

INTRO

- Welcome to this Chess Club Event. Thanks everyone for coming and Thanks to Niamh, Joahanes & Francesca for putting this together.
- My Name and Role. Research Interest:
 1. Counterculture of the 1960s; specifically the politics and aesthetics of writers, artists and rock musicians in this time, along with the legacy of those politics today.
 2. Early Twentieth Century European Avant-Garde Art & Literary Movements of the early 20th
- Now, as you'll see, both areas of specialism inform the subject that I want to talk about today
- The emergence in recent years of a new kind of Counterculture, one that is fuelled by radical right wing politics.
- What I want to discuss is how this movement relates to these earlier countercultures, and what we can learn by that relationship about how to respond to it.
- Format of the talk: 20-30 minutes of me talking. Followed by Questions. I'm very interested to hear your thoughts as the project is in its early stages and would benefit from public input.

OVERVIEW

- I'm interested in a cultural shift that has taken place over the last few years towards a kind of radical conservatism and a radical conservatism that brands itself as countercultural, rebellious, anti-establishment, as cool (by 'cool' I don't necessarily mean fashionable or trendy but at an ironic distance, at a remove, which is an attitude that relates back to the 1960s in clear ways)
- I'll be thinking a bit about the Alt Right – this movement of young white supremacists who've positioned themselves as alternative and modern and who've attracted a young following hungry for controversy and new ideas.
- The Alt Right was created and is led by Richard Spencer – one of the organizers of the recent White Supremacist march on Charlottesville – who has basically given America's Neo-Nazi movement a hipster makeover and made it palatable to younger people who in another age wouldn't have given these politics the time of day.
- I'll be thinking also about a bunch people who are at pains to dissociate themselves from the Alt Right and whose politics are in many ways very different, but who oppose some of the same things, use many of the same tactics and appeal to much of the same crowd.

- I'm talking here about Milo Yiannopoulos – former editor at Steve Bannon's Breitbart news organization, who is also an openly gay, flamboyant dressed, loudmouthed, and proud professional Internet Troll. He was kicked off Twitter in 2016 for comparing a black actress to a man and refusing to condemn the racist attacks on her that followed.
- I want also to think about Jordan Peterson – a professor of Psychology from Canada who gained a lot of attention recently first for protesting against law that made it compulsory to call gender neutral people by their chosen pronouns, then for his Channel 4 news interview with Cathy Newman a few weeks ago (in which he argued against the seriousness and necessity of closing the gender pay gap).
- THESE 3 HAVE DISPARATE VIEWS BUT ARE UNITED BY AN OPPOSITION TO WHAT THEY CALL 'THE TYRANNY OF THE LEFT' & A BELIEF THAT FREE SPEECH IS BEING STIFLED IN ALL PUBLIC ARENAS BY THE LEFT-WING ORTHODOXY OF POLITICAL CORRECTNESS & CONVENTIONAL IDENTITY POLITICS (The politics of Identity – Gender, Sexuality, Race)

(PAUSE)

- I'm going to consider 3 questions today:
 1. **How has anti-Political Correctness become the anti-establishment, revolutionary position?**
 2. **How do these figures use the language and methods of previous countercultures to present themselves as a new counterculture?**
 3. **How can we move beyond outrage and respond productively to this shift by understanding it in relation to these previous countercultures?**

(PAUSE)

- As a general point I want to think about what might be wrong with the standard liberal reaction to these attacks on identity politics (on gender and racial equality).
- One of the reasons I became interested in this subject was through frustration at the ineffectual responses I saw from liberal commentators to figures like Milo & Peterson.
- It's obvious we're living through politically fraught & erratic times and the failure of the left to understand this backlash against what are essentially articles of faith to them needs redressing.
- That term of article faith is important here – As I hope to make clear, I think there has been an emotionally and ultimately ineffective scramble to shout these people down or to paint them into a corner rather than seriously

challenge their arguments and make them accountable for the emotions they're channeling.

- In connection to this, I want to consider the nature of our modern consensus about the evils of racism, sexism etc. **EMOTIONAL, VISCERAL (IN THE STOMACH), A TABOO THAT WE CAN'T STAND TO BE TRANSGRESSED.**
- The psychologist Jonathan Haidt's article on Trump's breaking of taboo when he said there was 'evil on both sides' after Charlottesville.
- **AND TO SUGGEST NOT ONLY WAYS OF CHALLENGING THE CONSERVATIVE COUNTERCULTURAL APPROACH BUT TO THINK ABOUT WHAT MIGHT POSSIBLY BE VALID IN SOME OF THE REACTION AGAINST IDENTITY POLITICS (NOT SPENCER'S RACIST POSITION, BUT PETERSON'S IDEAS)**
- i.e. Don't just balk or sneer at the idea of 'the tyranny of the left' but try to understand why people think this way. What do they regard as oppressive? Is there any truth at all in the accusation?

1. How has anti-Political Correctness become the anti-establishment, revolutionary position?

- In the first place I think it's down to something quite simple:
 - I. **NEWNESS.** If we take a look at the language Richard Spencer uses, he said in a recent interview Elspeth Reeve for Vice ('You're not speaking truth to power anymore. We are' The Banks, The Businesses, The Media all pay lip service to your 'liberal, equal rights goofball schtick'). The Radical Right present themselves as no longer retrograde but forward thinking (progressive if you look it from a certain angle)
 - II. Secondly, ONLINE they've made very effective use of **GALLOWS HUMOUR. OF RACIST CARTOONS THAT ARE IN DELIBERATE BAD TASTE AND TREAD A LINE BETWEEN CONVICTION & SATIRE.**
 - THE BEST & MOST FAMOUS EXAMPLE OF THIS IS Pepe the Frog, a character who originally appeared in a comic book about slacker students sharing a frat house, but who has been appropriated for racially charged comedic purposes.
 - A typical Pepe meme involves his big green grinning face with Hitler Moustache pasted on it or in SS Uniform outside Auschwitz. As you can imagine, there are worse, more offensive examples online but you enough of the point from these. 'You get a gold star' (Star of David).
 - Spencer: Interviewed after footage emerged of Nazi Salutes being thrown at one of his meetings. It was 'in the Spirit of Exuberant Irony'
 - Emphasis placed on playing the Trickster Role.

- Milo Yiannopoulos constantly talks about himself in these terms, invoking Loki (the God of mischief in Norse mythology) and saying the prankster has a historically and culturally important function that he is inheriting.
- So he presents himself as a teller of the inconvenient truths that serious discourse disallows.
- Quote Spencer on kids having their attention grabbed by memes then being directed to the literature

III. The third contributor to the Alt Right's ability to present themselves as a counterculture is perhaps the least novel: The use of a **MODE OF RHETORIC THAT PRIVILEGES FREEDOM OF SPEECH.**

- The liberal left, Milo & Spencer say, are out of control. In Spencer's view – the more traditionally anti-PC view - they always were and in Milo's they've lost their way.
- So Milo, a gay man, concedes there were important civil rights battles to be won in the 1960s, but claims those battles are in the past and won't need to be fought again.
- Spencer, a less reconstructed far rightist, pays lip service to the idea that gender and racial equality were necessary in the mid to late 20th century but is more aggressively opposed to progressive politics in their essence.
- The rallying cry of this new conservative counterculture is that the right to not be offended, to have your feelings hurt, is ludicrous.
- The best way to demonstrate that is to speak as offensively as possible (always in line with what he believes but often in exaggeratedly bad taste).

IV. Which brings us on to the **BREAKING** of **TABOO**

- I had the extreme displeasure recently of sitting through an episode of a podcast called The Daily Shoa.
- A very deliberately anti-Semitic play on the Hebrew word for the Holocaust (Shoa)
- The hosts justify their pun and their constant use of racist slurs as a healthy act of transgression.
- In a recent episode (on which Elspeth Reeve from Vice appeared, she asked them 'Why the anti-Semitism, guys?', to which the response was 'Because it's taboo, idiot!')
- We're not used, in this country certainly and probably in America also, to hearing that kind of argument used in support of racist jokes and diatribes.
- It's a very deliberate turning of traditionally leftist language back on the left. A deliberate attempt to present themselves as opposed to conventional social norms and structures, and to position opponents as stiff, stale and hypocritical.

- Quite different to the standard line of 'political correctness gone mad'. It's Absurdist rather than cynical and grumbling; it's youthful rather than old and world-weary.

V. As I mentioned in my introduction, it's important to consider the sociological conditions that have enabled these tactics to succeed. There's been a lot of talk about the backlash against identity politics as representing a **CRISIS OF MASCULINITY, AND A CRISIS OF WHITENESS** across America (Gary Yonge's recent documentary for example) and THAT'S WORTH EXPLORING

MILO, SPENCER, PETERSON ALL OFFER RESPITE TO PERCEIVED OPPRESSIVENESS OF IDENTITY POLITICS,

- Most of the studies identify the Alt Right movement as being made up of predominantly young men between the ages of 16 and 30, often living with their parents, at school or out of work.
- So there's a picture here of a demographic with little to lose who are brought together by the sharing of a running, and socially unacceptable prank.
- There's the potential for thrill but also self and group esteem from indulging in the kind of jokes most in polite society wouldn't think about making.
- If that provides a sense of conspiracy, imagine the rush of endorphins when that prank goes nationwide with Trump's victory in 2017. Indeed, through Pepe the Frog and various other memes, the Alt Right helped boost Trump's online presence and played some part in his coming to power.
- At a more general level, and as David Brookes at the NYT pointed out recently, for millions of young men Jordan Peterson has proved to be an antidote to 'the cocktail of Coddling and accusation on which they were raised'. LET'S UNPACK THAT BRIEFLY.
- The coddling side of things has to do with not being brought up to take responsibility for oneself, a standard conclusion about Millennials and also a repeated mantra of Jordan Peterson's.
- Accusation. I suppose it can be taken in 2 ways - 1st in terms of the license Millennials (and you might say every generation since the 60s) have been given to blame society, family, history and mental illness for problems rather than face down and deal with them → Again one of Peterson's favourite themes.
- 2nd (and this is where it all becomes more problematic) in terms of young white men feeling unfairly accused by politically correct society for being white and male.
- A constant refrain from JP, Milo and Spencer is young white males are demographic who are unfairly persecuted as part of a privileged order they have no connection to. This leads all three to attack the term WHITE MALE PRIVILEGE and it points to one of the problems with political

correctness (identity politics overall). Namely, that it relies on having majority groups admit their blame, and expects all to have the self-confidence not to resent that.

- If you're white male, educated secure in yourself, then it's no major dent to your ego to be told that your race and gender should not be celebrated.
- It makes you feel good about yourself to admit the crimes of the past and feel like you - an individual - are part of a movement that's progressing morally.
- If you're worse educated, less privileged & less secure in yourself it's much harder to see that admission as a positive thing. You look for ways of understanding political correctness as part of a conspiracy. You lash out.
- Now this is where JP is a potentially positive influence.
- He's speaking to not just gawping or balking at these people
- He's telling them - there's another way that doesn't involve identifying as a member of a racial or gender group but rather yourself as an individual.
- THIS I THINK IS A VALUABLE ANSWER TO MALE INSECURITY IN 2018.

2. How do these figures present use the language and methods of previous countercultures to present themselves as the new counterculture?

I. THROUGH LANGUAGE AND IMAGERY FROM THE 1960S

- In between rants against feminism and the threat of Islam, MILO YIANOPPOLOS invokes left wing countercultural figures like **Lenny Bruce** – the 1960s comedian who's generally thought to have invented 'alternative comedy', a man who used subversive, often absurdist stand-up routines to promote civil rights and freedom of speech for all.
- Appropriation of traditionally left-wing language, icons and moral positions
- Richard Spencer presents himself as the 'Identitarian' Equivalent of Malcom X for the new millennium (White identity as a civil rights issue)
- The Alt Right also have their own equally puzzling line in 1960s-inspired aesthetics.
- Many of the memes that did the rounds in the run up to Trump's election were ironic takes on the psychedelic imagery of the summer of love:
- Pepe The Frog with swastika eyes against a backdrop of swirling psychedelic colors.
- Half Ironic borrowing of Eastern Language and Imagery in the Iron Pill Comic Book. Siddharta (Hesse. Big influence on 1960s hippy culture)
- Borrow terminology from slacker culture and from films, music and comic books that have their heritage in the hippie spirit of the 1960s.
- Red-pilling, an alt-right word for disabusing opponents of their liberal biases, comes from cult Sci-Fi film The Matrix, but can be traced directly back to the use 60s rock groups & writers made of Alice in Wonderland.

II. SITUATIONISM. SERIOUS PLAY.

- They're also harnessing the spirit of a 60s group of political artists and intellectuals called the Situationists, who used street-stunts, graffiti etc. to emphasize anarchic play as a means of transgression.
- Daubing slogans like 'We Demand Games with Great Seriousness'
- Angela Nagel's book *Kill All Normies* on Situationism 'ennui, boredom and inertia requires a counterforce of extreme transgression'
- Looking back to Georges Bataille, who in turn used the ideas of Marquis De Sade to celebrate the virtue in vice and in excess and waste (sex for pleasure not reproduction, unrestrained permissiveness) PORN DOMINATES POSTS ON 4 CHAN (Anonymous online bulletin board where Pepe and other memes originated)

II. TROLLING & THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY AVANT-GARDE

- But it goes further back still. Much of what the Situationists were doing had their roots in the art movements of the 1910s and 20s, groups like the Dadaists, the Surrealists, the Futurists & Vorticists.
- Angela Nagel links the rise of the Alt Right to 'THE CARNIVALESQUE', SURREALISM/DADAISM 'laughter directed at all and everyone ... a laughter that's ambivalent, that's gay, triumphant and at the same time mocking, deriding'
- That's interesting and worth exploring further but I want to focus on an Italian group called the Futurists who, like the Alt Right were aggressively anti-liberal and supportive of the fascist politics that were on the rise in their time.

FUTURISM

- Led by a man called Filippo Marinetti, who talks in his manifesto about 'The Pleasure in being booed'.
- He was using, before Milo Yiannopolis, politically incorrect statements as a way of gaining attention, making people laugh, disorienting while riling & to ridicule his opponents.
- In the run-up to the 1st world war, 'we glorify war, the great hygiene of the world',
- If you watch Milo deal with mainstream media interviewers or angry liberal protesters at his shows, you see someone who understands this concept very well.
- He feeds off the publicity he receives from having an audience lose their rag with him.
- Statements like 'feminism is a sociopathic cancer' or recently - in Australia - 'let's stop pandering to a culture whose greatest musical achievement amounts to a big stick' are his equivalent of Marinetti's 'we glorify war, the great hygiene of the world'.

- They accurately convey the speaker's general political impulse but in lurid technicolor, throwing the incredulous, outraged listener off balance and looking - to those already onside or just attracted to anarchy - like an overly earnest old person doesn't get the joke.
- By dressing violent ideas in prankish clothing, Marinetti in 1913 and Milo in 2017 set their opponents up to be the fall guys in their farce.

3. How can we use this understanding of new radical conservatism in relation to previous countercultures to arrive at productive ways of responding?

I. RECOGNISE THE FUTILITY OF OUTRAGE. This stuff appeals because it is irreverent about taboo and about hurting peoples' feelings. Any outrage about your own or others hurt feelings only adds to its appeal.

- Crucially, I'd say that it's not offence they need to account for but the emotions they're channelling and encouraging and the glaring historical precedent for where that has taken us in the past.
- We know almost to the point of cliché the ends this rhetoric led to in Nazi Germany, in fascist Italy and Spain.
- Until recently such argument have proved effective in keeping this kind of politics out of the public domain.
- But now there's a new, growing impatience with those arguments among young people.
- The Provocative Right Wing response to concerns about 'hate speech' is that the West is paranoid, delusional and immature to assume that Nazi Germany could happen again. **THOSE BATTLES, SAY MILO & SPENCER – EVEN PETERSON - ARE WON FOR GOOD.**
- Bound up with the imagery of 'waking up' by taking a 'red pill' is the idea that fear of a repeat of the Holocaust is something maliciously programmed into children so they will remain enslaved to liberal fallacies.
- Jordan Peterson did his 1st research on The Nazis and claims counter intuitively that the only way to avoid a repeat of the holocaust is to dispense with identity politics altogether. I.e. stop thinking of ourselves in terms of race.
- Stop fetishizing race through constant referral to historical oppression. Treat all equally and don't get unduly upset by language that laughs at non-whites, women, transgender people or those who are gender neutral
- Now this is all well and good in theory but it doesn't account for the reasons minorities needed protecting in the 1st place.
- In other words, I think it's utopian to assume that no legislation is needed to stop people abusing others in language and with actions that remind them of their dehumanisation through history.
- JP's position relies on individual human decency rather than rules that will enforce that decency.

- Asked by 5 Live Presenter Nihal Arthanayake what he would do to stop, for example, racist abuse at football matches (racist taunts, bananas being thrown on the pitch etc.) Peterson seemed to suggest the crowd should and would police themselves.
- All of this harks back to a pre-PC age in which minorities were expected put up with that kind of stuff as par for the course and it is a bracing reminder of how the conversation has changed.

II. EMPLOY INTELLECTUAL ARGUMENT BASED ON HISTORICAL PRECEDENT.

- It needs to be pointed out consistently that it's not enough to claim that Political Correctness has done its job and is now redundant.
- Feelings are not, as JP claims, a poor indicator of what is right or wrong + they should have an influence on law-making.
- Our care to avoid using offensive language is the result of hard fought battles against systematic discrimination. That needs to be hammered home and people need to be reminded of the genuine necessity of defining 'hate speech' in the first place.
- By the same token the question should be asked that if freedom from oppressive identity politics is the desired outcome, what practical end will that freedom be used to?
- The reassertion of pre-60s moral codes? The coercion of people with non-Western moral codes to comply with your value system? If so how will this work in practice? All 3 attack Islam (not just in its fundamentalist forms but across the board) as a retrograde value system. Does that mean
- Answers to these practical questions are rarely demanded of Milo or Jordan Peterson (one an entertainer (of sorts), the other a psychologist, neither of them any political education or experience). If they're asked, these guys manage to fudge the issue by positioning their interviewers as hysterical (AS I MENTIONED BEFORE)

III. LISTEN & CONCEDE WHERE ARGUMENTS ARE VALID.

- Jordan Peterson is positive, for example, on the futility of expecting to be consistently happy, on doing things that might make you happy if you do them well.
- The taking of responsibility for one's own actions which has particular resonance now among Millenials buying into his 12 step programme.
- Accepting that JP is different to the Alt Right. He speaks to many of the alienated young men who are easy prey for white identitarians and tells them to focus on themselves as individuals rather than a group.
- Stop worrying about where this language leads, they all say, and think instead of the damage caused by not being able to say what you think or feel.

- Hard as it is to stomach, there is something to this – particularly in relation to the backlash against political correctness that influenced Trump’s election and Britain’s vote to leave Europe.

IV. POINT OUT THE HYPOCRISY OF DEMANDING ‘GROWN-UP DISCUSSION’ FROM AN ADOLESCENT POSITION

- People like Milo claim to use provocatively anti-rational methods in the service of protecting Western reason, which is connected to what the Futurists and similar groups were doing in the 1910s.
- There was a lot of talk at that time of the ‘cult of childhood’ that had contaminated Western civilisation, of a sloppy feelings-based discourse.
- But Futurist methods of provocation were of a stubbornly and destructively childish bent.
- Likewise, the Trolls of the Alt Right expend a great deal of energy winding up a liberal enemy they characterise as oversensitive, whining and obsessed with ‘feelings rather than facts’ but do so in a manner that refuses rational grownup conversation.
- This needs to be pointed out.

V. REPOSITION THEM AS CLOWNS.

- This is tricky. It’s tempting to think that taking the high ground is the answer. Turn the other cheek, ignore the immature slights of your opponent etc.
- It was a great relief – in the volatile, hostile atmosphere that preceded Trump’s election - to hear Michelle Obama channelling MLK and saying ‘when they go low, we go high’.
- The same goes for when Hilary Clinton pointed out Trump’s serial mistreatment of women, his narcissism etc. It feels good to take the moral high ground.
- But I don’t think it’s the best response to an opponent who has already caricatured you as sanctimonious, smug, out of touch with the times and reality.
- If your moral position is being painted not only as wrong but ridiculous, sometimes the only effective response is to turn that back on them
- Ridicule the ridiculer; come back at them hard, pointing out how pathetic the anonymous trolling culture is.
- Ironically, Jordan Peterson does exactly this. When he’s asked how to respond to the rise of White Identitarian politics he says they need to be told in no uncertain terms to “grow up”.
- Peterson’s own Self-Help Shtick also needs taking to task. It takes itself oh so seriously but in many ways a corny re-hashing of standard back to basics conservative rhetoric.
- It also smacks at times of a parody – if any of you have seen Paul Thomas Anderson’s film *Magnolia*, in which Tom Cruise of all people plays a hurt and ludicrously macho dating coach, you’ll see what I mean.

- Likewise Milo Yiannopolous' jokes are labored, vain. He's about as far away in terms of talent from Lenny Bruce as you can get.
-
- This brings us to the problem of what happens to satire – a form of satire previously used in the service of progressive politics – when the thing you were satirizing has embraced transgression and absurdism.
- How do you effectively satirize someone who is already engaged in 'serious play'? Like the Situationists in the 60s – or even Bob Dylan – Trump and the new conservative counterculture are inoculated against satirical attack by their refusal to own most of what they say.
- I'm not sure what the answer is here, but approach to satire is probably needed.

VI. BE WILLING TO LISTEN TO IDEAS YOU FIND UNPLEASANT IN PUBLIC DEBATE, IN ART, IN LITERATURE.

- Trigger Warnings, Virtue Signaling & No Platforming are fuel to these new conservative firebrands.
- We need to find a way of stemming the polarization that's occurring right now and ignoring or banning your opponent is no way to do that.
- By the same token, I think it's imperative to take to task the current rhetoric about being 'awake' (in Conservative parlance) and 'woke' (in leftist, Black Lives Matter Parlance).
- It's evangelical language and it confirms supporters of both sides in their sense of superiority over the other.
- There's a danger right now that these two opposite sides – so similar in terms of the religious enthusiasm they inspire – are shutting up shop and refusing to consider the others' grievances.
- That shutting up shop is epitomised by the success of a recent book called 'Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race'. It's by the black writer Rene Eddo Lodge and the idea is one I sympathise with but also take to be very dangerous – that because white people consistently misunderstand and skew their sense of historical responsibility they need to get their own house in order before discussing race with minorities.
- The same can obviously be extended to men in relation to gender politics.
- The rhetoric is close to Martin Amis etc. on Islam in the wake of 9/11 and to me it's depressingly illiberal.
- If racism *is* a white problem and misogyny a male one, then the people with those problems need addressing consistently, intelligently and in an open way from all sides.
- It's imperative now to consider why movements so ostentatiously opposed to conventional liberal identity politics have succeeded in recent years.
- And it's particularly important to weigh concerns about gender and racial equality against the material issues facing those who feel left behind by such arguments.
- This would take a whole other paper to cover properly.

- In the meantime though, we need to be clear that the game has changed.
 - It's not good enough to retreat to outraging or silencing anti-liberal voices and we can learn a lot on how to treat a movement that sees itself as a counterculture by understanding its impulses, its methods and its appeal in terms of the earlier countercultures it is channelling
-