7 Love and Hate Online

Affective Politics in the Era of Trump

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Abstract

This chapter examines the affective politics of online vitriol in the era of Trump, the first Twitter president. Trump's use of Twitter shapes the affective resonances of his presidency by fueling experiences of love as well as indignation. These dynamics are unpacked by examining the online style of Donald Trump and Mike Cernovich, a self-appointed spokesman for MAGA and the New Right. The chapter first outlines how affect theory helps to comprehend the emotional politics of Trump's presidency in a manner that goes beyond notions of its simply invoking hatred. Second, the chapter argues that social media platforms create pleasurable in-group community experiences that function to produce collective support for Trump.

Keywords: Trump presidency, Twitter president, affect theory, affective politics, affect and social media

This chapter outlines how affect theory can help to understand the emotional politics of online hatred and its counterpart, online love. Affect describes pre-verbal experiences of feeling rather than emotions, which are experiences that have been translated into and thus already explained through words. Affective experiences include getting hot and having one's skin turn red when one feels embarrassed or getting goose bumps when one feels afraid. These feelings are deeply embodied and have little to do with rational arguments that are expressed in words. This chapter also wants to offer a bit of pushback against what I now see as a dominant narrative about the negative effects of social media. This narrative says that social media represents a 'threat to democracy' and to civility and that the main

impetus behind online engagement and interaction is a sense of disgust or a thirst for novelty.¹

The primary affects expressed in individual and group contributions to online vitriol have been described as outrage and a sense of 'fellowship' in commonly expressed grievance.² Outrage is certainly the preferred mode of the first Twitter president Donald Trump, who likes first to berate others in his tweets and 'then escalate' whatever conflict is at hand.³ Alternatively, the desire for attention from both one's peers and perceived enemies, also through shared humour, is said to drive trolls. How does this affective economy of vitriol, including experiences of extreme anger and a desire for violence, Schadenfreude, humour, and a hunger for recognition actually operate? Why can online vitriol only be understood with reference to its opposite, online love? How do the as yet unnamed and undertheorized experiences of pleasure and feeling positively connected fit into this mixture of intense sensations? Why do we need to think about political discourse and the politics of social media differently because of affects?

This chapter starts to address these questions. It notes preliminarily that theories of political and social intercourse have traditionally described a public commons that is governed by rational discourse and exchange. This presupposes that communication occurs primarily through language, that language is used to represent a commonly agreed upon reality, and that agreements about perceptions of this reality can be made on the basis of rational exchange. This reality is then also understood to be experienced mutually and to be negotiable through a commonly understood language.

An affective theory of the political, by contrast, suggests that political sentiments are determined by viscerally experienced sentiments and a physically imagined sense of rightness or wrongness, rather than one that is worked out through rational means. This aligns with notions of persuasion that stress pathos – the evocation of feeling – as an at least as important part of rhetoric as logos and ethos – the logical/evidentiary and the communicator's conveyed sense of authority, respectively. Moreover, a sense of affective loyalty or being strongly bound to those who agree with one fuels a heightened sense of 'taking one for the team' and outdoing one another in terms of expressing online venom and eliciting strong reactions from those one vents against.

¹ Cf. *The Economist* cover story of 4 November 2017, entitled 'Social media's threat to democracy' and Vosoughi et al., 'The Spread' on the primacy of the 'basic emotions' of disgust and novelty in the spread of false news.

^{2 &#}x27;Politics of Outrage', p. 23.

³ Gessen, 'How Trump governs by tweet'; Baker, 'A Trump Vacation Formula'.

More rational models have traditionally comprised deontological ethics, based on should(s) and ought(s) between subjects, or utilitarianism, based on an interest in minimizing suffering and maximizing the common good. Further, Jürgen Habermas's notion of social communication was based on a linguistic model of exchange that was grounded in the ideal that every group would be able to equally participate in the process of developing rationally agreed upon norms through discussion and coming to consensus about better, that is more rational, arguments for these norms.⁴ Habermas writes that: 'The concept of communicative action presupposes language as the medium for a kind of reaching understanding, in the course of which participants, through relating to the world, reciprocally raise validity claims that can be accepted or contested.5 Through language, speakers can convince one another discursively about the validity of their claims using rational means. In contrast to Habermas, I am arguing that we need now to take a post-linguistic approach to the political, one that accounts for what has been called the affective turn in critical theory.⁶

In contrast to rational-choice theories of the political or to ones based on a notion of a common consensus that can be attained through communicative means, political thinkers like Chantal Mouffe describe a political climate in which the affective has to be taken with great seriousness: 'My claim is that it is impossible to understand democratic politics without acknowledging 'passions' as the driving force in the political field'. In the spirit of Mouffe, I would like to move away from a poo-poohing of affectively experienced and expressed politics as the result of a vulgar populism. Rather, I wish to explore how the political is literally felt differently in our historical moment, the era of Trump, and how these feelings are expressed in social media exchanges. To look at the affects of online vitriol as well as those of what, to my mind, have been the still underdiscussed phenomena of online affection and connectivity, I want to look at Donald Trump's discourse first. Trump, it is generally agreed, has mastered the art of affective elicitation and has garnered a sense of loyalty amongst his followers that is genuinely difficult to explain rationally. Put bluntly, Trump has been able to spread a sense of hatred of his perceived enemies so effectively only because he is so talented at bringing out a sense of fierce love in his followers. After thinking about

- 4 Habermas, The Theory.
- 5 Ibid., p. 99.
- 6 Clough and Halley, *Theorizing the Social*; Clough, 'Political Economy'; Leys, 'The Turn to Affect'; Olson, 'The Turn to Passion'.
- 7 Mouffe, Agonistics, p. 6.

Trump's affective style, I wish to look more closely at the online expressions of a self-chosen spokesman for Trump and the New Right, Mike Cernovich, before finally commenting, more generally, on how affect functions online.

Genealogies of affect

Versus a history of philosophy that has favoured the rational while exiling the irrational, the felt and the embodied, affect theory favours the somatic and questions the validity of representations that are based on descriptive notational systems. This is in contradistinction to Cartesian rationality which sets up a model in which there is a strict relation of control between the mind and the objects of consciousness that are contained in that mind and are accessed through cognition. Cartesianism extends into the present in that we use linguistic and/or other forms of semiotic representation to signify something as being such a thing. Writing about the break from this kind of notational economy that is based on the semiotic sign, Karen Barad remarks that 'the belief in the ontological distinction between representations and that which they purport to represent' has been obliterated by the notion of affect.⁸

Affect theory has more than one genealogy. The one I follow more closely extends from Baruch Spinoza's emphasis on the irreducibility of ideas from the body in his 1677 *Ethics*. Considered a heretic, Spinoza directly contradicted Descartes's insistence on a dualism of mind and body as postulated in his *Mediations* (1641). This involves making rationality the sine qua non of existence. Descartes' 'I think, therefore I am' means that the process of cogitating precedes and is the precondition for one's being. Embodiment is a secondary state to cognition and therefore, like the environment, of a second-order status. By contrast, Spinoza writes in *Ethics* that 'the body cannot determine the mind to think, nor the mind the body to remain in motion or at rest'. The two are inseparable.

Other anti-Cartesians have shown up within the history of Western philosophy in the work of thinkers like William James, Henri Bergson, the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, and in Cognitive Metaphor Theory, which espouses a theory of the embodied mind. Yet the twentieth-century philosopher Gilles Deleuze's reading of Spinoza's *affectus* has perhaps become the most seminal basis for theoreticians like Brian Massumi, Rosi Braidotti,

⁸ Barad, 'Posthumanist Performativity', p. 804.

⁹ Spinoza, Collected Works, 'Ethics', 3P2.

and Mieke Bal. Deleuze describes affects as embodied states of intensity. This is according to Deleuze's and Felix Guattari's translator Massumi to be understood as 'a prepersonal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another and implying an augmentation or diminution in that body's capacity to act'. Leading Deleuzian figures of relation include 'intensities, machinic assemblages and their various types, bodies without organs' and the rhizome, which 'assumes very diverse forms, from ramified surface extension in all directions to concretion'. These forms provide metaphors for how things may be related without the linearity of beginning or end, subject and object, or the presence of a human.

Note that the affective is independent of individuation and personhood, denotation and consciousness. Affective relations are accordingly anti-narrative in that narrativization involves a structuring of experience through minimal narrative units that are generally set up in a linear relation to one another. Such units are for the greater part verbally processed and transmitted. Affects exist prior to their being articulated in speech or through other language-related forms. They are felt or experienced rather than related through words or other representational systems. Bodies, and not necessarily human ones, meet one another, skins touch, affects are sent forth and returned.

Another genealogy of affect theory arises from the psychologist Silvan Tompkins's notion of basic emotions, which are shared affectively when one unconsciously mimics, for instance, the happy, smiling face one has unexpectedly encountered in the subway. Affects are expressed in non-verbal reactions, and particularly in facial expressions. Tompkins's hypothesis is that basic emotions are shared through the report or representation of these emotions in affects. 'All affects, with the exception of startle, are specific activators of themselves – the principle of *contagion*'.'¹³ He explains this with the image of an infant who continues to cry even after the source of the tears has been alleviated: 'This is because crying is as much to cry about as adequate a stimulus as is pain. [...] we are referring not simply to the response of crying, but to the awareness, or report of crying'.¹⁴

Tompkins works with a notion of affect as non-verbal reaction and expression. According to Tompkins, intrinsic affects are experienced in

¹⁰ Deleuze and Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus, p. xvii.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 5.

¹² Ibid., p. 7.

¹³ Tompkins, Affect Imagery, p. 296.

¹⁴ Ibid.

the face, whose expressions are highly resonant in terms of how they are responded to, and thereby elicit emotions in others contagiously. The idea of what is alternatively termed emotional or affective contagion has been popularized in psychology to suggest that personal happiness for instance is more dependent on the equanimity of one's friends and loved ones than on one's personal material conditions. ¹⁵ It has also been used to show how direct touch, for instance between mothers and their infants, positively impacts shared affects. ¹⁶

Typically, models of contagion describe a three-part pattern of mimicry – feedback - contagion and are based on ideas of direct interactions between persons.¹⁷ It has also been used to describe the affective work that artistic images do. Jill Bennett calls 'affect contagion' the transportation of physically felt experience through the elicited awakening of similar somatically embedded experiences. Such images 'touch the viewer who feels rather than simply sees the event, drawn into the image through a process of affect contagion,' a reaction that 'precedes the inscription of narrative, of moral emotion or empathy'.18 Bennett's work is important in this regard because the affective charges she describes in viewers are elicited through images and not through non-verbal behaviours like smiling or snarling. This plays a part in the not yet adequately understood process of how affects are spread contagiously via digital media. We know that Facebook has experimented with trying to shape its users' affective responses by manipulating users' incoming content. This resulted in the insight that '[e]motions expressed by friends, via online social networks, influence our own moods, constituting, to our knowledge, the first experimental evidence for massive-scale emotional contagion via social networks'.19

Jodi Dean has suggested that online exchanges contain 'affective nugget[s]'²⁰ that take place within the frame of 'communicative capitalism' in which users are hailed into capitalist labour practices in which they act as both producers and consumers.²¹ Affective nuggets provide a useful alternative to the logic of narremes, that is how minimal narrative units relate to one another. The haptic quality of nuggets also allows us to think about bonds between similarly effected/affected individuals as also taking

¹⁵ See Stein, 'Happiness'.

¹⁶ Waters et al., 'Affect Contagion'.

¹⁷ Hatfield et al., 'New Perspectives'.

¹⁸ Bennett, Empathic Vision, p. 36.

¹⁹ Booth, 'Facebook Reveals'.

²⁰ Dean, Blog Theory, p. 95.

²¹ Dean, 'Affect and Drive', p. 90.

place in the body. Dean, like others, has suggested that social media can only function because it is pleasurable and its makers create it as it is.²² Let us suppose that a sense of enjoyment, titillation, pleasure in the outrageous and boundary making between an in-group and an imagined outgroup form the basis of online vitriol and online love in the Trump era. If this is the case, studying the libidinal politics of Trump's media presence as well as of one of his self-appointed knights of the round table, Mike Cernovich, may be a way to understanding the felt politics of the present.

I suggest we move away from the negatively connoted metaphors of illness and non-volition that are suggested by 'contagion' and 'going viral' and think about affective contagion in a neutral sense, as the stickiness that binds people and also pushes them apart. Why is this so effectively elicited and transmitted through digital means, and how does this digitally elicited affective contagion determine personal sentiment so strongly at present? This notion of the contagiousness of the affective, its stickiness, stands somewhat in contrast to the negative reading of virality that Sara Polak offers in this book.

Trumpian affects

One of the perplexing things about the Trump era is that many of his supporters perpetuate a pattern in which working-class people support Republican candidates whose fiscally conservative policies are to their clear economic detriment.²³ This trend, which is generally dated back to the culture wars of the 1980s, has, if anything, intensified in the polarized media economy that surrounds Trump's presidency. The more Trump is criticized, it would seem, the more his supporters insist on their loyalty to him and their belief in the verity of the version of facts he espouses.²⁴ This affective attachment to Trump is often explained as people's having fallen prey to the appeal of an authoritarian personality whose discourse and style reduces complexity and gives the disaffected a sense of safety in what is perceived as a belligerent or unsafe environment. The appeal of authoritarianism may be one part of the equation.

Yet Trump also needs to be credited for his having cued into a new political economy of passion, excess, and the naming of subjects once considered

²² See Paasonen, 'A Midsummer's Bonfire', and Pedwell, 'Mediated Habits'.

²³ Frank, What's the Matter, p. 204.

²⁴ Olson, 'Nur Emotionen'.

unmentionable, at least by a politician on the public stage. Trump makes racist slurs, regularly incites Islamophobia and has dissed disabled people, and called immigrants 'animals' as well as 'rapists.' He has also repeatedly wagged fingers at women who have gained weight, were supposedly menstruating while questioning him, women who were lactating, women who are not loyal to their husbands, and women who fail to be as 'attractive' as Trump's wife. The list goes on. This is not to mention Trump's self-fashioning in social media, that is to say how his presentation of himself in images and central narratives has contributed to creating a newly affective online environment:

He at once defines the field through his celebrity and performances which generated outrageous, cheap-to-produce content with each news cycle, while opening this space to the pure affective intensity of the alt-right.²⁵

Trump supporters maintain loyalty and a sense of passion towards him, because he is a master of rousing passionate responses and using these responses effectively in media expressions and reports. Trump 'is completely modern in embodying the values of affective media in eliciting the libidinal energies of his audience'. 26

Trump, I am coming to believe, serves as much as a blank screen as Obama once did for the projection of a variety of diverse kinds of desire. Yet he has shown himself to be uniquely qualified in calling out expressions of hate, derision, and boundary making, as well as love. It is a mistake, I think, to concentrate on the negative affects that Trump inspires without also looking at the sticky attachment and sense of love and/or loyalty that he also calls out.

Trump supporters identify with the emotional immediacy of Trump's address. He offers a sense of closeness and intensity by rhetorically breaking down the world into winners and losers, by championing the — according to him — formerly strong white men and working people who have been unreasonably weakened by Washington elites, and through his repeated attestations of love for these people. Note how he expresses a sense of shared affection at his rally in Phoenix in August 2017:

CROWD: USA! USA! USA! [...]

You always understood what Washington, D.C. did not. Our movement is a movement built on love. Our movement is a movement built on love.

²⁵ Jutel, 'Donald Trump's Libidinal Entanglement'.

²⁶ Ibid.

It's love for fellow citizens. It's love for struggling Americans who've been left behind, and love for every American child who deserves a chance to have all of their dreams come true. 27

The rally in Phoenix was held shortly after Trump had made equivocal comments about supporting the white supremacists responsible for attacks on counter-demonstrators in Charlottesville, VA. The 'love' that he insisted on in Phoenix and which is at the basis of his movement may well sit uneasily with readers of this chapter. Yet it needs to be taken seriously as the attestation of a world view in which the in-group of Trumpians feel themselves to be passionately attached to each other and to a shared sense of felt identity. It is their 'dreams' that have been delayed, according to Trump. They, this group 'built on love,' stand in radical opposition to the haters in Washington, D.C. 'You,' as Trump addresses them in the second person, are the true lovers, dreamers, and believers.

And Trumpians do believe. On a website that charts Rustbelt Trump voters' evolving opinions about their candidate before and after the election, one finds a continuing stream of steady support. For instance, the 54-year-old Ohioan driver and former Democrat voter Geno DiFabio speaks about the continued affective appeal of his candidate. Regarding criticism of Trump's failure to get a new health-care bill through Congress and other setbacks, DiFabio's position changed little between March and November 2017. If anything, his ratings of Trump on a 1-10 scale went up.

All they're doing is solidifying the people that voted for him, believe me. Sometimes he says stupid stuff, but he's still the only one that's going to do anything for us, fight for us, actually fight for us.²⁸

One notes the sense of affective connection, the belief that Trump is the fighter for 'us,' the people, even if 'he says stupid stuff.' And in July 2017:

I think the swamp in Washington is bigger and deeper than he thought... I pay attention enough to see that no one is helping him as far as there's no cooperation whatsoever from the Democrats and very little from the Republicans. So no, I'm not disappointed.²⁹

^{27 &#}x27;WATCH: President Trump holds rally in Phoenix', 30:74-31:05.

²⁸ DiFabio, 22 March 2017.

²⁹ Ibid., 18 July 2017.

The affective sense is that opposition shows the legitimacy and trueness of the people's candidate, the man who so nobly fights for them. This extends to Trump's tweets and his take on the news:

He's up against a lot more than I thought he would ever be up against, from both sides. The people that voted for him – and I'll bet there's more people every day – are still behind him... At first [his tweeting] made me nervous. I used to cringe – I'd say, 'Oh God, what's he going to say today?' Now, I love it. Now, if they would take it away from him, that would probably ruin his presidency because he can bring what he wants to the forefront and they jump on everything he says. So people can make their own choice: here's what Trump's saying, here's what the media is saying.³⁰

I want to pause over DiFabio's self-reflexivity, his awareness that aspects of Trump's utterances once made him uneasy but that he now sees them as a vital part of Trump's truth-saying in the face of media lies. DiFabio uses affectively charged words such as 'fight for us,' 'swamp' and in the last citation 'love.' He expresses certainty that more people stand behind Trump, his politics, and his tweets than during the election.

DiFabio, like others, responds to the alternative route to information these tweets provide as well as their uncensored and surely also for this reason original content. As Trump has repeatedly insisted, his tweets allow him to circumvent traditional media vehicles and coverage as well as to hit back immediately at those who criticize him.³¹ Trump's tweets do offer seemingly unmediated access to the President's thoughts and affects. Their verity is attested to in their bluntness as well as their grammatical and spelling errors.

DiFabio expresses his sense of a world of 'us' – those with Trump – and a world of 'them' – the media and Trump's detractors. Affectively, the greater the intensity of disapproval, or felt hate, that is extended towards Trump, the more love his supporters shall nobly bring to his support. As DiFabio's statement about Trump reveals, the strong identification with him leads to a sense that all criticism is an effort to weaken Trump and is therefore also false. This mirrors Trump's rhetoric that all of his critics are unproductive losers that have personal vendettas against him.

Trump personalizes America's problems as his own in a manner that evokes passions. He insists that the country may excel again if it has a tough

³⁰ Ibid., 6 November 2017.

^{31 &#}x27;Donald Trump defends'.

guy in charge to do battle for it. Making a case for his ability to go to battle, Trump stressed at the beginning of his campaign announcement speech that he would be the fighter-in-chief:

Our country is in serious trouble. We don't have victories anymore. We used to have victories, but we don't have them. When was the last time anybody saw us beating, let's say, China in a trade deal? They kill us. I beat China all the time. All the time.

Whereas the country finds itself in a downtrodden and defeated state, also against China in terms of trade, Trump as tough commander will restore the country to its place of rightful dominance. 'I beat China' is a rallying cry: America under Trump will beat the world. Those who have been unfairly weakened will under Trump's dominant leadership return, like the country in general, to glory.

Trump performs an alternative normative order whose performance is carried out by affective means, in the call and response pattern of his rallies and the binarist logic of his speeches. This logic divides the world into losers – those who are against Trump (the media, Washington, elites) – and winners (his loving and loyal supporters). As explicated by the earlier title of his campaign memoir 'Crippled America,' Trump's dominant narrative concerns the nation's lost greatness. It elicits a nostalgic yearning for this greatness that can be won back through the election of the winner and fixer Trump. This narrative cues in with a generalized sense of lost position and dignity amongst Trump supporters. It is also expressed in Trump's Alt-Right and New Right adherents' urgent desire to recover an imagined, much longed for sense of lost masculine nobility.

Another aspect of Trumpian political affect is his certainty that any news about him is beneficial for his brand and that any negative news about him is simply untrue. As early as 1986, Trump espoused the value of negative coverage in *The Art of the Deal*: 'The funny thing is that even a critical story, which may be hurtful personally, can be very valuable to your business', an idea he repeats in *Great Again*. ³⁴ In a chapter from *Great Again*, Trump (or his ghost-writer) vilifies the press as dishonest, inaccurate, and personal in their vendetta against him:

^{32 &#}x27;Donald Trump Announces'.

³³ Trump, *The Art*, p. 57.

³⁴ Trump, Great Again, p. 11.

They [the media] hate me because they know I don't need them. I learned a long time ago how to talk directly to the people who matter – to regular Americans who are fed up with the career politicians.

That's probably you – the real Americans.35

By this view, real Americans align with Trump in despising the traditional press, believing that they are untruthful and have a personal vendetta against their candidate. Note the emphasis on hate to elicit love in the 'real Americans' Trump makes his appeal to.

Mike Cernovich, masculine nobility, and basic bitches

If Trumpian affective discourse serves as a communicative and sensational model for his online supporters, then it may be worthwhile looking at a self-appointed champion of Trump, Mike Cernovich. A defender of the Manosphere – 'the pick-up artist community [...] groups of men disillusioned with feminism in society',36 Cernovich is credited with masterminding Pizza-Gate and currently acts as an alternative news pundit and a self-appointed denouncer of fake news. In a dualistic world of winners and losers, in which Trump is the self-appointed winner, the rest are liars, weaklings, and people without enough to do. Cernovich espouses a similar philosophy: negative news is good coverage and gets attention. Cernovich does in fact possess the wherewithal to make Kellyanne Conway quote his Twitter account as 'unbiased journalism' and for Trump Jr. to retweet his posts. As he states: 'This is why the hoaxing media is so triggered by me. They can only keep saying, 'Don't listen to him; he's not legit' for so long. I'll keep saying the opposite, and I'll keep getting more views on Periscope".37

Cernovich also acts as a powerful voice in the #MAGA movement. With reference to Trump's campaign slogan, this movement

was tapping into the fears of voters who felt that the America they lived in, the America they loved, had gone downhill. The slogan speaks to people who desired not just for a new America, but one which takes its cues from the America of old – America updated. America V 2.0. A return

³⁵ Ibid., p. 17.

³⁶ Anglin, 'A Normie's Guide'.

³⁷ Marantz, 'Can a Pro-Trump Meme Maker'.

to the past glory days, to employment, to stability, to working together to realise the American dream.³⁸

Note, once again, the emphasis on love, lost greatness, and the simply and accessibly expressed conviction that the country's prelapsarian ideal can be attained again.

Cernovich has recently been as much maligned by the mainstream and the non-mainstream media for his self-promotional tactics, the alleged charges of rape against him, and his presentation of himself as wealthier and more conventionally successful than he actually is.³⁹ One could also make the critical point that my writing about Cernovich in this context performs the same kind of academic and media overexposure of Trump that abetted his branding of himself in a celebrity culture, and which contributed to his successful campaign for the presidency. Yet I find that Cernovich's group tactics and his communicative patterns and allusions to traditional notions of masculinity and an ideal of dominance closely align with Trump's affectively resonant rhetorical practices. They are helpful in understanding how the process of expressing hatred and disrespect online occurs on a background of a shared sense of knight-like brotherly love.

Cernovich has repeatedly stated that he is particularly impressed by Trump's straight-talking brand of ostentatious masculinity, his unabashed championing of himself as The Donald, and his victories over his enemies. Trump's triumphal masculinity is not only worthy of emulation but cause for Cernovich's sense of intimate connection. As he proclaims in one Vlog during the campaign:

Trump is just doing what I am doing. He said, Fuck you. Fuck the establishment. I believe in America. Here are my beliefs. When he was confronted about mean tweets he said this is why America is losing. Right, that's the deep shame of real Americans. America used to be a masculine country. That's why America is losing.⁴⁰

Real Americans are associated with a sense of lost and nostalgically longed for male heroism and noble masculinity that Cernovich refers to at the beginning of this video. There he complains of the demise of male ascendance

^{38 &#}x27;What made Trump's 'Make".

³⁹ Marantz, 'Trolls'.

⁴⁰ Cernovich, '10 Ways to Reclaim Masculinity', 8:27-8:45.

due to the feminization of the United States. This imperious masculinity is associated with Trump and is counterposed with 'the establishment.'

The affective love for Trump, the in-group's support for their top dog, might be explained as an instance of hegemonic masculinity. As explicated by R.W. Connell, hegemonic masculinity privileges the top dog or the masculine hegemon. Yet those men who are subordinate to the hegemon nevertheless profit from their relative position within a hierarchy of masculinity. They are still closer to power than those who are marginalized, like women, those identified with women, and gays. Within a system of hegemonic masculinity, women who have successfully internalized misogyny will be rewarded to the degree that they uphold and enforce the structures of this system to the detriment of other women who are less compliant. By contrast, such women will be treated with hostility who refuse to hold up the prevalent system of male privilege. 42

Reading Cernovich in light of research on hegemonic masculinity and in reference to biographical details like his denying the existence of date rape, and his penning books on the virtues of masculine domination such as *Gorilla Mindset* (2015) and *Danger & Play* (2016), one notes with interest that all despised persons are described as 'basic bitches'. This phrase deserves unpacking. ⁴³ The Urban Dictionary lists the top definition of 'basic bitch' as follows:

Someone who is unflinchingly upholding of the status quo and stereotypes of their gender without even realizing it. She engages in typical, unoriginal behaviors, modes of dress, speech, and likes. She is tragically/laughably unaware of her utter lack of specialness and intrigue. She believers herself to be unique, fly, amazing, and a complete catch, when really she is boring, painfully normal, and par.⁴⁴

And in an etymological explanation of the term Slang by Dictionary notes that:

Basic bitch is a term used to condescendingly refer to women who have predictable or unoriginal style, interests, or behavior. [...] For many, the concept of a basic bitch is associated exclusively with middle-class white women, however, this term originated in black culture with a different

⁴¹ Connell, Masculinities.

⁴² Manne, Down Girl.

⁴³ See also Nagle, Kill All Normies.

⁴⁴ Gee, 'Basic Bitch'.

meaning and connotations. In this entry [from Lil Duval and SpokenReason from 2009], *basic bitch* is defined as 'a bum-ass woman who think she the shit but really ain't.' By 2011, with the release of Kreayshawn's 'Gucci Gucci,' *basic bitch* had come to refer more specifically to women who rely on popular designer clothing for status: [...]. This definition of a *basic bitch* as a woman who likes things that are popular because they are popular began to stick.⁴⁵

The term 'basic bitch' coheres with Julia Serano's analysis of 'traditional sexism' as the denigration and deprecation of everything that is associated with the feminine, including pleasure in adornment and ornamentation. ⁴⁶ In the original meaning, 'basic bitch' referred to an uppity woman who refused to know her place. In the now more common usage, the term refers to a stereotypically feminine woman, particularly in terms of her consumerist practices and media tastes. Two forms of gender-related disparagement are carried out in the term. The first is to disdain an identified woman as a 'bitch,' a female dog - ugly, sexually unattractive, animal-like, and hyper-embodied, and the second term 'basic' as more highly so a woman. Work on verbal expressions of gender-based disdain shows that women are typically insulted for being either insufficiently attractive according to normative expectations or for their perceived sexual (over)availability. Men, by contrast, are insulted for being weak, incompetent, or for being like women. Men tend to perceive as the worst kind of insult being told that they are like gay men.⁴⁷

All of this plays into Mike Cernovich's and his followers' multiple uses of the term 'basic bitches.' Significantly, he has named his book series as such. 'Basic bitches' is used as a nomenclature of disdain not only for Trump critics and leftists but also for those who are deemed insufficiently conservative. In the 2016 *New Yorker* profile that brought Cernovich to national and international attention, he is quoted as saying derogatorily of Hillary Clinton's PR people that:

Her social-media advisers are twenty-four-year-old basic bitches who feel triggered by us, and so they asked their boss to yell at us and make us go away. Well, we're not going away. They just made us stronger.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Serano, Whipping Girl.

⁴⁷ James, 'Gender-linked Derogatory Terms'.

⁴⁸ Marantz, 'Trolls'.

Here the disparagement is that they are women or weak men, who are as such incompetent and unable to defend themselves. Moreover, their weakness calls out an even greater show of strength in Cernovich's army of trolls. In the same article, Cernovich is quoted as saying he shall care for his then unborn daughter 'as long as she's not a basic bitch' and referring to George Soros's son by the same term.⁴⁹

In the following tweet, Cernovich responds to the furor about the comedian Kathy Griffin's 2017 photograph of herself holding the bloody decapitated head of the president:

Basic bitch conservatives go, 'Imagine if a conservative did what Kathy Griffin did.' Yawn. The New Right is calling CNN's advertisers! (@Cernovich, $30\,\text{May}\,2017)^{50}$

In this case, basic bitches are insufficiently critical and radical. This is reflected in comments on the tweet such as

Yes please. I'm tired of the right ALLOWING themselves to be bullied. Pathetic. (@sheeplemmings, 31 May 2017)⁵¹

Yet this form of abuse is also commented on negatively by one Cernovich follower who tweets that

Calling teammates basic bitches really isn't helping the situation (@chanopokes, 31 May 2017)⁵²

Both responses, one of acclaim and solidarity, the other of critique of Cernovich's discourse, demonstrate how cohesion is created within the group. Group members are intimately concerned with and involved in adjudging, affirming, and editing each other's utterances. This leads to a sense of immediacy, attachment, and mutual involvement.

The pattern I am pointing out is that to be weak in any way is to be basic-bitch-like. This is to be insufficiently strong, masculine, dominant, or, in Cernovich's eyes, like a woman. Similarly, the supposedly inadequately radical former House Speaker Paul Ryan is akin to a cuckolded man. Cernovich

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ twitter.com/Cernovich/status/869649288472666113.

⁵¹ twitter.com/sheeplemmings/status/86996273283282944.

⁵² https://twitter.com/chanopokes/status/869989836697985024.

refers to him as 'Cuck Ryan'.⁵³ 'Basic bitch' may however also refer to the mediocre and the insufficiently radically conservative, as in the tweet about supposedly lacklustre conservatives' response to the Griffin photograph, quoted from above. Thus, Cernovich pitches his book *MAGA Mindset: Making You and America Great Again* with an obvious reference to Trump's campaign memoir as follows:

'Readers are tired of basic bitch content,' Cernovich told me, 'They want edge. They want pop. They want swagger. My readers are ferocious and want to stand out. Let the content serfs serve up the same undifferentiated slop. I only want savages and madmen and madwomen reading me.'54

And self-critically about his own work:

My content was getting a little basic bitch, so I had a three hour conversation with a Muslim nationalist. (@Cernovich, 11 June 2017)⁵⁵

I do not read Cernovich's use of 'basic bitch' necessarily as a hatred of particular women or of the female gender per se but rather a hatred of being dominated and a desire to win in any contest. The goal is making others submit to one's control. Here, the self-appointed newsmaker mimics his much-admired president. Trump reports proudly on his having beaten up his music teacher in second grade: 'I'm not proud of that, but it's clear evidence that even early on I had a tendency to stand up and make my opinions known in a very forceful way'. ⁵⁶ Similarly, Cernovich's supporters, like Trump's, have an affective sense of intense loyalty to and commonality with this mouthpiece of theirs, the New Right movement. This loyalty is experienced as a brotherhood that champions a nostalgic longing for a lost masculinity.

Expressions of an affectively experienced brotherhood of insiders can be found in the following online commentaries. In responses to a Cernovich YouTube teaser for a documentary on fake news called 'Hoaxed' from 8 July 2017, supporters posted comments such as

⁵³ Cernovich, 'Mike Cernovich'.

⁵⁴ Ibid

⁵⁵ twitter.com/Cernovich/status/873713799513096192.

⁵⁶ Trump, The Art, pp. 71-78.

WoW..!! This is Epic..!! Your Stepping up Next Level Bro..!! Great Job !!! Thank-you & God Bless you and the Fam Mike for Bringing Truth to the Light.! ('Dick Tracy')

YES, finally someone with balls, I'm in Lock & Loaded !!!(not literally !!!) ('AimZ2909')

revelutionary ,ground breaking frontal attack that will promote the movement we need towards the liberty and principles this land was ment to sustain. Thank you sir Mike cernovich ('Bearcat Fierce')

I F@\$(?ing love you Mike! That made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. Any freedom loving person who doesn't react like I did to this challenge is fast asleep and we must wake them. I can't think of a more noble cause in the world today for anyone who hopes to leave any kind of decent future for our children. Thank you Mike Cernovich. ('Dizzy AUgustopherAG')

Yaaaaa buddy ('Tony N')

CAPTAIN AWESOME HIT ONE OUT OF THE BALLPARK!!!!!!!!!!!!! THAT LAST VISUAL HAD ME LMFAO!!!!!!!!!!!!!! THIS IS THE BEST FREAKING TRAILER I'VE EVER SEEN! BRAVO! ('Texas Cat')

wow....a turn on the arthurian way of legend...enter at the darkest place... where there is no path...now enter at the darkest place...and take it back from the evil ones that left their horrible tracks in us...BRILLIANT!!!! and dangerous...true bravery...can hardly stand to watch this... maga trump... the true living arthurian king....and YOU a contemporary knight of the round table...where angels fear to tread bro.... ('esmeralda')

Thanks Mike! I appreciate youbrother! ('Patrick Lacy')

King Kong Cernovich Biggest monkey in the JUNGLE. ('H8twoluz')

Without analyzing each comment individually, I would like first to highlight the stress on a felt sense of masculine kinship articulated in words like 'Bro..!!,' 'brother!,' and 'Yaaaaa buddy,' each expression suggesting that the speaker is a common member of a desirable closely linked group of men. Second, the respondents stress the inherent nobility of

masculinity that is exemplified by Cernovich in creating this trailer for his documentary on fake news. This is documented in expressions such as: 'Thank you sir Mike Cernovich,' and 'maga trump...the true living arthurian king....and YOU a contemporary knight of the round table... where angels fear to tread bro....' and 'I can't think of a more noble cause in the world today for anyone who hopes to leave any kind of decent future for our children.' In all three cases, Cernovich is portrayed as an altruistic noble who engages in battle for the honour of his king MAGA Trump. Finally, there are positive attestations of Cernovich's superior masculinity and machismo, as in 'YES, finally someone with balls, I'm in Lock & Loaded !!!' and 'CAPTAIN AWESOME HIT ONE OUT OF THE BALLPARK!!!!!!!!!!!!! and, with reference to Cernovich's earlier work on having a gorilla mindset, 'King Kong Cernovich Biggest monkey in the JUNGLE.' Here, the implication is that by being the top dog, the hardest hitter, the Captain Awesome of the fraternally bonded group, Cernovich champions and improves not only his own status but also that of his brothers. One notes the affective resonance that is conveyed by the use of shouting caps and multiple exclamation marks. These followers feel intently and deeply for their man, Cernovich.

Online affect

Affective emotions occur in physical sensations of hate, love, desire and disgust. We do not yet, I believe, have a model to explain our current political climate in which affects appear to spread differently via online media as compared to other forms of human exchange. One obvious explanation for expressions of online vitriol is the experience of deindividuation described in social psychology. This involves one's feeling oneself intensely to be anonymous and/or as a part of a group rather than being recognized and potentially also adjudged for one's actions as an individual. This decreased sense of personal responsibility and availability to critique happens in situations in which people feel a powerful sense of group unity, are focused on stimulating outward events, and have a sense of reduced individuality. Experiments on deindividuation show that when test subjects had white sacks placed over their heads they were more likely, in a simulated setting, to induce shocks in others than when their faces were uncovered and they knew that they could be seen. In this case, there are 'weakened restraints against impulsive behavior' as in expressions of online hate, and an 'inability

to regulate [one's] own behavior'.⁵⁷ In descriptions of motivations behind the Alt-Right and the New Right movements, one finds an obvious gratification in winning and in being outrageous, a sense of pleasure in outsmarting the other side. As Andrew Anglin explains in his guide to the Alt-Right: 'One of the unifying marks of the Alt-Right sensibility is the assumption that no speech act is beyond the pale'.⁵⁸ One also finds an expressed sensation of happiness in belonging to a brotherhood with a common purpose. As Angela Nagle has discussed, in-group online subcultures are violently defended through displays of superior skills in manipulating digital forums.⁵⁹ Deindividuated, one acts with lessened self-awareness and restraint in what are felt to be the interests of the group.

When groups pile on hate or copy-cat each other's vitriol towards a given person, deindividuation may be at work. Another theory borrowed from social psychology suggests that people are more likely to help others in trouble when they are alone and in direct face-to-face encounters than when they are in groups of bystanders or do not have direct contact with the person in need. Processes of deindividuation and the diffusion of responsibility when multiple bystanders are present lead to acute concerns about the effects of drone warfare, for instance, about the sense of responsibility in the person operating the drone: what happens when targets are sighted on screen rather than in direct forms of combat? Similarly, anxieties grow about the oversharing that occurs between people who interact digitally rather than in person. The very anonymity of the exchange – the non-touching – appears paradoxically to invite highly personal exchanges, sometimes with painfully experienced consequences that occur in flaming, revenge porn, or other misuses of shared material.

Metaphors of contagion have also been used to describe what happens when people strongly empathize with anonymous others online in what might be described as online love rather than vitriol. Cassandra Sharp describes how a sense of vulnerability was affectively shared and enlarged upon per tweets after the terrorist attacks in Paris and elsewhere. ⁶¹ Reading tweets added to users' immediate perceived sense of their own threat from a possible terrorist attack, however safe their locality and position there actually was. What is counterintuitive here,

⁵⁷ Atkinson et al., Introduction to Psychology, p. 632.

⁵⁸ Anglin, 'A Normie's Guide'.

⁵⁹ Nagle, Kill All Normies.

⁶⁰ Atkinson et al., Introduction to Psychology, pp. 633-636.

⁶¹ Sharp, '#Vulnerability'.

is that touch is not involved in these experiences of spread sensation caused by interactions with others on social media. Nor is emotional intimacy based on face-to-face social interaction with another or others necessary to co-experience or even co-witness sentiments expressed on Twitter, Reddit, or Facebook.

How then do we explain the shared affects of online exchanges and responses, the expressions and sensations of hate and love? Applying affect theory to online exchange, Dean has argued that, similar to the distinction that game theorists have made between what happens in games and descriptions of gaming in narratology, it is not the imposition of a linear tale that arouses, but the iterative and the participatory. ⁶² To create content and to comment on the content of others or on their commentaries is to contribute to building something. The time one spends in specific online forums relates directly to one's affective commitment, sense of purpose, and pleasure in being there. When a group that is experienced as unique and as subject to its own code is attacked, then the defence of this group becomes a passionately important pursuit. Face-to-face interaction is rendered irrelevant given group members' experience of mutual banded togetherness. In a similar vein, Susanne Paasonen argues that a taste for affective or 'sticky intensity' of all kinds drives trolls and non-trolls alike. ⁶³ This intensity increases in scale in online conflicts.

Conclusions

Attributing Alt-Right and now New Right internet hate to misogyny alone is too monocausal. Trump's rhetoric and self-fashioning is not fuelled by misogyny alone, nor is that of his knight-in-waiting Cernovich. Rather, Trump has been uniquely successful in creating an us versus them narrative that includes an antagonism towards traditional journalism and supposedly elitist sources of knowledge. This narrative focusses on the intrinsic greatness and largeness of Trump, #MAGA America, and those who believe in these entities. It also espouses the supposed virtues of hegemonic masculinity. Online hate functions in part through experiences of deindividuation and perhaps also through a diffusion of responsibility caused by actors' ability to inflict pain and not be held directly accountable for it. Yet these explanations of online vitriol prove too simple. The real affective charge that is spoken

⁶² Dean, 'Affect and Drive'.

⁶³ Paasonen, 'A Midsummer's Bonfire'.

about by Cernovich and his compatriots results out of exchanges with their in-group community that can be regarded as expressions of a libidinal economy. In meticulous commentaries about each other's messages, group members pat each other on the back for what is perceived as their having won online battles not only individually but also for the glory of the group.

To begin to understand online hate during the age of Trump and other populist authoritarians, we need to understand the love that binds those who feel themselves to be passionately fighting for common cause in their support of him. What motivates Trump's supporters is in parts a nostalgically longed for, phantasmagoric image of lost American glory and an ideal of noble manhood that, for many of us, went out of fashion with medieval knights or Braveheart. Yet it is also intensely experienced love. We need to attend seriously to the stickiness involved in expressions of hate and vitriol on online platforms and their background in a shared sense of commonality and affection. This means taking affect seriously. We may also have to critically adjust our continuing attachments to the power of rational arguments and our sense that others should be convinced by these arguments as well.

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