationship between the intention of the posted image (or video) and the subversive meaning meant to be gleaned by the viewer. However, deepfakes differ from memes in their active, rather than passive, ability to construct the visual imaginary—one produced by the performance of an in-group or culturally relevant identity—as darkly abject. There is synthetic meaning in the form of overlapping edges, data moshed differences, and forcibly-intersected identities to be grasped by the viewer of a deepfake.

### Deepfake videos as composite digital objects

How do we come to understand deepfakes synthetic demonstration of subjectivity? To pin down what exactly is at stake when discussing deepfakes as vehicles of meaning, we first assert that videos are a specific type of digital object, produced through the tripartite relation of fabricated material to substantive concept to perceptible movement. Yuk Hui (2012: 380-1) defines digital objects as “simply objects on the Web...that [are] composed of data and formalized by schemes or ontologies that one can generalize as metadata” and “constitute a ubiquitous milieu from which we cannot escape.” They are all around us, on any digital device we may interface with, and provide the fodder for our everyday lives as we log onto social media platforms, video streaming services, and any application that relies on wired connections to produce something within screen-based view. An innumerable amount of videos conveying synthesis exist on and because of the Internet. However, some were constructed through analog means, particularly in artistic circumstances like celluloid film production and performance utilizing audiovisual sequencer machines to produce electronic colors and sounds. Marking this material distinction between analog and digital in making videos is crucial because it informs our understanding of the objects and tools utilized in producing deepfakes and their subsequent existence as digital objects as they relate to other audiovisual forms of media displayed on mediated screens. While analog-processed video can be used as footage for digital videos, for this paper, we are focusing on videos that are meant to be digitized, intentionally involve pre- and post-production software editing processes, and come to exist as digital objects to be shared on digital and physical viewing platforms.

Hui forms the digital object in part from Simondon's notion of the technical object (1980), further expanding to the technical individual and its subsequent interaction system. Technical objects regain their materiality by engaging with an associated milieu and thus attain a differing degree of perfection from what mechanical systems expect regarding cybernetics (Hui 2012, p. 386). Hui then contrasts Simondon with Heidegger's two modes of categorization of technical objects: things get rendered as objects to be either ready-to-hand or present-at-hand, depending on the subject's desire for essentialization or functional interaction. Knowing the essence of a thing fully versus being

simply able to use it, for Heidegger (2001), are two distinctly different modes of understanding technical objects as they coordinate with the social milieu, rather than the granularly technical, such as Simondon (*ibid.*). With this understanding, in challenging the discourse of deepfakes, we specifically absorb Hui's inference that Heidegger's approach toward technical objects has been taken up by "AI researchers as a challenge in the design of intelligence" (Hui 2012, p. 387). We draw on these philosophers to better mitigate discussions in the study of artificial intelligence that stratify the issues of human ability and machine function to an intensely ubiquitous scale as the manageable effector for all of society's ills, i.e., tech-solutionism. Recent conversations about what constitutes the 'metaverse' of digital technologies as they are constructed through virtual reality provide a necessary ground for the discursive frame for which we interrogate Hui's inference.

Altogether an issue of objectivity versus subjectivity, deepfakes are aestheticized and politicized through their association with gimmick and controversy (Ngai 2020). The inability of platforms to moderate ethically casts reasonable doubt on the way media industries and social institutions could process this influence of deepfakes, as what we argue to be sociocultural and political devices situated within discourses of reactionary politics, uncanny embodiment as represented through abjection, and the ever-present potential of life-disrupting disinformation. Individuals with a decent level of coding ability or an artistic eye are able to detect that these videos—made from a haphazard collection of images trained to modify the likeness of a figure through algorithmic pattern recognition—are deeply fake. For everyone else, the ability to notice the difference between tricky actors in a deepfake relies on digital literacy, sensitivity to cultural nuance, and the "acute mediation of the ways affect can take form in a crisis-intensified historical present," or what Lauren Berlant in *Cruel Optimism* (2011) called intuition: "the process of dynamic sensual data-gathering through which affect takes shape in forms whose job it is to make reliable sense of life." In these contexts, users are subject to a double-bind of intuition: platforms retain operational control over how creative, cultural media is both produced and consumed, structuring the digital political economy on precarity, illusion, and ignorance (Cunningham, 2019; Gillespie, 2010).

The appeal of deepfake videos as meme-like gimmicks emerged as a viral widespread culture phenomenon at the end of the 2010s. While many popular deepfakes go viral for their uncanny resemblance to real people and real-life scenarios, the artificially intelligent technology instrumentalized to fabricate these videos is being used for sowing misinformation and intentionally obfuscating an individual's identity for disinformation and socio-political disruption. As the Western perspective on artificial intelligence idealizes Silicon Valley's capitalization of digital aesthetics, deepfakes can easily be fashioned as a vessel for image manipulation done to marginalized publics at the hands of those in power, i.e. platforms and their agents therein. Institutional discourses continue to purport deepfakes as an issue of national security related to terrorism and the protection provided by consistent diplomatic messaging.<sup>2</sup> American legislation like the Deepfakes Accountability Act has introduced the notion of synthetic media into legal discussions of digital pornography.

### **Deepfake videos as tools for disinformation**

While it should be recognized that disinformation is a conceptual extension of propaganda, the harms being caused by deepfakes and their corresponding modes of production are amplified by infrastructures of face-based surveillance, like facial recognition technology (FRT) and biometric graphing, e.g., fixed identity-based digital affordances (Wojewidka 2020). The increasing integration of automated machine learning practices in the dispersion of information, such as in the interest-based display of news content and indexing of search results, promotes discord over notions of community belonging and collective truth that could otherwise be ascertained without an intense focus on individual and personalized interest. Deepfakes, as animated manifestations of intensified interest set on disrupting the image and likeness of a socially relevant figure, invite an attitude of communicative entitlement based on individually-constructed preference and, we argue, shape the value one can reasonably place on susceptibility to harm in online environments.



Deepfakes, made from pixels, necessitate the need for a combined aesthetic and communicative analysis in order to understand them as individual videos, images, or likenesses manipulated by procedurally automated scripts. Deepfakes affect political publics, destabilizing the activity that glues industry standards to infrastructure and exposing faulty moderating systems in political law and technological programming. Ultimately, deepfakes have the potential to trick inefficiently automated systems into revealing the technological, communicative, and aesthetic mistakes made by its creators, distributors, and users alike. The purpose of this paper is then to draw attention to the problems that deepfakes pose to the constructions of cultural memory and digital sovereignty under an infrastructure that prioritizes techno-capitalism (Chun 2016), spotlighting the United States and India.

Social media platforms like Facebook, purported by Meta, provide the foundation for disinformation to spread with their notorious hands-off approach to content moderation that privileges the right of any individual actor to speak rather than appeal for the right not to be harmed. Meta's control over various other social media platforms and messaging applications, like Instagram and WhatsApp, expand their vector of power over the parameters of social discussion and connection across international borders. In an effort to inform the interested public of developments in their software, Meta keeps an active blog to report innovations in company artificial intelligence research.<sup>3</sup>

### The Black Box of Deepfakes

Deepfakes are created using machine learning frameworks called generative adversarial networks (GANs). Utilizing found footage to compound, manipulate and warp the image of another that similarly aligns with features of an original image or through the video's color values and representation of edges and lines, deepfakes are not simple by any means. In fact, we argue that deepfakes in their application are *meant* to complicate the data presented to the viewer in the form of image manipulation, seeking to invoke the stylistic intent of the producer as a fabrication of and as a mechanism for the display of power through automation and alteration of meaning. GANs operate through two channels: as a generator of data and a discriminator of data. The generative channel of a GAN seeks to synthesize data that appears to be the new data as it is being trained against the latter system of discernment and discrimination. In order for the discriminator channel to discern what is real and what is fake, the discriminator channel functions to accurately classify the synthetic data as fake and the training data as accurate (Harrod 2020). The GAN's objective then becomes embedded in a mechanistic authentication network, discriminating data trained against the other set incorporated into the network to determine whether it is accurate or fake. In this process, the GAN does not produce an ultimately absolute or true piece of data but comprises a dual synthesis system and the reassurance of that synthesis. What is produced by the GAN cannot be separated from the algorithmic framework it was constructed in—except when this synthesis process is recorded and captured on the screen in the post-production stage, becoming what we observe as the source material of a deepfake video. As generator channels become better at recognizing aspects of the synthesis occurring between the content placed in the network, discriminator channels are enabled to make increasingly quick decisions about how to change the image or video to suit the objective of the GAN. The architecture of the GAN identifies “unique artifacts” in an image or video, and the results from the generator/discriminator mechanism “deteriorate[s] when the GAN architecture is changed” (Yu et al. 2019). Nevertheless, what are these unique artifacts, and how do they become materially distinct from the GAN's architecture? We know that GANs leave behind something adjacent to what we would call digital watermarks or image fingerprints: visual indicators or vectored remnants that represent the residual reconstruction of images after being implemented into a GAN model (Yu et al. 2019).

Watermarking places a name or other representative signifier on an image or video to denote the object as owned by an individual or organization and typically involves an explicit security structure and the intent to preserve intellectual property. GANs iterate model-specific types of feature-based signification to keep the visual integrity of the image cohesive at all stages of the network's process, as designated through interaction with the training data and the imposition of an “initialization seed” (Yu et al. 2019). This process of organizing model-specific types is how aspects of the human face stay together cohesively as the deepfake video mutates. Measuring bands of frequency and

patches of color by combining two or more images integrated into the GAN, Yu et al. (2019) postulate that a deepfake-specific fingerprint can be attributed to and lifted from the final deepfaked image by pooling together the pixels that correspond to statistical frequencies chosen in response to the GAN's trained to function. The attribution of aspects in a deepfake that determine its authenticity and, therefore, its identity, "comes down to attributing a depiction of bias" presented by whoever initializes the models set in place at the beginning of GAN training (Zhang et al. 2021). Past this manual attribution, experiments utilize auto-encoding techniques and other designated parameters provided by the producer (or group of producers) to reconstruct extracted samples of the images and accomplish a visualization of its unique imprint (Karras et al. 2019; Qi et al. 2020; Tolosana et al. 2020; Yu et al. 2019; Zhang et al. 2021).

Deepfake videos, in particular, can thus maintain their own unique identity generated, discerned, and optimized from their GAN and cannot be thoroughly authenticated or verified if the models integrated into the GAN do not correlate with what application processing interfaces, or APIs, have been trained to look for. Deepfakes are auto-encoded at every stage of the production process: once finalized and made into a complete video post-GAN, the fabricated videos are virtually indistinguishable from other sorts of video files that happen to be imported into content production applications and onto video streaming websites. It is for this reason that we discussed the importance of differentiating analog from digital video, as the construction of deepfakes in effect mimics the production process of analog video; the implementation of source material into a perceptive apparatus. Already embedded with their own, typically black-boxed, systems of security protocol, websites that enable the uploading of videos tend to encode media as it is being imported into its system for the purposes of analytical tracking and high, clear quality for observation (Cole 2020b). Our paper seeks to understand how, if at all, video streaming sites can stabilize the onslaught of unverifiable, yet obviously fabricated, amateur videos such as deepfake pornography (van Der Nagel 2020).

Detection methods that emphasize discerning or discriminating the real from the fake through techniques similar to FRT have commercial relevance, like services to find and warn individuals if someone made a deepfake of them or someone they know through Sensity.AI (Ajder et al. 2020). Because each deepfake video is generated in model-dependent and -specific ways, approaches that only investigate the discriminator channel will always be behind methods that can pinpoint the aspects of images that are abstracted, manipulated, and obfuscated with automated ease within the GAN (Harrod 2020).

StyleGAN, an alternative generator architecture for GANs known for its utilization in the This Person Does Not Exist project, provides a functional model of ascertained stochastic features found in a Flickr dataset of faces (termed "facesets") in order to normalize standard sets of human facial expressions (Karras et al. 2019). Seeking to optimize the process of style transfer as the network trains against authentic or other synthetic images, StyleGAN focuses its vectors of alteration on the generator channel rather than improving simply on the discriminator end (Huang et al. 2017; Karras et al. 2019). We argue that this factor of normalization that can be integrated into the GAN through the StyleGAN (and later StyleGAN2) models are relevant because this integration of stylistic type 1) recognizes embodied characteristic as they are exemplified in the image or video, and 2) emphasizes the ability of style transfer, or perhaps more aptly named style power, to grasp the modes of changeability and material presence of the facesets that are implemented into typical GAN models, in a visual way that goes beyond code and algorithmic configuration.

Experimental methods that intervene for the generative channel, like DeepRhythm, are able to graph the blood flow and heartbeat occurring within the targeted individual in order to examine deepfake videos through remote visual photoplethysmography: the monitoring of minuscule changes in skin color over a while, to detect whether the human person represented in the video is real or fake (Qi et al. 2020). With these experiments that measure levels of oscillation in heart rhythms to determine proof of life, there is little to no discussion of sociopolitical limitations, e.g., the ethnically apparent and racially specific boundaries that are crossed when fabricating a deepfake someone who is white into someone that is not. By examining frequency rather than, for example, the demarcation of red or blue hues found in the face, approaches like DeepRhythm are interesting for GAN-detection methods that detect human liveness by measuring frequencies. In the next section, we turn toward the vernacular appropriation of deepfakes.

## Pirate Affordances

The emergence of an almost cottage industry of deepfake creation has led to resurfacing of debates about technological appropriations and affordances. While complaint and redressal mechanisms (Ahmed 2021) offer as one the modalities to channel the technology back into the institutional rendition, what remains a long-standing precondition concerning technology is the inherent leakages in the supply chain of technologies. To position this debate with respect to technologies and institutions, we revisit the argument of pirate appropriations as proposed by Ravi Sundaram (2011). Little has changed in the way technologies translate on the local surface in vernacular usage. Moreover, with social media platforms becoming the primary sites for institutional encounters, including election campaigns, deepfake technology disperses as a vernacular practice of playing photoshop with celebrity images on one end and fudged representations of electoral candidates on the other end. The range of these vernacular appropriations varies between entry-level amateur to a more sophisticated IT cell-driven maneuver made to influence voting institutions. While click farms are another dimension to this pirate appropriation and manufacture of numbers on social media accounts of public figures, deepfake images offer a new rendition of informal technological leakages. We trace the affordance evidence on Instagram pages of deepfake creator accounts concerning Indian celebrities. One of the visible examples here is *The Indian Deepfaker* – with a follower count of almost ten thousand followers, deepfakes created by the account often comment upon the socio-political events of the world. In a recent turn of events, the account has posted about the tense Ukraine situation, in addition to posts that address some of the most vocal public figures from the Hindi film industry. In a direct message conversation with one such account, they commented how easy it was to get access to stock images of celebrities, and indeed, with better tools and access, they could recreate the image with actions (sic). The gestural economy of most public figures then emerges as a contentious site that is usually mapped using artificial intelligence tools.

Further, deepfake technologies also find ample institutionalized appropriation in advertising platforms in India. The food and beverage giant Cadbury chocolates created deepfake videos of Hindi film star Shahrukh Khan in an advertising campaign. We refer to the video posted on their channel on YouTube, where the advertisers have designed the campaign foregrounding the use of deepfake technology to revive the small and medium local businesses during the harvest festival of the fall season called Diwali or the festival of lights. The advertisement opens with the citation: “This is not just a Cadbury ad. The stories mentioned in this ad are part of thousands of local stories that Cadbury is promoting this Diwali.”<sup>4</sup> Quickly followed by the *mise-en-scène* of festivities unfolding in an Indian household with Shahrukh’s deepfake pronouncing support for the names of local proprietors like home-grown bakers and confectioners, sweet shops, and other miscellaneous businesses in the festive season. The advertisement stands out because it uses Shahrukh’s gestural economy to connect with the audiences with emotional contagion. The timing of the advertisement wherein the advertisement gathered viral view counts owing to star power and holiday season tractions. The advertisement ends with the caption: “Make your ad on NotJustACadburyAd.com.” Conceptualized by Ogilvy and Wavemaker ad agencies, the outreach of the campaign was hyperlocal—covering nearly three hundred plus pin codes across India.<sup>5</sup> Further, the advertisement promotes the use of Shahrukh Khan’s deepfake videos to support local businesses and that the campaign is participatory. Perception building around the brand’s ad campaign pushed for shifting the business requirements of local vendors and mainstreaming the appropriation and usage of deepfakes more openly and publicly. While the ad campaign in and of itself does not mean that internet users in the vernacular contexts shifted to deepfake creation, the process of deepfake creation here, became a site of novelty and aspiration for tech enthusiasts.

## Conclusion

In a deep mediatised (Hepp 2019) world, deepfakes complicate and muddy the waters of image economies for nearly every stakeholder in the ecosystem. While deepfakes find appropriations across contexts, it becomes critical to understand the deep-rooted political economy governing this technology. Not only in the Silicon Valley, but this imaging technology feeds into the big corporates connected with celebrity footing, as in the example of the

Cadbury Ad. Deepfakes are products of instruments for audio and video synthesis that come to have meaning in sociocultural and political contexts through their entrenchment in powerful apparatuses of media control, as objects, catalysts for disinformation, and profit through machine learning techniques. Further, in the age of Web 3.0, with non-fungible tokens (NFTs) emerging as digital possessions for the Metaverse, the next discursive ecosystem of synthetic media appears to follow the same logics of commerce as that of “real” media ecosystems in existing media industries of the world.

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## Endnotes

1 Source: <https://www.moneycontrol.com/news/india/deepfakes-of-bjp-delhi-president-manoj-tiwari-circulated-during-delhi-elections-report-4959171.html> , last accessed on September 13, 2022

2 Popular American cable news programs like 60 Minutes spotlighted these problems posed by deepfakes in a special broadcasted on October 10, 2021, interviewing author of *Deepfakes: The Coming Infocalypse* Nina Schick and deepfake artist Chris Ume.

3 How these innovations are meant to demonstrably effect these interested publics beyond the creation of the Metaverse is yet to be seen.

4 Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R3FnhpelBRO> , last accessed on September 13, 2022

5 Source: <https://www.wpp.com/featured/work/2021/03/ogilvy-and-wavemaker-notjustacadburyad> , last accessed on September 13, 2022

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# Introduction to Special Section: Academic Automation, Machine Un/Learning and Artificial Non/Intelligences

Jeremy Hunsinger

This special section grew out of a panel at the Society for the Social Study of Science in 2021. The panel engaged the broader questions of the relations between automation, machine learning, technologization, and higher education. The papers submitted to the special section are representative of one aspect of that panel, that of the technologization of higher education.

For higher education, the processes of technologization parallel that of society in general. Innovation, novelty, fashion, budgets, and similar intrigues push the adoption and dissemination of new technologies. Technologies come into use and either stabilize as part of the ongoing technologization of the university or pass from general use. In my career so far, there have been many technologies that have come and gone, and some that have stabilized. Some technologies have required more technical support and some less. Other technologies have been simple and easy for the institution and/or faculty and students to adapt. Regardless, every new technology takes the labor of everyone involved, and labor involves time.

Time and space are the two central economies of higher education. Some presume that higher education's primary economy is scholarship, but scholarship rests on the proper management of the two central economies. Much of the capital assets (buildings, real estate, infrastructure, etc.) of universities are designed to preserve and distribute time as a resource. The bureaucracy should also tend toward this model. In a similar vein, teaching and research take up the space of those capital assets. This is true of almost every system that produces a form of capital, such as scholarship, or produces workers who have to be trained to conform to economies of time and space. These economies tie back into the labor-oriented economies and symbolic economies of higher education. The various economies of higher education and their interaction are not simple, but it is clear that time and space are two that the other economies require to operate.

The ease of use of a technology is rarely what makes them gain traction in the university. Usually, they gain traction when they make a section of the university's administrative apparatus in a way that supports fashionable trends in university management, such as neo-liberalization, bureaucratized assessment regimes, austerity, a new popular research idea, or a specific teaching idea such as Moodle's social constructivist pedagogy. Most of these new technologies aim to transfer faculty and students' academic lives and labor into some quantifiable, administrative product.

We also should not disregard the function of the fashion system regarding the culture of technology. Much like the fashion system of mobile phones, the technologies you choose are not necessarily chosen merely for their function, but they are chosen for a host of reasons including that the technology is currently fashionable. Whole industries exist to influence technology decision-makers, and while technical decisions are part of the equation of decision-making, technical decisions can be moderated by other interests of the decision-making parties and one of those interests is

to be involved in the current discussions; the current fashions of the technological elites. Fashions operate in many parts of higher education and it is worth paying attention to their changing currents, especially in terms of economic models, and the systems that govern research and teaching.

The papers in the special section pursue that questioning and critique in several ways. Mostly they confront the perpetual technologization of the university and its implications. For instance, Matthew Vetter and Zachary McDowell engage Wikipedia and higher education to critique the ongoing corporatization and privatization of knowledge and the promotion of non-knowledge. They argue that slow knowledge is a mode of resistance to the privatization of knowledge. Because of that, they claim we need to develop knowledge platforms that recognize that efficiency and speed do not yield the best knowledge systems nor the best learning outcomes.

Edward Maclin critiques Learning Management Systems (LMS's) as non-convivial and designed primarily to bureaucratize and administrate students. He uses Ivan Illich's construction of the conviviality of tools to imagine how LMS's could change if they were convivial. While we can imagine the difference, as Illich and Maclin have, LMS's are instruments of administration and not instruments of community or conviviality. Maclin presents a solid argument on how we can do better by adopting Illich's idea that we should restrain technology such as the LMS from its hegemonic position of being an administrative system that subjectifies its users and moves them toward a position where they are only useful for conviviality. In other words, the priority of the LMS should be that it helps us live better together or in the case of the university, it helps the university help people live better.

The final contribution from Mario Khreiche engages modularity as its central question. One of the persistent critiques of technology in higher education is that it transforms the traditional constructions of labor in the academy, transforming academics into part-time technicians or other specialists. The transformation of their work-life impinges on their time, which is already constrained due to overwork and increasing expectations. However, Khreiche's point is less the ongoing critique of labor and more about how modularity in higher education transforms the work-life of the institution. He argues that modularity, frequently found in the U.K., is becoming more common in the U.S. and transforming how people design their classes. He is quite clear that one way that this modularity is created is because the learning management systems have assumptions of modularity designed into them. Thus, the design of the system becomes the design of the course. This insight has significant implications for learning and the management of courses, intellectual property, and basically all of academic labor around learning.

In the end, all the essays in this special section show that the general assumption of technology and learning in higher education seems to be "neutrality"; technology is not neutral, it is political. The technologies we choose to use structure the learning experiences of our students. Our students are learning the technologies, but also the assumptions of those technologies and the designs of the technologies with whatever hidden curriculum those technologies embody. In short, what is clear from these research papers is that educational technology in higher education is a place for concern, critique, and development based on the norms of the university, such as communality, conviviality, and collegiality.



# Fast “Truths” and Slow Knowledge; Oracular Answers and Wikipedia’s Epistemology

Zachary J. McDowell and Matthew A. Vetter

Heralded for years by librarians and media scholars, the lack of proper information literacy training has brought about a public crisis in which social media encloses more and more of public life. Numerous theories and frameworks have surfaced, attempting to both understand and intercede with the mis/disinformation pervading the ever-changing and fast-paced social media landscape. For better or worse, students and instructors struggle to grapple with these issues, espousing the often repeated (and often belied) mantra of “do your own research.”

danah boyd notes in *It’s Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens* (2014) that this idea of “do your own research” might have backfired on information literacy education. This concept might have rung true within a larger context of information literacy pedagogy (often within the more extensive system of teaching traditional research skills) but shifted potential interpretations as terms like “google” became culturally synonymous with “look up information” or “research.” This linguistic slide helps explain how information literacy pedagogy might have “backfired,” but it was not to blame for the concerns.

Of course, along with the rise of powerful and ubiquitous search tools also came Wikipedia, which represented a massive shift in democratizing the authoritarian process of information curation and access to the encyclopedic form. Along with this massive shift came significant (and rightful) concern for the “encyclopedia anyone can edit” to maintain any semblance of reliability, particularly during its early years, when Wikipedia was seen as unreliable, especially amongst educators. Unfortunately, these teachings about Wikipedia persisted, despite Wikipedia becoming far more reliable as it matured. As expected, boyd notes that students were told to “avoid Wikipedia” and do their own research. Furthermore, students “heard that Google was trustworthy, but Wikipedia was not” (boyd 2017). In light of the history of these concepts (research, Google, and the history of how Wikipedia was viewed), it makes sense that despite students being trained to engage media with a “critical” lens, the evolution of media itself shifted much about what the outcomes of “doing research” meant.

With the speed of Google and the astounding amount of information delivered by its algorithmic searches, students (both those enrolled in traditional or formal institutions as well as anyone seeking to learn) remain bombarded with a veritable cornucopia of information consumption choices, often with high production values and seemingly reliable pedigrees. To be fair to information literacy educators, what boyd and others are concerned about is not necessarily that information literacy training has failed. Instead, there’s a need to address the confusion that emerges from having nearly unlimited information available instantaneously - seeking “answers” and “Truth” – rather than seeing (as the ACRL’s *Framework* puts it) “research as inquiry” and “searching as strategic exploration” (*Framework* 2015). To put it another way, formal and informal information literacy necessitates a distinction between fast “Truths” and what we call “slow knowledge” to indicate a gradual process of knowing, understanding how to interact with knowledge, and understanding the construction of that knowledge.

The speed of these fast “Truths,” both in terms of students’ queries and the rate at which they acquire answers, contrasts deeply with a sustained process of inquiry - and, as we will explore, often ignores foundational checks such as source reliability and verifiability. Our use of capital T “Truth” gestures towards a critique of the foundational (or transcendental) “Truth” perceived when users approach the Internet (and Google in particular) as an objective oracle, as opposed to a socio-technical (and subjective) community and space of engagement.

Google’s Knowledge Graph project, which introduced infoboxes or “knowledge panels” into search results beginning in 2012, remains a prime example of the Internet functioning as an oracle, as the “answers” it provides feeds not only infoboxes but also Virtual Assistant (VA) devices (such as Google Home, aka Nest), literally “speaking the answers” to the user. However, infoboxes (and VAs) often camouflage the referential process, hiding the source of data that creates the “answers,” and forwarding this omniscient oracular stance, which then characterizes user experiences and habits. This stance is particularly problematic in an era of weaponized misinformation because it not only habituates users to seek decontextualized answers (“Truths”) but also creates and feeds new desires within a particular and idealized vision of technology. Stiegler argues that collective anticipations are being replaced by computational systems that deliver a guaranteed result, “destroying every expectation of the unexpected,” which redirects desire towards the expected result - what those technological systems provide (2016: 20). In the “epoch” of algorithms and especially as new applications of big data and algorithms seek to create and answer previously unknown, or unanticipated needs, we should be especially critical of promises like the one Google made when first introducing the Knowledge Graph in 2012: “the perfect search engine should understand exactly what you mean and give you back exactly what you want” (Singhal 2012). Essentially, Google admits to Steigler’s concern: they wish to replace the unexpected with precisely what is expected (that, in turn, one desires only the expected).

As the Internet remains an amalgamation of technologies, it also remains an amalgamation of accidents. As Virilio (2007) notes, the invention of technologies always implies the possibility of accidents: “To invent the sailing ship or the steamer is to invent the shipwreck. To invent the train is to invent the rail accident of derailment” (10). Representation of “truth” is no stranger to these accidents, even before the Internet, and the Internet has created the potential (and has been the site of) innumerable technological “accidents.” More so than this desire for only the requested and expected, these technologies create a destructive desire, even accidentally so, for easy answers without the need or invitation for active engagement. We attempt here to frame a small aspect of the site of this “accident,” as it often remains hidden from view due to the ongoing cataclysms pervading the Internet (and the world) through addressing the technologically driven automated “answers” provided through algorithmic systems such as Google Knowledge Graphs. As speed transforms the essence of things and often dominates against that which is slower (Virilio 1986), it is imperative to consider the pace at which different systems process information and how that assists in the subjugation of other systems. In this paper, we explore concerns around the speed of information, how users access that information, and why it should matter for education (both traditional and nontraditional, formal and informal).

By contrasting this notion of “fast Truths” with an oppositional process, we call “slow knowledge,” we seek to problematize the ways that Google’s Knowledge Graph Project and VAs decontextualize the construction of knowledge from the data itself — often presenting information or “answers” to users in a way that fails to display a reference, and more generally, omits the sociotechnical process that goes into the creation of information. This is where the “accident” here of “fast Truths” emerges, as the rapid velocity ignores critical information literacy components. In contrast, Wikipedia has been referred to as a “happy accident” (Reagle 2009), and we use it here to illuminate the notion of “slow knowledge” as it encourages engagements with information that uncover this sociotechnical construction. Wikipedia has illuminated the processes for this construction of information since its foundation (especially in the meta genres that document its policies, histories, and guidelines), undeterred by its detractors.

Despite Wikipedia’s meager beginnings, the past two decades of its existence illuminates that the encyclopedia offers something fundamentally different from how information is handled and presented on the rest of the Internet. Numerous studies have shown Wikipedia’s reliability in comparison to other encyclopedias (Brown 2011; Giles 2005; Hwang et al.; Kräenbring 2014), and countless researchers have explored its educational value when it comes to core information literacy concepts (Ayers and Zanni 2017; Dowel and Bridges 2019; McDowell and Vetter 2022; Vetter and Woods 2018). Although its reliability and pedagogical usefulness help to illuminate its importance, an additional value of Wikipedia, we argue, is that it can help to differentiate approaches to information representation.

In contrast to the Internet’s offerings of “fast Truths” as “answers” that respond to an immediacy (often the antithesis to information literacy and learning), Wikipedia offers this “slow knowledge” that focuses on reliable, verifiable information, recognition that representation of information neutrally is complicated and messy, and requires understandings of deep research and information literacy concepts to grok the information within it fully. Additionally, the speed of the rest of the Internet relies on procedural knowledge (how to do something to get a result, find a thing, or participate) that offers “results” (as in Google or otherwise), while Wikipedia (by and large) relies on conceptual knowledge (understanding principles, concepts, and theories) to participate fully and engage with the information it holds. Wikipedia’s reliance on verifiable knowledge that can be traced back is imperative to its reliability, which defies the production of “fast Truths” that the Internet is so ready with. While merely contrasting these oppositional concepts provides a productive critique, what has emerged in Google Search in recent years has further blurred the lines between these concepts in ways that are additionally problematic and that demand critical interrogation.

### **Web 3.0: Big Data and Information Literacy in Google’s World**

As is commonly known for anyone who uses Google Search, the top results are often Wikipedia articles. This is no mistake, as Google has been a massive supporter of the Wikimedia Foundation. This foundation is responsible for running and supporting the software and community which comprises Wikipedia and its sister projects. Over the years, these top results became influenced and were supplemented with Google’s “Knowledge Graphs” (displayed in infoboxes on the top right of the browser page). Wikipedia refers to Knowledge Graphs as “a knowledge base used by Google and its services to enhance its search engine’s results with information gathered from various sources. The information is presented to users in an infobox next to the search results” (“Google Knowledge” 2022). These Knowledge Graphs not only supply infobox “answers”; they are often comprised of the same content that VA devices “read” to users - answers that are extracted from Wikipedia. However, what is fascinating here, and somewhat terrifying as well, is that unlike Wikipedia, which is cited in a visibly verifiable way, this information is often de-linked, and therefore de-verified, and most often represented without any transparent way to trace back the sourcing, reliable or not, to the information’s place of extraction.

Where and how Google extracts, this information has shifted over the years. Sourced initially from Wikipedia, Google linked these answers back to the actual articles, which then cited verifiable, reliable data (or if it did not, it was verifiably apparent), backing up its knowledge representation with sources. This was necessary since Wikipedia might be the “free encyclopedia,” but its CC-BY-SA licensing requires attribution. Knowledge Graphs can now extract much of their information from Wikidata, a sister project to Wikipedia, with no such licensing barriers requiring attribution. Wikidata is licensed as CC0, public domain, which is free to link to, extract from, and use in any way - commercial or noncommercial, attributed or not. The CC0 license allows for commodification and re-appropriation of content initially licensed under a CC-BY-SA license and created by a volunteer community in Wikipedia. Specifically, Wikidata scrapes Wikipedia metadata as part of how it populates its system with information. Although (meta)data isn’t copyrightable currently (and there are ample reasons why it shouldn’t be), the original information which has been utilized was created by countless volunteer hours under the guise of this “ShareAlike” license. Although, at first glance, Wikidata might sound like a step forward in providing truly free data, the ways in which large tech companies utilize this data and where this data originated from highlight the epistemological crisis of these “fast Truths.”

In the case of Google's Knowledge Graphs, which not only provide easily digestible answers via infobox but also provide those answers for VA devices, the issue is both that Google's "answers" are provided authoritatively by Google itself, as well as that they distract from (or even amputate) the source of that information - creating both the experience of Google as the authority (and author) of that knowledge as well as ensuring that the information is not seen as something requiring verifiability in the first place. In a *Washington Post* op-ed, "You Probably Haven't Even Noticed Google's Sketchy Quest to Control the World's Knowledge," Caitlin Dewey (2016) offers an accessible critique of the way that Google Search, and in particular its use of Knowledge Graphs, is evidence of a "looming literacy crisis." Dewey interviewed Dario Taraborelli, former head of research at Wikimedia Foundation, who describes the problem in the following: "[The Knowledge Graph] undermines people's ability to verify the information and, ultimately, to develop well-informed opinions" (qt. in Dewey, n.p.). The main issue at stake here, as Dewey sees it, is that the knowledge graphs "provide information but often leave out any context on where that information came from" (n.p.). Even if the infobox remains linked to a Wikipedia article (as some still do), they quickly disappear as Wikidata continues to grow. The "answers" provided are either de-emphasized on the infobox or, more and more likely to be the case, provided by a VA without an audible referent. Essentially, users experience these "fast Truths" from Google (and others) in a way that actively hides the most important aspects of information literacy - the ability to evaluate reliable sources and trace verifiable information as a routine procedure.

Doubly concerning, as boyd noted, is the idea that users trust Google while skeptical of Wikipedia, as they are often unaware that information they are receiving from Google is socially and historically constructed by volunteers in the Wikipedia community. As a result, we have a double conundrum here regarding big tech's appropriation of Wikidata. Not only does Google purposely obscure reference trails; but it also violates and extracts from the digital commons for commercial motives. As noted before, early implementations of Google's Knowledge Graphs, "infoboxes" displayed in response to a search query credited Wikipedia for the information presented. Such attributions, in the form of links to the original article, were de-emphasized and then disappeared altogether. In an interview quoted by Kolbe (initially conducted by Heather Ford in 2014), Max Klein notes the concern over how this came to be: "Wikidata being CC0 at first seemed very radical to me. But one thing I noticed was that increasingly this will mean where the Google Knowledge Graph now credits their "info-cards" to Wikipedia, the attribution will just start disappearing. This seems mostly innocent until you consider that Google is a funder of the Wikidata project. So in some way it could seem like they are just paying to remove a blemish on their perceived omniscience." (as cited in Kolbe, n.p.).

But it is not just the case that Google can "remove a blemish on their perceived omniscience" but instead that CC0 allows them to display data unattributed. The data becomes "part of" their larger data ecosystem, and is able to be used in any way they deem fit - whether simply stating facts in the knowledge panels, feeding VAs, or to utilize in machine learning systems. This disassociation of data sourcing breaks the reference trail imperative to Wikipedia's accountability (as verifiability of sources remains a fundamental tenet of Wikipedia) but also breaks the promise of Wikipedia's licensing - that information contributed to Wikipedia is legally secured as "ShareAlike." When Google uses Wikidata's data derived from Wikipedia, it now has free access to do with it what it will. Not only does this violate the citational ethos of the commons, but in its pursuit of "fast Truths," it also breaks the chain of verifiability, effectively bypassing the "experiential epistemology" that comes from engaging with transparently verifiable information. This extraction should concern anyone involved in the countless hours of labor volunteered to support Wikimedia's free knowledge movement, mainly because that movement is based on and supports critically necessary information literacy skills.

### **Wikipedia and Experiential Epistemology - learning conceptual information literacy skills**

As previously articulated (McDowell and Vetter 2021; McDowell and Vetter 2020), Wikipedia provides an "experiential epistemology" - a process for engaging users in the critical evaluation of information through an assemblage of policies and guidelines agreed upon by the community. Although much of these benefits arise alongside learning how to edit and write Wikipedia, this does not necessarily require in-depth training as even the most casual

audiences of the encyclopedia are likely to have encountered an invitation to help the community evaluate information, most typically in the form of a “[Citation needed]” tag, encouraging readers and would-be editors to provide a verifiable reference for unsourced or poorly sourced content. The space itself is structured in ways that experientially inform readers about proper sourcing, neutrality, and many other aspects of information literacy. To help frame how Wikipedia participates and constructs this “slow knowledge,” we further explore how policies and guidelines related to reliability and verifiability constitute and create this “experiential epistemology.” This will help to articulate and underscore why the loss of engagement within these Wikipedia systems and policies is devastating to information literacy education when procedures and policies are effectively bypassed through a more automated process, what Tom Simonite, writing for *Wired*, labeled a “robot epistemology” (2019).

### WP: Verifiability and WP: Reliability as foundations of knowledge representation

Despite the ubiquitous jokes and criticisms of Wikipedia’s reliability, the encyclopedia has endured, matured, and improved its reputation (especially in the last few years), leading Richard Cooke to label it “the last best place on the Internet” (2020). While certainly related, our current concern is not so much with the encyclopedia’s accuracy of content but instead with the way Wikipedia provides a kind of “public pedagogy” (Hood 2008; Vetter 2014) and, in particular an “experiential epistemology” that engages users in the process of evaluating information in terms of verifiability and reliability. This is no mistake, of course, as reliability and verifiability are central to the fundamental policies and guidelines that govern Wikipedia.

Wikipedia’s project namespace (often abbreviated simply as “WP,” as opposed to “mainspace” articles) contains a collection of pages related to the administration of Wikipedia itself. This is where meta genres such as guidelines, policies, and even essays about the community norms are found, and it is this namespace that houses policies and guidelines related to how the community approaches the application of concepts such as reliability and verifiability, among over 200 others. These guidelines are, at first glance, fairly straightforward; however, they are voluminous and much like Wikipedia mainspace entries, linked, filled with references, and (even individually) often quite lengthy. WP: Verifiability and WP: Reliability are no exception to this.

Arguably the most crucial policy on Wikipedia, WP: Verifiability helps to underscore that Wikipedia is an *encyclopedia* and a tertiary source (and so far from firsthand information that it is not recommended to cite original research as a “proper source”). Wikipedia requires that all content be verifiable through a (secondary) source that directly supports a statement in any given mainspace (content) article. This policy remains imperative to a “chain of evidence” as to why the information *could be trusted*, as each statement on Wikipedia must be neutrally stated and backed up by a reliable source, ensuring that whatever is written on Wikipedia can be checked by anyone to be representative of the source’s information. While there have been essential critiques of how WP: Verifiability limits the types of both sources that can be used to build Wikipedia as well as the content that can be added to a mainspace article (Gruwell 2015; Menking and Rosenberg 2020), WP: Verifiability remains an essential arbiter in the more extensive knowledge ecosystem, not only of Wikimedia but in all of the knowledge representation (especially on the web). The notion of verifiability helps underscore why it is of utmost concern that information extracted from Wikimedia (from Wikidata, for example) must include attribution. De-attribution cuts away the most essential part of why that information could be trusted. In other words, WP: Verifiability initiates the process that invites any user (reader or contributor) into the experiential epistemology of Wikipedia, as it presents the invitation to verify the representation of the source in the statement. As the policy ensures that information can be traced back to another authority, WP: Verifiability sets up the ability to assess the reliability of a source in either the existing content or in developing new content.

The policy of WP: Reliability is, in a nutshell, Wikipedia’s answer to the notion of “truth,” as it seeks to ensure information represented on Wikipedia can be verified from a *trusted* source. This is where Wikipedia distinguishes itself from these “fast Truths” and approaches the notion of knowledge as many reliable representations of “truth” existing simultaneously. Furthermore, WP: Reliability defines both the proper use of and definition of reliable sources:

“Wikipedia articles should be based on reliable, published sources, making sure that all majority and significant minority views that have appeared in those sources are covered” (“Reliable sources”). The guideline covers both recommended (e.g., secondary research vetted by specific academic communities) and more questionable types of sources (e.g., sponsored content). WP: Reliability pushes off the responsibility for factual and reviewed content onto publishers, particularly favoring ones with fact-checking and peer reviewing. Consisting of six sections and nearly thirty subsections, this guideline alone is already quite comprehensive in providing a pedagogical overview for information literacy as it speaks to evaluating sources and understanding where information arises from. However, the recommended practices come alive in the day-to-day interactions and editing work happening in the encyclopedia as editors update articles with new secondary sources and challenge unsourced or questionably-sourced content, as well as when readers encounter both reliable and unreliable sources content across the encyclopedia’s main content articles. Editorial changes and reader encounters constitute a type of experiential epistemology characterized by knowledge-making practices that are quite traditional, given the history of the encyclopedic genre (Vetter 2020).

In the end, Wikipedia has established a robust system for information processing - both in terms of the critical evaluation of all types of source material, as well as the assessment of how those sources are used to create coverage of any given topic. While WP: Reliability and WP: Verifiability represent only a few of the hundreds of guidelines and policies on Wikipedia, the two of these represent perhaps the most essential elements of how Wikipedia’s “slow knowledge” emerges, one which is experienced both as the ability to find answers as well as trusting those answers because of the ability to verify them.

Wikipedia depends on quality secondary sources to create tertiary article content. WP: Verifiability presupposes and creates the space where readers can then question reliability, while the policy of WP: Reliability seeks to ensure accountability for “factual” information. Such policies are the basis for constructing knowledge in Wikipedia, but they do not act alone. Instead, they are part of a messy struggle to represent knowledge with algorithms, editors, readers, and other agents in the ongoing creation of what we have referred to as ethical assemblages (McDowell and Vetter 2021: 29). These assemblages create movement within the representation of “truth” and this movement cannot exist without this messy process allowing knowledge representation to exist in a constant state of interpretation, evaluation, and improvement. This is the pedagogical experience of knowing - that rather than fast “Truths,” the value of information transcends immediate answers (see McDowell and Vetter 2022) and even “truth” remains overwhelmingly contingent upon numerous aspects of subjectivity.

## Conclusion

Despite the call for better information literacy and skills to combat mis/disinformation, it is evident that the constant desire for immediate answers runs counter to healthy epistemologies indicative of information literacy. Treating a socially and technically constructed machine as some sort of oracle is an easy way out of the slow, complex, and messy learnings that represent the reality and history of human knowledge. The speed at which information is accessed can only be handled appropriately when both the teachings have been properly imparted and when the information’s sourcing remains transparent. Although we cannot solely blame tech companies for the lack of education or the speed at which things move, we do need to hold big data accountable to specific standards of transparency as well as for obfuscating and profiteering off of the lack (and lag) of public information literacy education. Nothing comes from nothing, and allowing tech giants to act as priests of knowledge, delivering information as if they themselves are the intermediaries or arbiters of all that is “True” and factual, remains problematic at best and particularly dangerous in a time of rapid-onset disinformation. The experiential here is of concern - the idea that answers are final/uncontested itself runs counter to how knowledge functions, and without the ability to engage with the knowledge, we can undoubtedly expect mass atrophy in information literacy habits and skills. Furthermore, the increasing exploitation and enclosure of the digital commons threaten all this. The orientation of tech giants as ubiquitous oracles casts the struggles of the commons aside and devalues the combined love and labor of those who seek to share and participate.

Rather than settle for oracular answers, we need platforms and engagements that emphasize dynamism - that of knowledge creation and curation, sharing, and community. Systems of verifiability give us a roadmap, both within larger historical systems and the “modern” (albeit ancient in Internet terms) systems that govern Wikipedia. Recognizing how the Wikipedia community has come to work alongside machinic systems (bots, AI, and otherwise) while retaining socially-governed practices and commitment to epistemological foundations illustrates and illuminates not only the need for transparent, open, and grounded information systems but also that the ethics of information representation remain in good hands when curated by these messy human-led assemblages. In the end, Wikipedia might move slowly in comparison to these fully automated systems, but it also demonstrates that *faster is not necessarily better* (particularly when we understand the long-term potential consequences). Although learning “how to know,” and understanding the construction of knowledge takes time, it is time well spent.

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# Learning Management Systems as Anti-Convivial Tools

Edward Maclin

The last two decades have seen an increase in the number of online university classes operating under any of several commercial Learning Management Systems (LMS). Online classes expanded dramatically in the US during 2020 as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Students, faculty, and administrators frequently assume that LMSs are epistemologically neutral. These LMSs are designed to do exactly what they say on the tin: they are systems for managing learning. At the same time, they function based on implicit understandings of “learning,” “management,” and “systems” that privilege some knowledges, interactions, and discourses while de-emphasizing others. In this paper I argue that the LMS as a tool is not—in the terms of Ivan Illich—convivial. Rather, LMSs as designed enforce a technocratic perspective based on efficiency and replicability, making them actively anti-convivial. At the same time, problems with LMS-hosted classes are defined in technological terms, with additional improved software being seen as the main solution. I argue that employing a critical participatory pedagogy can begin to address these concerns.

## Introduction

Scholars have noted many problems with and objections to the widespread use of Learning Management Systems. LMSs have been criticized for limiting innovation in learning and teaching (Mott and Wiley 2009); failing to support user interaction, customization, and flexibility (Brown, Dehoney, and Millichap 2015); and as being useful for accessibility but otherwise uninteresting (Hill 2015).

Green and Chewning (Green and Chewning 2020) frame criticisms of LMSs as falling into two camps. The first focuses on LMSs as one-size, instructor-centered teaching platforms in need of technological renovation. The second camp contains advocates of critical pedagogy (Morris 2017b; Stommel 2017), who see LMSs as an outgrowth of the banking model of education. Green and Chewning (2020) describe both camps as reactions to the dominant uses of LMSs—as information hosting platforms—which fail to make use of the full capacities of the modern LMS.

Solutions to these criticisms may be digital reconfiguration—for example, as Next Generation Digital Learning Environments (Brown et al. 2015) designed to be customizable for all users at all levels of the institution. Or, they may come through forms of digital pedagogy (Morris 2017) that ask instructors to use a mix of technologies and approaches to transcend the limitations of the LMS (Desantis 2012; Morris 2017b) The solutions may even be present already—waiting largely unused within the LMS (Green and Chewning 2020.)

What these electronic and pedagogical approaches have in common is an implicit assumption regarding the neutrality of technology. In the words of Sean Morris, “The digital isn’t magic. It isn’t mysterious. It’s regular human communication astride a new medium. Let me say that again: It’s regular human communication astride a new medium. There’s no need to make it more than it is” (Morris 2017a). Or, as Green and Chewning put it: “Whether

in digital or analog spaces, we contend that the technology we use or eschew is merely a tool, which can be used for transformative or normative purposes” (Green and Chewning 2020,425).

In this paper, I make two closely related arguments regarding the use of LMSs in higher education. The first is that LMSs are not epistemologically neutral: they favor a mechanistic and depoliticized perspective on knowledge, despite the best practices and intentions of educators. The second, rooted in Ivan Illich’s idea of convivial technology, is that LMSs are more than simply non-convivial—they are, due to their depoliticizing and mechanistic epistemology, actively anti-convivial. I end with thoughts on how a critical participatory pedagogy might begin to address these concerns.

## History of LMSs

In 1987, I was an undergraduate student in Biology at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville (UTK). My father was, at the time, working as a mechanical engineer for E.I. Dupont in Memphis. It was the Fall semester of that year when I sent my first email across the state. As I recall, it was sent over BITNET, the routing information was embedded in the email address, and it took him by surprise when the message showed up on his company computer. My chemistry class that semester, taught by Dr. Donald Kleinfelter, was one of a few classes that was broadcast across the campus’ closed-circuit television system—so students could attend from their own dormitories. At the same time—in the Fall of 1987, the NKI Distance Education Network in Norway rolled out their first course using the EKKO Computer Conferencing system (Paulsen and Rekkedal 2001). Another early step toward online education was PLATO (Programmed Logic for Automatic Teaching), built beginning in 1959 by a team of engineers and technologists at the University of Illinois using military funding (Cope and Kalantzis 2021). B.F. Skinner had seen the potential for individualized computer instruction even earlier (Skinner 1958). Still, these first steps were tentative and experimental.

It wasn’t until the late 1990s and early 2000s that Learning Management Systems became common. These are more than single course broadcasts or bulletin boards. Their work includes attendance tracking, communications, information hosting and sharing, scheduling, assessments, grouping students, managing users and user roles, and tracking click-throughs and time spent on individual web pages. A working LMS provides consistency across classes for students and instructors. It facilitates standardization and replicability. And, I argue, it is too often assumed to be epistemically neutral. These LMSs are designed to do exactly what they say on the tin: they are systems for managing learning. Or, at least, they are systems designed to administer the institutionalized educational process. At the end of the day, though, they end up also managing learning—in ways that may be unintended or perverse.

Online classes—synchronous, asynchronous, and hybrid—were already becoming more popular through the first part of the 21st century. The U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics tracked a continuous increase in the number of online classes from 2012 through 2019. In the Fall of 2018, 35% of undergraduate students in the US enrolled in some type of distance education course enrolled in some type of distance education course (NCES 2021). This doesn’t count those students taking face-to-face or hybrid classes where a portion of the class is hosted and administered through a LMS.

Then, of course, the pandemic hit. Faculty and students who had avoided talking classes online or using LMS technology were now all in. As Sean Palmer and Jason Gallagher wrote in the Harvard Business Review in September 2020:

This moment is likely to be remembered as a critical turning point between the “time before,” when analog on-campus degree-focused learning was the default, to the “time after,” when digital, online, career-focused learning became the fulcrum of competition between institutions. (Gallagher and Palmer 2020)

What strikes me here is not the assertion of a digital turning point but the expected shift from “degree-focused” to “career-focused” learning. This is certainly in line with audit culture (Kipnis 2008; Shore and Wright 2015; Strathern 2000) within universities and a shift in how and why the educational project is valued.

### Online Classes as Solutions and Solutionism

Online classes in general and LMSs in specific seem to be riding a wave of inevitability. At my own University—prior to the pandemic—the available LMS was gradually and unevenly adopted by faculty for their courses through the last decade. We were encouraged to make use of the LMS even for face-to-face classes to host syllabi, articles, and the class gradebook. This was often described in terms of accessibility (so that differently-abled students could access and read materials) and security (since maintaining a gradebook on paper or a laptop risks leaking personal information.) In these cases, the LMS does provide solutions. LMSs, particularly in the case of online classes, also tout the potential to increase enrollment, retention, and course success. Whether they actually do these things is beyond my scope here—though during the last decade in the US, as online participation has increased, total enrollments have dropped (NCES 2021).

LMSs follow a familiar technological trajectory: from existing as a curiosity, to useful tool, to ubiquitous and even mandatory technology (Illich 1973). LMSs are part of a larger digital environment, and are in part driven by changes to Internet regulations, cybersecurity, and machine learning algorithms (Kowch 2018). Universities are placing increased priority on technological integration—so that the LMS works with other digital systems to allow a seamless flow of data across platforms. This has the additional effect of locking the LMS into the campus technological ecosystem. While I have several friends who have given up smart phones, or cars, or even tried moving partially off the electrical grid, I don’t know anyone who has ditched the LMS—except by leaving academia.

Where students and faculty see issues with the LMS, the LMS itself often provides the solution. Low online engagement? Intelligent agents within the LMS can monitor student logins, activities, and clicks and send out automated emails to students. Students not excited about the course? The LMS provides fun digital badges to gamify the class experience. Lots of papers to grade? The LMS both integrates with plagiarism-checking technology and provides easy-to-use rubric tools for quantifying student work. Before we had the word “solutionism” (Morozov 2013) Ivan Illich described this process: “It has become fashionable to say that where science and technology have created problems, it is only more scientific understanding and better technology that can carry us past them” (Illich 1973:16).

### LMSs and Epistemic Neutrality

Proponents of LMSs have insisted on a framework of technological neutrality (Green and Chewning 2020; Morris 2017a) in which the LMS is “merely a tool” (Green and Chewning 2020,425). Meanwhile, social scientists and philosophers from multiple disciplines have continued to object to the technological neutrality framework. Whether because technologies may act as moral proxies for humans (Millar 2015), because technological artifacts are value-laden and transmit those values through their use (Dyrud 2017), or through the ecological interactions between technologies and higher-education discourse (Dowd 2016), technological non-neutrality continues to be a major theme in the Science, Technology, and Society (STS) literature.

In this section, I focus in particular on **epistemic** non-neutrality: that LMSs influence or transform the knowledge that they transmit. They do this in three ways: first, LMSs demand particular forms of interaction and input; second, by presenting themselves as technologically neutral, they favor an atomistic, individualistic, and transactional perspective on knowledge; third, they enable and enforce evaluation and assessment following an audit culture model. Combined, these result in a mechanistic and depoliticized epistemology.

That the LMS demands particular, standardized inputs is far from trivial. In 1950, Alan Turing developed the idea of the Turing Test—the core idea being if a computer can respond in a way that is functionally equivalent and indistinguishable from a thinking (human) user, then that machine is also thinking (Harnad 2003; Turing 1950). I want to propose the inverse: if a human responds in a way that is indistinguishable from a machine, then that human is an artificial intelligence.

What if, in working with computers, we are adapting our own social-cognitive processes to the system to such a degree that we ourselves are essentially apps, to be judged as either functional or buggy? Rather than humans using machines as mere tools, the computer system interfaces with us as an aggressive act—demanding specific data in specific formats. How many of the students in our online classes would pass a Turing Test? Put another way, if an AI signed up for an online class would we know the difference? Rather than AI being the product of human invention, AI enters into humans through an unbirth as an emergent property of the machine system. As in Bishop's *The Anticipatory Corpse* (Bishop 2011) where dead—rather than living—bodies are the epistemological standard for medicine, in the LMS the standard is an efficient machine-mind, capable of completing tasks and processing information, but without the added worry of social and emotional complexity.

Illich refers to this process as an institutionalization of values, and the “the incongruous demand that man seek his satisfaction by submitting to the logic of his tools” (Illich 1973, 56.) I suggest that this process has an individualistic effect on creativity and agency, but also a collective effect on classroom culture.

At the same time, LMSs perpetuate not only a banking model of education (Freire 2005) but also a transactional and material metaphor for knowledge itself. This object metaphor for knowledge is rooted in representationalism (Kakihara and Sørensen 2002), the idea that our knowledge is a direct—if imperfect—representation of observations or experiences. Aadne et. al. (1996) note that in a objective, representationist framework, the processing work of the human mind is “to a large extent comparable to the essential characteristics of computation” (Aadne et al. 1996:11). Knowledge here is objectified, and learning is a process of acquiring more accurate representations (Kakihara and Sørensen 2002). A objectified metaphor for knowledge as resource or capital is also the basis for ideas of intellectual capital (Andriessen 2006), which are rooted in and supportive of industrial management.

Potentially accepting or creating alternate metaphors for knowledge, for example as an outgrowth of collective practice (Brown and Duguid 2001) or as a process (Nonaka and Takeuchi 1995) is problematic beyond the LMS. One key point here is on grading. Students are routinely tested and graded on an individual basis—but if we take knowledge to be social and processual rather than personal and atomistic, individual testing makes less sense. This question—what counts as knowledge—is implicitly answered by the LMS through a proliferation of rubrics, quiz tools, and student checklists. Ungrading is made difficult through the very structure of the LMS (Gibbs 2017).

This ties to my third point on the non-neutrality of the LMS: it supports an audit culture (Strathern 2000) model based on ranking and quantitative evaluation. The LMS enables efficiency by offering to accept responsibility for grading, counting clicks, tracking time-on-task, and other tasks of surveillance. This technocratic governance enables the disciplines of Learning Analytics (LA), educational process mining (EPM), Educational Data Mining (EDM). This approach also contributes to metric-based tracking of instructor work and, in turn, academic precarity (Hall 2019).

An increase in the collection of student and instructor data leads to analysis and deployment of that data in search of efficiency. An example is the recent swell of interest in machine learning. Machine learning is touted as a path toward individualization and precision education (Luan and Tsai 2022) and increased performance (Ciolacu et al. 2017). Several authors have proposed machine teaching—applying the principles of software engineering to teaching—as an extension of this process, particularly as a way to efficiently increase the number of people who can develop machine learning systems (Ramos et al. 2020; Simard et al. 2017; Zhu et al. 2018).

The result of these processes is a mechanistic and depoliticized epistemology. In my own anthropology classes, on human prehistory, urban communities, the Internet, 20th century theory, and so on, a frequent topic is the importance of material culture and the idea that tools—from stone scrapers to computers—are full participants in our bio-cultural systems, and that they affect our consciousness and communities in significant ways. In fully online classes, though, I meet a disproportionate amount of skepticism on this concept. Students readily accept the idea that human *uses* of technology can be political—but not that technology itself exerts political influence. The overwhelming tendency of students is toward the technological neutrality framework.

### LMSs and Anti-Conviviality

Ivan Illich developed the concept of conviviality to describe tools that we can live with. Illich is by no means against new technologies. He envisions convivial tools as affording opportunities without compulsion:

Convivial tools are those which give each person who uses them the greatest opportunity to enrich the environment with the fruits of his or her vision (Illich 1973:29).

Convivial tools rule out certain levels of power, compulsion, and programming, which are precisely those features that now tend to make all governments look more or less alike (Illich 1973:24).

He contrasts these to managerial or industrial tools:

Industrial tools deny this possibility [conviviality] to those who use them and they allow their designers to determine the meaning and expectations of others. (Illich 1973:29).

His concern is that once a particular technology crosses a threshold of institutionalization, we begin to conform ourselves to the logic of the tool.

The use of industrial tools stamps in an identical way the landscape of cities each having its own history and culture. Highways, hospital wards, classrooms, office buildings, apartments, and stores look everywhere the same. Identical tools also promote the development of the same character types. Policemen in patrol cars or accountants at computers look and act alike all over the world, while their poor cousins using nightstick or pen are different from region to region. The progressive homogenization of personalities and personal relationships cannot be stemmed without a retooling of society (Illich 1973:22).

Illich himself was very interested in education and education technologies—though the technologies he was considering consisted of standardized textbooks and classrooms. Here lies an important point: while standardized textbooks may count as an industrialized technology, they operate as immutable mobiles (Latour 1987b) within the education system. To the extent that textbooks promote standardization and define the legitimacy of specific knowledge discourses, they fit Illich's conception of industrial or non-convivial technology. As such, they are homogenizing within a limited domain of knowledge legitimacy. Instructors often circumvent this using supplementary materials or by using alternate sources in conjunction with the book.

In contrast, LMSs are strategic technologies of legibility (Scott 1998) that reorganize and simplify both students and faculty to render them more manageable. Crucially, this strategy operates through technologies and institutions rather than solely through the individual agency of technocrats. As such, LMSs are not merely non-convivial; they are actively anti-convivial. The LMS is increasingly institutionalized within the technological ecosystem of education under an assumption of neutrality—which makes circumventing it difficult or impossible.

## Critical Participatory Pedagogy

I am not entirely opposed to the LMS in principle, but—following Illich—I suggest that communities should limit the use and spread of non-convivial tools to prevent them from becoming dominating institutions. In the case of anti-convivial technologies, I suggest that it is necessary to go beyond circumventing the technology toward developing activities that directly challenge the technology’s epistemological assumptions.

In my online Anthropology classes, I see students responding by hitting all the appropriate check-boxes. They submit papers, take quizzes, do the readings, watch the videos, and participate in the discussion forum. They meet the objective standards that I set in the course development process. When I assign group work, it is always mediated by technology (email, Groupme, discussion board, Zoom)—except when online students happen to share offline social connections. And I do see students learning—they leave the class with new information, and often with new perspectives on theory, or communities, or whatever the topic of the class was. At the same time, I am left with a nameless dread.

Are these students engaged participating in a learning community that serves as legitimate peripheral participation (Lave and Wenger 1991) for membership in the larger community of anthropologists? I do think that the students in this class are engaged in the work of culture-building. The question is, what kind of culture are we (I include myself) assembling, what are the scraps that we are drawing together, and what tools and processes are we using along the way?

Two components of this issue are synchronicity and embodiment. The LMS is apparently an asynchronous environment, meaning that students and instructors are not interacting with one another in real time. Zoom and live text chat are available, but they both flatten and delay communication. The asynchronous nature of online classes could be seen as a benefit by students who dislike groups, crowds, and potentially uncomfortable social situations. It is also apparently beneficial for those with reduced capacities for attending in-person classes—lack of transportation, schedule conflicts, language barriers, and so on. Having an asynchronous discussion via a forum allows students time to compose their thoughts and draft an “appropriate” response. All of this, I think, works against the development of either an online culture that is conducive to critical discourse or a learning community that transitions students from the periphery to the core of the discipline of Anthropology. Asynchronous classes limit shared experience, emotional communication, and the tension of existing in an uncertain liminal state. They also serve as a technological alternative to the important work of increasing student and community capacities for synchronous engagement.

I say that these classes are *apparently* asynchronous—but not from the perspective of the machine. From the computer’s view, communications between itself and others are always synchronous. The computer-user relationship is the only truly synchronous sharing of experience that the technology allows, and in this case synchronous sharing is both implicit and mandatory. Assuming that synchronous sharing of experience is one necessary component for cultural development, the culture that is emerging will likely focus on narrowly-defined technological integration and information sharing, governed by invisible technocrats. Ruth Benedict famously once said that the purpose of anthropology is to make the world safe for human differences—which is contrary to the kind of standardization that online classes so often demand.

Similarly, the experience of both faculty and students is differently embodied in face-to-face versus face-to-LMS interactions. In both situations human participants are fully embodied; and in both systems, embodiment is affected by the structural arrangements of technology, whether that be desks in rows, whiteboards, screens, or phone keyboards with haptic feedback. The human-LMS interaction may seem to offer additional freedom, since you can be most anywhere (at a table, in the tub, driving) for the process. But, I think that this has to be weighed against both the narrow field of view that the screen requires and the work of educators to recognize and address embodiment in pedagogy—which is made more difficult by the LMS. Paul Drijvers in Utrecht has written on ideas

about embodiment and physicality in math education, and the ways that differently-embodied physical interactions with mathematical models influence learning (Drijvers 2019). These issues of synchronicity and embodiment are also too often taken as neutral.

I envision two possible paths forward: one is technological whack-a-mole, in which every solution creates or reveals additional problems (Latour 1987a). This approach necessitates a team of mole-whackers. Ideally, these mole-whackers might be well versed in critical pedagogy, approaches to decolonization and anti-racism, and ethnographic methods. Because of the work that goes into whacking all those moles, this process leads to a technology that appears as progressively unproblematic.

The other approach is to abandon the expansive use of the LMS in an attempt to return to Illich's middle stage—in which technology is useful, but not yet hegemonic. This approach allows a continued use of some features that promote accessibility and security, combined with additional approaches and technologies (both digital and analog) of creativity and resistance. This second approach is rooted in participation, in two senses. In the first sense, it recognizes knowledge as arising through a process of community interaction (Brown and Duguid 2001). This interaction in higher education is the beginning of induction into professional communities of practice through the process of legitimate peripheral participation (Lave and Wenger 1991). In the second sense, as an anthropologist, a participatory approach follows trends in anthropology toward collaboration and participation (Nastasi et al. 2000; Schensul, Berg, and Williamson 2008) that are crucial to the education of future anthropologists.

In my own classes I am increasingly directing students away from readings, videos, and the like and toward their own families and neighborhoods. In two recent classes, students have completed paper Zines as collaborative final class projects—including poetry, recipes, and reflections on class materials. During the Spring of 2022, in a split level undergraduate/graduate class on the Anthropology of Organizations, students are using online word processing software to write a textbook on the subject, with groups of students working together collaboratively each week to draft text, and the whole class coming together to suggest additions and edits. I refer to these projects as critical participatory pedagogy, in that they de-center my position as Instructor and encourage collaboration, participation, and explicit agency on behalf of the students. In each case, I have maintained a minimal use of the LMS—while intentionally seeking out projects and activities that emphasize the social nature of knowledge and the politics of media.

After thinking about this for a while, I'm left with some questions. *Should* an LMS be convivial? I've taken this as a positive assumption based on my own leanings and Illich's work. Convivial for whom? It is possible to imagine a system in which LMSs are more convivial for faculty than students, or vice versa. What might be appropriate limits on LMS technology, who sets those limits, and how? Perhaps most critical—how can we overcome the assumptions of ethical and epistemological neutrality that so often accompany technologies like the LMS?



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# Modularity, Labor, and Ideology in Edtech Platforms

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## Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has accelerated the proliferation of digital education technologies (edtech) in K-12 schools, community colleges, and universities. Learning Management Systems (LMSs), video conferencing platforms, and other proprietary software tools are now instrumental in facilitating remote and hybrid learning. This increased reliance on edtech concerns not only current pandemic (or endemic) circumstances, but raises questions about the quality and labor systems of education. Focusing on higher education institutions, the convergence of edtech and venture capital (V.C.) casts doubts on the educational investments of administrations. Among the points of contention are the dataveillance efforts of edtech providers that seek to increase addressable market share and reconfigure academic working conditions consistent with platform logics. Platform logics fragment learning into discrete units that can be integrated and scaled in evermore online environments and value chains.

In this article, I suggest that the concept of modularity can help explain edtech-platform design, processes, and ideology. I proceed in the following steps: First, I provide a brief overview of learning technologies to situate the discussion in a longer history of computer-mediated learning. In particular, the ambient, perhaps invisible, characteristic of LMSs as learning infrastructure abets the concealment of academic labor relations. Second, I outline the idea of modularity, drawing from literature in media and software studies. While modularity is often conceived as an affordance that enables scaling and automating of systems, critical perspectives in media and software studies highlight its sociotechnical implications, particularly “information hiding.” Third, I show how modular design approaches inform platform architectures, such that academic work is streamlined, outsourced, and formatted to accommodate the creation of engagement-driven learning environments.

## Edtech: Histories and Presences

Visions of computer-assisted and automated modes of teaching and learning are not new and are well-documented in historical accounts. Educators, technologists, and other stakeholders have long advocated for the implementation of computers to improve learning outcomes and innovate educational conditions. Examples are myriad and range from B.F. Skinner’s and Sydney Pressey’s personalized Teaching Machines in the post-war era (Watters 2021) to Heinz von Foerster’s “cybernetic learning machines” during the counterculture movement (Müggenburg 2020) to recurring policy initiatives of Coding Literacy (Vee 2017) to learning technologies as forms of international development (Ames 2019) and global citizenship (Good 2020). If learning technologies have consistently mediated educational experiences, conversely, advances in hardware and software, mainframe and personal computing, and information and communication networks—projects like Programmed Logic for Automated Teaching Operations (PLATO) (Rankin 2018) or ARPANET, the precursor to today’s Internet (Barbrook 2007)—would be inconceivable without research and development in educational settings. Although hardly as prestigious as some of the aforementioned applications, the LMS has been widely-adopted in education institutions and is now perhaps the most impactful technology in the service of institutional education.

LMSs emerged several decades ago, but were not widely adopted until the early 2000s. As Justin Reich writes, “The first cited references to learning management systems appear in scholarly literature in the 1960s and 70s [while the] first commercially successful LMS was Blackboard, released in 1997, and the first widely adopted open-source LMS was Moodle, released in 2002” (2020: 24). Compared to more domain-specific programs and tutorials in computer-assisted learning (CAL), computer-assisted instruction (CAI) and intelligent CAI (ICAI) (Saettler 2004: 456-63), the value proposition of LMSs is elementary: they provide a virtual space for classroom management and administration. In other domains, similarly fundamental value propositions indicate the promise of platforms becoming infrastructure (Plantin et al. 2018). In education, LMSs now serve as central hubs for all sorts of educational participation. LMSs are successful precisely because they are “boring,” that is, “they fall into that class of infrastructure [...] that are essential to everyday experience even as they are mostly invisible” (Reich 2020: 24).

The ambient character of LMSs helps conceal widespread practices of outsourcing educational activities to the servers and graphical user interfaces (GUIs) of commercial platforms. Integrating various content development tools, according to some observers, functionally renders today’s LMSs Learning Content Management System (LCMS) (Watson and Watson 2007). Definitional uncertainties aside, digital tools like attendance trackers or video conferencing software are now expected to seamlessly connect and interoperate with LMSs via plugin or application programming interface (API) (Snodgrass and Soon 2019). Behind their user-oriented GUIs, providers like Blackboard, Canvas, and Desire2Learn (D2L) frequently embed additional features or expand through vertical integrations and acquisitions to remain competitive in an accelerating market (Hill 2020). The modular design of LMSs helps implement platform dynamics of feature convergence, digital rentiership, and assetization.

While LMSs have become central platforms in and beyond higher education—they also serve K-12 schools, businesses, and government agencies—institutional infrastructures remain complex networks of databases, directories, student information systems (SIS), and other computational administrative tools. Internal complexity and external contingency on historical, social, and regional factors, then, prevent “sweeping” technological “disruptions” (Reich 2020: 9). Reich’s situated research on MOOCs, for instance, grounds expectations in technologist and business-oriented discourses, showing that putative innovations tend to offer supply to not yet existing demand. Nevertheless, even incremental change and tinkering with learning platforms might normalize new modalities of teaching and learning, shift pedagogical expertise, and change demands placed on academic workers. Thus, “concentrating on the suggestive and anticipatory qualities of sociotechnical systems” (Perrotta et al. 2021) remains an important task, particularly during public health emergencies that have education institutions hastily turning to digital solutions (Williamson et al. 2020).

Fueled by at least a decade of growth in the tech industry and expedited by the pandemic emergency, edtech sector projections in 2020 ranged from \$90bn to \$187bn, while expected annual growth rates for the subsequent 4-7 years varied between 14.5% and 19.9% (IBIS Capital 2020; Grand View 2021). Between 2010 and 2020, V.C. investment increased from \$0.5bn to \$16bn, signifying a 3100% jump (HolonIQ 2021). Given recent economic downturns and geopolitical events, however, such unbridled growth now seems less likely. At the same time, tech companies might again convert crisis into opportunity and seek to fill gaps left by budget cuts across federal, state, and local levels (Fourcade 2021). In other words, even as tech and adjacent sectors correct, companies like Google (Classroom), Microsoft (Teams), and specialized edtech platforms like Instructure (Canvas) or Coursera are likely to capitalize on the structural decline, create new educational needs, and reshuffle institutional working configurations.

Against this backdrop of the edtech political economy, propositions to manage learning through customized engagement enclosures, learning analytics, and algorithmic nudging architectures retain traction among both educational and financial institutions. In such business models, platforms accumulate capital not only through contracts with colleges and universities, but also by turning individuals and their data into assets (Birch et al. 2020) and forming rentier relationships (Komljenovic 2021). It is precisely these prospects of monetizing educational participation that fan the ongoing convergence of V.C. and edtech. Not surprisingly, then, recent mergers and acquisitions in the sector

combine access to student populations and activity with capabilities in data analytics and behavioral modulation (Hill 2022). At once a design feature and ideological screen, modularity informs the ways edtech platforms facilitate and reimagine online and hybrid classroom architectures, institutional relationships, and educational participation and workflows.

## Modularity in Organization, Course Design, and Ideology

The concept of modularity has origins in the life and cognitive sciences (Callebaut and Rasskin-Gutman 2005) and has been adopted in computer science and related fields (Gobet 2005). In ecosystems, modularity generates resilience, that is, a system's ability to compartmentalize and absorb shock (Kharrazi 2019). This capacity, in turn, finds application in industrial operating procedures, where modularity speaks to the interchangeability of system-relevant components (Sutton 2015). Historically, production processes such as the assembly of automobiles or personal computers have evinced modular characteristics, allowing output to continue despite partial supply chain breakdown (Langlois 2002: 22-4). In software engineering, meanwhile, modularity describes "how knowledge is indexed, structured, organized, and retrieved" and "the ability to add, modify, or delete individual data structures" (Gobet 2005: 333-4). In both production and programming, a prominent modular characteristic is that of information hiding. Indeed, to the extent that higher education institutions are tasked to produce knowledge, the implications of modularization are traceable to LMS GUIs, departmental practices, and administration. Media and software studies have contributed significantly to reveal the sociotechnical interfaces between programming and institutional organization.

Modularity informs Lev Manovich's media theory, constituting the second of his five "Principles of New Media" (2002). Emphasizing the technical reproducibility of new digital media, Manovich defines modularity as both a principle and an affordance that enables scalable and integrative processes: "the modular structure of a media object [allows] for the automation of many operations involved in media creation, manipulation, and access" (Manovich 2002: 30). Consistent with accounts in software engineering, this view presents scaling and automation as more or less neutral results of modularity. Manovich's formal account, however, contains a blind spot when applied beyond virtual media objects to infrastructural platforms. Whereas in modular design, information hiding can make technical processes more efficient, in a sociotechnical context, it can double as an ideological screen. As "properly modularized code reduces the amount of information required to understand any given portion of the system" (Scott quoted in Galloway 2012: 67), individual programmers (or programs) are, to varying degrees, siloed in information architecture. Defined as the capacity to modify and reuse blocks of code in future iterations, modularity not only "allow[s] for the automation of many operations," as Manovich (2002: 32) would have it, but also engenders information asymmetries and, by extension, changes relationships and hierarchies. In short, modularity enables specialization in programming through hiding components of a given code, while institutional meanings of modularity range from increased organizational resilience to the deskilling of labor.

These patterns are also evident in higher education institutions, where course programming and instruction are increasingly mediated by learning platforms and information technology (I.T.) support staff. Modular LMS design, for instance, ensures the suitability of generic course shells for different academic disciplines and departmental specializations. Such streamlining shifts educational expertise, practices, and expectations further into technical and administrative domains. As Perrotta et al. (2021: 108) argue in an analysis of the Google Classroom API:

The introduction of automation in the pedagogic environment does not eliminate teachers' labor but reconfigures it by generating new tasks that require teachers to synchronize effectively with the platform and by slowly but perceptibly shifting their efforts from actual teaching to the 24/7 coordination, moderation, and facilitation of student engagement.

Transforming job profiles in such a way is a laborious process in itself, a fact obscured by labels of digitization, automation, or human-centered design. Intensified by the pandemic, norms around effective instruction now involve

robust online components, including LMS implementation, video support, and sometimes asynchronous learning options. Institutions expect instructors to attend live or recorded tutorials and, if necessary, schedule individual sessions with I.T. staff to adequately prepare online course environments. These training activities typically occur outside regular semesters and are thus further made invisible. Tasks that technology officers might bill as seamless integration, such as transferring course content from previous semesters, often call for reading unwieldy instructions and manually entering commands. This is not to say that modular design only streamlines and formalizes. Instructors might find creative openings by developing modules or requesting additional third-party applications. In fact, much of the work of platform development relies on precisely this type of crowdsourced activity, feedback, troubleshooting, and maintenance by educational staff.

While modularization affords individual instructors a reasonable degree of efficient resource management, such as reusing and duplicating course content, it also lets administrations and departments oversee and replicate the work of faculty. According to Daniel Greene's (2021: 112) account of technology-focused charter schools, the emphasis on streamlining and granular data collection on learning platforms often produces an "infrastructure [...] more responsive to administrators than teachers or students." Basic technical requirements have considerable consequences. LMSs, for instance, grant backend access to I.T. staff, department support, and other administrators or faculty, sometimes long after semesters end, to allow new faculty members to review or copy course materials. As a result, less domain-specific knowledge is required to modulate and recreate existing content for later course iterations and educational programming. While these practices improve the efficiency of schools, departments, and even individual faculty, they render instructors overall more substitutable and their working conditions more unpredictable, not unlike other contexts in which management closely surveils workflows (Levy and Barocas 2018). Such tendencies fasten under conditions of "adjunctification, austerity, privatization, entrepreneurialization, and shifting costs to students and their families" (Ovetz 2021: 1066). As a design feature, modularity "unbundles" teaching into several components to be redistributed to "nonfaculty academic staff such as content experts, counselors, course designers, technical support, programmers, and [...] software companies" (Ovetz 2021: 1068). As an ideology, modularization highlights seamless user experiences while hiding the very working conditions that enable those experiences in the first place.

LMS providers advertise modular design toward two distinct goals: First, to make educational content and programming available at all times and across different devices. The convenience of accessing course materials and assignments 24/7 certainly appeals to a mobile sensibility, but ubiquitous access also normalizes extended working hours and creates on-demand subjectivities in both learners and instructors. For example, Instructure Canvas popularizes learning on its mobile app as "bite-sized" in that "digestible chunks of information can be made accessible anywhere, any time" (Canvas 2020). Learning in chunks—modules—allows instructors to flexibly provide feedback, generating an ambient availability of work. Increased use of remote learning technologies during the pandemic, however, has shown that constant access to content and communication contributes to fatigue among students and faculty alike (Lovink 2020). Second, modular design involves the creation of educational categories that are scalable and machine-legible, an aspect I discuss in more detail below. Modular design encourages instructors to "break learning down into smaller pieces (aka micro-learning) through content chunking to avoid overloading the learner" (Canvas 2020). Reducing pedagogical complexity, such streamlining generates more datasets for quantitative analytics and the potential for behavioral modulation. LMSs and other edtech tools increasingly market such data-driven interventions to raise interest from institutional clients and capital from investors.

## **Modulation and Acquisition**

As staff and instructors build out, integrate, and partition LMS course shells and extended learning environments, they create more discrete spaces for engagement and make the overall system more legible for administrations and statistical inquiries and, in some cases, behavioral nudges. Of course, education already follows modular principles, as syllabi divide courses into units, units into lessons, lessons into activities, and so on. These are common characteristics and LMSs merely formalize and further standardize them. Informed by a disciplinary agnosticism, LMS providers

insist that their platforms accommodate any learning objective through a set of modules that might include text, audio, or video-based lessons, discussion forums, quizzes, and collaborations on integrated software. Anchoring such diverse activities in grade books or statistical engagement reports, further rationalizes different pedagogical practices. Moreover, streamlining education in this way enables software tools to produce granular and large-scale data pertaining to system use, learning progress, at-risk students, and other institutional patterns.

In 2019, for example, Instructure Canvas leadership introduced Insight (née DIG), an assessment tool supplying a bird's-eye view to concerned instructors and administrators. According to a company spokesperson, "What makes this project exciting to Canvas users is that the [...] analytics range from summary statistics to powerful predictions, from simply visualizing Canvas adoption over time to prompting outreach when a student suddenly becomes at-risk of dropping out or failing a course" (Stein 2019). This supposedly learner-centered approach relies on positivist assumptions about the meanings of learning and their representability through statistical analysis and visualization. Canvas Insight confounds positive learning outcomes with trackable participation and fails to qualitatively distinguish between different assignment types. A presentation boasts that Insight recorded over a billion quizzes taken and over four billion assignments submitted through the platform (Gibbs 2019). As metadata supersedes content, courses and modules with varying scopes and aims become calculable and scalable. According to a report, Canvas developed "a machine learning model to predict the navigational complexity of a course website [including] the number of tools and features used and the organisation of content and activities" (eLearning 2015). Critically, "navigational complexity" and "feature depth" are proxies that relate platform activity to academic outcomes. (In this case, they also promote more fully-developed course shells, further inculcating expectations that instructors use their platform.) The approach reinforces educational modes that are legible to similar data audits, cementing the role of LMSs and other edtech providers in learning assessments at academic institutions. Yet, doubts remain about the assumptions, methodological rigor, and pedagogical insights of data analytics championed by Canvas and other edtech actors (Whitman 2020).

While Insight was discontinued after Instructure's acquisition by private equity firm Thoma Bravo (Hill 2020), the sector is replete with similar and even more ambitious approaches to valorization. In particular, promises of automated decision-making, data-driven intervention, and behavioral modulation are becoming more common (Pickup 2021). Thus, a crucial question is the extent to which edtech platforms might emulate logics of ad-based social media, streaming, or gig-economy platforms (Srnicke 2017; Sadowski 2019). Unlike these other platforms, as Janja Komljenovic notes, "Most edtech companies explicitly state that they do not directly sell student or user data. However, there are many different ways for such data to be valorised rather than simply turning it into money" (Komljenovic 2021: 5). Specifically, valorization derives from "processing data into intelligence for either improving an existing product or service, or creating a new one, selling data-based products (such as learning analytics or other data intelligence on students), various automated matching services [...]. The key here is that data is not rivalry in consumption, and can be used repeatedly in different operations and combinations" (Komljenovic 2021: 5). Given such open-ended possibilities, it is not surprising that LMSs and other services double down on valorization techniques.

Engageli, a video conferencing tool co-founded by Daphne Koller, exemplifies the fixations with virtual classroom design that creates evermore opportunities for generating, mining, analyzing, and utilizing data towards learning interventions. The software defaults to splitting classrooms into pods—what Zoom calls a breakout room—to ramp up the number of spaces for communication and feedback. As Koller states,

There are all these engagement tools on the platform—like upvot[ing] something, you can ask a question or there are polls, there are exercises that are integrated into the learning experience—all of those are tracked and stored. You can then start to ask really important questions like, what kinds of engagements are most predictive of ultimate success? What happens if I add an intervention? What happens if the instructor actually calls on a student? Does that actually influence it? (Koller quoted in Carson: 2020)

Koller's vague yet gleeful probe into Engageli's potential is indicative of an emergent speculative element in the entire edtech sector. Indeed, the specificity of the engagements Koller alludes to seem entirely secondary to the generation of engagement in the first place. To ensure adoption and competitiveness, Engageli's leadership encourages both software engineers and instructors to test best practices, as long as experimentation occurs on its platform. The overall tendency to create engagement-driven enclosures is further documented by recent mergers and acquisitions in the industry: Companies that are VC-owned or VC-funded consolidate online learning environments, where prospective learning activities are converted into assets.

A case in point, the acquisition of Blackboard LMS by Anthology, a data analytics company, was, in fact, a deal brokered among three private equity firms: Anthology is co-owned by Veritas Capital and Leeds Equity Partners, while Blackboard was owned by Providence Equity Partners (Anthology 2021; Williamson 2021). These financial institutions assign speculative value to an optimized LMS, where “the ‘nudge’ has become the source of expected future value to asset owners” while “students themselves [are] assets with value that can be increased through predictive nudging” (Williamson 2021). The reasoning is self-fulfilling: Data-driven interventions to improve learning outcomes appreciate the future value of students, whose activities and subjectivities project value as vectors of data analytics. Consistent with demands to increase the “volume, velocity, and variety” of data (Lycett 2013: 381), Anthology offers a range of services, from streamlining SIS to optimizing enrollment to customizing alumni engagement. Another recent transaction, the acquisition of Blackboard Collaborate by the Zoom-based software Class Technologies, Inc.—a competitor of Engageli—confirms that speculative data enclosures extend their borders beyond LMSs around video conferencing platforms (Hill 2022).

Enabled by modularization in LMS and extended learning environments, multi-modal and continuous engagement more apparently benefits the agendas of commercial actors than the public good. In particular, academic workers are infrastructuralized and employed in the service of turning students into data assets. Given the confluence of these concerns, some commentators unsurprisingly recall Deleuze's (1992:5) warning that “*perpetual training* tends to replace the *school*, and continuous control to replace examination. [...] the surest way of delivering the school over to the corporation.” For example, a recent study on education under the auspices of the Australian government, *Through growth to achievement*, was found to “push for continuous assessment for continuous improvement, education as personalized learning, and growth mindset as a policy mandate” (Buchanan 2020: 1027). Universities and community colleges are on track to emulate the rampant privatization of K-12 schools, where apps like ClassDojo already manage classroom behavior with avatars, leader boards, and reward badges, shaping “students’ subjectivities so that they seek to constantly improve themselves” (Buchanan 2020: 1036). Modularization expedites the implementation of these practices beyond the classroom to include the entire educational experience. In these settings, education is realized increasingly in self-referential terms of engagement with platforms and interfaces.

## Conclusion

To situate this discussion, I noted that the history of education contains many forms of computer-based learning media, so that the presence of technology in classrooms is neither new, nor in itself problematic. Indeed, the observation that digital environments now contain entire classrooms, even institutions like online universities, is rather common and might elicit positive feedback, as access to education is rightly considered a pressing social issue. However, the agendas of LMS providers and other edtech platforms go far beyond facilitating normal operations during public health crises and other socioeconomic challenges. Budget cuts and fiscal austerity typically provide favorable conditions in which these actors compete for access to and control over educational activity. A slow but lucrative process, the privatization of online learning infrastructures ultimately positions platforms and their financial backers as pivotal entities seeking to manage more operations at educational institutions. The modular logic that enables the streamlined delivery of course content is likely to benefit the management of academic workers more than the management of learning activities. Specifically, the fragmentation and information hiding inherent in modularization drive shifts from distinct pedagogical expertise towards practices of administering and outsourcing



education. Institutions might realize greater efficiency, at least in the short-term, but the benefits of edtech are not distributed evenly and often come at the expense of primarily contract and adjunct faculty.

Modularity is not a disinterested design approach, but rather a tool that facilitates the fragmentation, deskilling, and data-intensive assetization of education. Programmed into the interfaces of LMSs and video conferencing platforms, modularization, at least in principle, enables academic workers to customize and personalize. In practice, however, instructors stand to lose educational authority and autonomy, as modular configurations subordinate individual contributions of workers to the frictionless functioning of the institution. Although colleges and universities remain, in many ways, distinct from corporations, both contexts align with business strategies of optimizing institutional workflows through design and behavioral intervention. Further research into the ways that edtech providers consolidate educational work across platforms might focus on the enrollment of instructors in generating value beyond education. Conversely, scholars might reflect on research methods that include perspectives on academic labor relations while also engaging with ideas of critical pedagogy to push back against the profitable rendering of learning as engagement.

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# Slow Thoughts for Fast Times

Charles Lemert

## Margaret Fuller: Feminist Theory Years Ahead of Its Time

From the 1830s to the 1860s and the end of the American Civil War, Concord, Massachusetts was the nation's intellectual center. At the heart of its international fame were Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. What is not as well known is that Margaret Fuller (1810-1850) was every bit as important to Concord's Moment as the bright light of America's distinctive intellectual life—brighter in the day than even its nearby Boston Hub.

Fuller was a popular lecturer, as well as a successful editor of *The Dial*, Emerson's transcendentalist journal. She was also a scholar who translated Goethe and wrote a biography of the German poet. She was a poet in her own right, as well as author of many non-fiction essays and, among other book-length works, one popular in her day and important still in ours. Plus, Fuller contributed literary and social commentary to Horace Greeley's *New-York Tribune*; and more. She died upon returning from Italy when her ship sank off Fire Island in 1850. She lived but forty years.

The relations among Emerson, Thoreau, and Fuller served each in their way by being mutual in spite of their obvious differences. Still, Fuller stood out among the three, not simply because she did so much in so few years; nor because she was at least their intellectual equal; but because she broke the mold of Concord's transcendentalist attitudes—this by introducing what we now clearly recognized to be a feminist theory that became the central feature of her life's work.

Fuller's most famous book, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, published in 1845, introduces the strange notion of a gendered soul as an active force that viewed gender relations as inherently social by understanding the degree to which male and female are fluid categories. *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* includes what today theorists may recognize as a stunningly original passage:

Male and female represent the two sides of the great radical divide.  
But in fact they are perpetually passing into one another.  
Fluid hardens to solid, solid rushes to fluid.  
There is no wholly masculine man, no purely feminine woman.

Some today might consider Fuller's move here part of a deconstruction of the cultural norm of "the *ideal* man," as Fuller puts it at the beginning of the book. If so, it is also a historical claim that she is writing and living "a new hour in the day of man." More deeply, these lines by Fuller can rightly be considered a deconstruction, yes, but also a forerunner to feminist theory's important concepts late in the twentieth and early in the twenty-first centuries—fractured identities and intersectionality.

Think what you will of the term "deconstruction," it serves a good purpose when not weirdly misused. Deconstruction is not about tearing apart a concept in order to destroy it. Rather, deconstruction is breaking down a concept into its historical elements so that it can be used without corruptions that inevitably adhere to normative

ideals. Or, as Jacques Derrida put it, deconstruction means to put the concept “under erasure,” in the sense of removing what appears on the surface of an idea to get to the trace that underlies it.

There are deeply embedded terms everywhere in any culture. One of the most common in modern cultures is “man,” meaning generic Man. Fuller is doing more than calling out the essentialist notion of Man. She is rethinking by taking apart “man” as a conceptual notion in order to expose its several relations to “woman”—relations that prevent either from being distinct, separate, or abstract. Fuller is seeking thereby to uncover the trace elements that neither the categories themselves nor the ever more general idea of gender can convey. Again: “*There is no wholly masculine man, no purely feminine woman.*” Plus, both men and women are real, specific, different, and complicated historical figures.

A good century and a half after Fuller, surprisingly original ideas came to the surface in a concept originated by bell hooks and broadcast by Patricia Hill Collins *Black Feminist Thought* in 1990. The *matrix of domination*, as they called it, expressly argued that women of color who are pressed down by a dominating culture possess the knowledge and power to force political change. At much the same time, Donna Haraway’s 1985 *The Cyborg Manifesto*, in effect, rekindled a version of the kind of Gaia theory of Nature that Emerson first put forth. “A cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of social reality as well as a creature of fiction.” Then Haraway adds:

The cyborg is resolutely committed to partiality, irony, intimacy, and perversity. ... No longer structured by the polarity of public and private, the cyborg defines a technological polis based partly on a revolution of social relations... Nature and culture are reworked; the one no longer being the resource for appropriation or incorporation by the other.

Haraway’s manifesto introduced the concept of *fractured identities*, which in turn took the *matrix of domination* one radical step further. If social relations are a matrix of vectors, then personal identities are necessarily multiple. Related to these two concepts is *intersectionality*, made famous later by Kimberlé Crenshaw. Though Crenshaw’s idea is a bit abstract, it serves to add to a conceptual tradition that was implicit in Fuller’s 1845 book.

If, as Fuller writes, “there is no wholly masculine man, no purely feminine woman,” then, by extension, everyone is caught up, for better or worse, in a matrix that fractures the very idea of singularity with respect, not just to genders but to all the many—too many in fact—vectors that cut us apart: race to be sure, class of course, sexuality too, and so on. What *intersectionality* seeks to add is that the fracturing matrices come down, so to speak from the many structural elements at play in all complex societies.

It goes without saying that Fuller herself did not, and could not have, imagined this outcome. She was too much like the Concord transcendentalist oEmerson and, in a different way, Thoreau. But the seeds are there even if Collins, Harding, and Crenshaw grew their ideas from a soil seeded differently. Yet, writing with literary flare, Fuller makes her central theoretical point by proclaiming the nature of woman in an unmistakable allusion to the transcendentalist soul:

The especial genius of woman I believe to be electrical in movement, intuitive in function, spiritual in tendency. ... More native is it to her to be the living model of the artist than to set apart from herself any one form of objective reality. ... In so far as soul is in her completely developed, all soul is the same; but as far as it is modified in her as woman, it flows, it breathes, it sings, rather than deposits soil, or finishes work...

Woman is not like man the dirt of sod, or the wolf, or the canker. Nor is she objectively One. Rather, in her electrical movement, she is Many. As we all, to varying degrees, depending on whether or not the more privileged among us can free themselves from the prison house of thinking themselves to be different, better, above. Fuller, by contrast: “Every relation, every gradation of nature is incalculably precious, but only to the soul which is poised upon itself, and to whom no loss, no change, can bring dull discord, for it is in harmony with the central soul.”

