<CT>The Networked Self in the Age of Identity Fundamentalism

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<Txt>Over the latter half of the twentieth century, social theorists told a broad story of social "disembedding." Anthony Giddens (1991) famously charted the rise of modernity in the reshaping of local geographies in terms of distal social influences and reordered relations of time. For Giddens, the self of modernity is reflexivity constructed between the local and global; the individual crafts her identity and lifestyle amid diversity. While Giddens was writing long before the advent of social media, contemporary communication and media scholars have charted the rise of "cultures of connectivity," "networked sociality," and "connective action." Taken as a whole, these accounts generally are premised on the idea of individuated reflexive selves, where people actively construct their identities, and continually do so, in an era marked by the decline of traditions, institutions, and locales. To date, much of the emphasis in the communication and media studies literature might be termed an "actor-centric" self. This is a self that is generally free to pick and choose among available identities and cultural forms, often in private. In this view, the self quite literally constructs itself.

While this premise undoubtedly captures important aspects of the contemporary relationship between networked media and reflexive, flexible identities, how do we explain the surprising endurance, and even newfound importance, of nationalism, religious fundamentalism, and ethnicity in the context of social identity? For example, the persistence, and new public

visibility, of white racial identity and its attendant American nationalism and Christian underpinnings were on full display during the 2016 election cycle, in both the campaign of Donald Trump and the attendant rise of the "alt-right." The alt-right is a diffuse, networked, and primarily online movement (Marwick & Lewis, 2017) premised on assertions of white identity as a legitimate basis for social affiliation and wielding political power. In "An Establishment Conservative's Guide to the Alt-Right," contributors to the flagship alt-right media site Breitbart Allum Bokhari and Milo Yiannopoulos (2016) chronicle the origins of the alt-right movement and the development of its various strains:

<Ext>In short, they [the alt-right] want what every people fighting for self-determination in history have ever wanted, and what progressives are always telling us people should be allowed—unless those people are white. This hypocrisy is what has led so many Trump voters—groups who have in many cases not voted since the 1970s or 80s—to come out of the woodwork and stand up for their values and culture.

<Txt>The various groups in the alt-right movement share a white nationalist ideology that conceptualizes race as the primary basis of social affiliation and differentiation and a legitimate means for making claims on political power. The alt-right rejects any attempt to change traditional, Christian morality by the left, and the progressive value of diversity, whether it is on sexual, gender, or racial and ethnic terms (Marwick & Lewis, 2016). The alt-right critiques what it sees as liberal attempts to jettison white Western civilization in favor of the cultural elevation of those oppressed in this history (such as African Americans). However, there is considerable debate in the literature, and more importantly within the alt-right itself, about its other key tenants and symbolic boundaries. Kreiss and Mason (2017), for instance, argue that

while older white supremacist groups such as the neo-Nazis and the KKK received the lion's share of attention after the racial violence in Charlottesville during the summer of 2017, more common among the alt-right's key sites such as Breitbart is the argument for *equality* in the context of white self-determination. For example, Bokhari and Yiannopoulos argue that the primarily white, male, and middle-American "natural conservative" subset of the alt-right movement found on sites such as Breitbart reject the violence and inherent claims of white racial superiority espoused by the neo-Nazis (or "1488ers"). Instead, these individuals embrace self-determination for *all* racial and ethnic groups ("homogeneity" in terms of Haidt's (2012) values), see white identity as a legitimate and desirable basis for making political claims, and argue that America is historically a white nation, a legacy which they believe should be preserved.[1]

These explicit forms of white racial identity on display during the election cycle on sites such as Breitbart are surprising in light of the three decades-old literature cited above that generally posits that contemporary identities are more fluid and flexible than those of the past. This idea of identity fluidity and its construction from a range of available alternatives is premised on a number of factors, including the erosion of traditional forms of authority rooted in religion and place and the development of global information networks and social media platforms that place networked sociality at the heart of contemporary social relations (Van Dijck, 2013). For example, the idea of flexible selves and identities are a key tenant of contemporary sociological and especially media theory. In her influential work, Zizi Papacharissi (2014, p. 304) argues that:

> <Ext>the self, in late modern societies, is expressed as fluid abstraction, reified through the individual's association with a reality that may be equally flexible. The process of self-presentation becomes an ever-evolving cycle through which

individual identity is presented, compared, adjusted, or defended against a

constellation of social, cultural, economic, or political realities.

<Txt>In this view, self-identity is something that is actively and reflexively constructed

and reconstructed, particularly through the use of networked media. As Papacharissi argues,

drawing on her previous work in *A Private Sphere*, our social lives are marked by "autonomy"

and "fluidity" as "the individual engages socially through a private media environment located

within the individual's personal and private space" (ibid., p. 306; see also Papacharissi, 2015, p.

97-99). Individuals find rootedness in the temporary senses of place they arrive at through their

identity performances, even as they navigate the context collapse (Marwick & boyd, 2011) that

happens when social media platforms bundle together many disparate types of relations and

encounter economic, social, and political forces that bound self-construction and performances.

Even still, the guiding concepts of contemporary identity in this tradition are flexibility,

multiplicity, reflexivity, and play, especially when compared with the received identities of

traditional societies.

Other theorists, however, have told a different story that helps shed light on new

expressions and social formations of white nationalism. The sociologist Manuel Castells's *The

Power of Identity* (2011 [1998], p. 11) argues that reflexive selves are the purview of *elites*:

"reflexive life-planning becomes impossible, except for the elite inhabiting the timeless space of

flows of global networks and their ancillary locales." Those left out of global information

networks, or who perceive themselves being culturally or economically marginalized by them,

retreat to the "defensive trenches" of nationalism, religiosity, and race and ethnicity, which are

buffeting forces against the power and play of information and global networks, in addition to

the withering of civil society (ibid., p. 33). Castells (ibid., p. 68) argued that these resultant

"cultural communes" offer reactionary, defensive, and solidaristic identities organized around values coded by symbols of identification, and provide mooring for individuals excluded from or resistant to "the individualization of identity."

In light of the 2016 election, Castells (2011, p. 69) was perceptive in understanding that "God, nation, family, and community will provide unbreakable, eternal codes" that stand against global flows of power and information. This chapter details these contrasting theories on identity before providing an analysis of how Breitbart provides the supporting media for a contemporary white nationalist cultural commune that falls under the label of the alt-right. The site, founded in 2005 by Andrew Breitbart, a conservative media entrepreneur and provocateur, is the 44th most popular website in the United States according to Alexa, and received massive traffic during the election, with over 2.3 million followers on Facebook and 18 million homepage visitors a month (Grynbaum and Herrman, 2016). Even more, the site was highly influential. A team of researchers (Benkler et. al, 2017; Faris et. al, 2017) demonstrated that Breitbart significantly shaped online communication in the public sphere during the election, so much so that the site was much more central than *Fox News* to political discourse. And, the fact that Steve Bannon, a founding member of the board and executive chair of Breitbart, served as chief executive officer of the Trump campaign and the White House chief strategist during the first eight months of the Trump administration also speaks of its considerable influence.

As this chapter reveals, Breitbart advances the assertion of identity fundamentalism in an age of elite networked selves. Breitbart's various contributors reject contemporary pluralist, multicultural democracy, economic and institutional globalization, and cosmopolitanism in favor of an American democracy premised upon white, Christian American identity. In doing so, Breitbart provides a forum for ideas and identities that animate the alt-right, drawing in new

audiences and reifying the identities of extant ones, helping people scared and anxious of a changing world and their diminished place in it to connect and assert political and economic claims on the basis of a shared identity. Given its influence and role, Breitbart offers an ideal opportunity to analyze the defensive trenches of contemporary identity, showing how older bases of collective symbolic identification and belonging not only persist in a changing world, but can also become stronger.

<A>The Surprising Rootedness of Networked Identity

<Txt>Scholars have grounded the concept of identity in the idea of social difference. Craig Calhoun (1994, pp. 9–10) argues that: "We know of no people without names, no languages or cultures in which some manner of distinctions between self and other, we and they, are not made … Self-knowledge – always a construction no matter how much it feels like a discovery – is never altogether separable from claims to be known in specific ways by others." In this formulation, identity is actively constructed by social actors over time and fundamentally premised on social *difference* (i.e. distinction). Identities distinguish between self and society, individuals and groups, in-groups and out-groups, and they are fundamentally public, ways of being known by others. People can also have multiple identities, encompassing citizenship status, religious affiliation, social groups, political party, and racial and ethnic groups, and so on.

Many social theorists have argued that a key feature of modernity is that identity is less rooted in received social groupings than in the past, such as handed down notions of religion and place. Instead, theorists posit that contemporary identity is the result of an active and self-reflexive process. Giddens (1991) saw the key condition of modernity in the erosion of received forms of identity rooted in place and faith. As tradition loses its hold, individuals navigate their own life choices in a process of "reflexively organized life planning":

<Ext>Self-identity is not a distinctive trait possessed by the individual. It is *the self as reflexively understood by the person in terms of her/his biograph*y.

<S>(Giddens, 1991, p. 53, emphasis in the original)

<Txt>Giddens's (ibid., p. 32) key insight is that "in the context of post-traditional order, the self becomes a reflexive project." Taking the place of received selves, such as on the basis of terrestrial community and religious identity, are reflexive selves that are comparatively free to remake their identities in the context of their cultural surroundings. This idea has taken on new life and urgency in the age of the Internet and social media (Baumann, 2013; Van Dijck, 2013). While the idea of a continually remade "project self" did not originate with the Internet, scholars have argued that the growth of global information networks and social media has made the process of self-construction more widespread, expansive, fluid, and socially, culturally, and politically important (Bennett and Segerberg, 2013; Ratto and Boler, 2014). The informational and social networks that people are embedded in are both more diverse and more expansive when constituted through communications technology. As Papacharissi (2010, p. 17) argues, in late modern societies the locus of politics resides in the citizen's

<Ext>private sphere of contemplation, evaluation, and action, in which the self remains the point of reference. The citizen is alone, but not lonely or isolated. On the contrary, within the private sphere, the individual cultivates civic habits that enable him or her to connect with others on the basis of shared social, political, and cultural priorities.

<Txt>Of course, fluidity has never been complete, as two decades of scholarship on networked media in the context of race and ethnicity have pointed out. Cultural theorist Lisa Nakamura (2013), for instance, pointed out that the idea of a de-raced Internet was always a

fantasy, a fiction of whiteness as the absence of race. People could never escape from the racial and ethnic identities that shape their culture and bodies, nor did people of color ever necessarily desire to. Even still, the broad consensus in the literature is that individuals are able to seek out like-minded others in the private sphere, and build their own networks of political, social, and cultural affiliation.

Manuel Castells, in contrast, makes a structural argument regarding who gets to participate in the free flow and voluntaristic construction of identities in the network society. As noted above, for Castells it is only elites in the global information society that are able to construct their fluid selves. Most non-elite individuals only have *local* experiences and orientations, while power resides in *global* networks. For most people, life in the "network society" is characterized by a comparative powerlessness, as the local lives they live are structured by increasingly global forces. Meanwhile, civil society has become fractured and attenuates in power given that local associations and means of political representation are increasingly rendered powerless in the face of global networks. This, in turn, leads people to retreat into the defenses of nationalism, religion, and ethnicity. As Castells (2011, p. 11) argues:

> <Ext>The search for meaning takes place then in the reconstruction of defensive identities around communal principles. Most of social action becomes organized in the opposition between unidentified flows and secluded identities … But, I propose the hypothesis that the constitution of subjects, at the heart of the process of social change, takes a different route to the one we knew during modernity, and late modernity: namely, *subjects, if and when constructed, are not built any longer on the basis of civil societies, which are in the process of disintegration, but as prolongation of communal resistance.*

<S>(emphasis in the original)

<Txt>Castells presciently proposes that this communalism takes four forms: religious fundamentalism, nationalism, ethnic identity, and territorial identity. They are identities that are fundamentally *reactive* to shifts in global power and information, and offer independent and "autonomous" sources of meaning vis-à-vis global networks (ibid., p. 68). These "cultural communes" become havens for those "excluded from or resisting the individualization of identity attached to life in the global networks of power and wealth" (ibid.). In sum, Castells argues that these are identities carved out in reaction, and opposition, to globalization (which erodes territorial, national, and cultural sovereignty), flexible networks and identities (which foster economic precarity and make social groupings unclear), and breakdowns of traditional social and cultural roles found within family units and other social groupings. As Castells (ibid., pp. 68–70) argues, cultural communes:

<Ext>are, at the outset, defensive identities that function as refuge and solidarity, to protect against a hostile, outside world. They are culturally constituted; that is, organized around a specific set of values whose meaning and sharing are marked by specific codes of self-identification: the community of believers, the icons of nationalism, the geography of locality…

This negation of civil societies and political institutions where cultural communes emerge leads to the closing of the boundaries of the commune. In contrast to pluralistic, differentiated civil societies, cultural communes display little internal differentiation. Indeed, their strength, and their ability to provide refuge, solace,

certainty, and protection, comes precisely from their communal character, from their collective responsibility, canceling individual projects. Thus, in the first stage of reaction, the (re)construction of meaning by defensive identities breaks away from the institutions of society, and promises to rebuild from the bottom up, while retrenching themselves in a communal heaven.

<Txt>Writing in the late 1990s, Castells sees these cultural communes take shape in "the dominance of symbolic politics in the space of media" (ibid., p. 73). His case studies document how groups such as the Zapatistas and the American militia movements utilize communications technologies, particularly the Internet, to craft their symbolic politics, which provide fertile ground for the sharing of conspiracy theories, supports expression, and provides the basis for collective self-definition and action. In Castells work, then, we see a clear alternative to the emphasis on individual self-reflexivity, often through networked media use, that characterizes accounts of digital "connective action" (Bennet & Segerberg, 2013). For Castells, the defensive work of symbolic and social retreats into older forms of *stabilizing* identity shape contemporary politics.

These were precisely the dynamics on display in the 2016 U.S. presidential election and, I would argue, that lay behind many of the overtly nationalistic, populist, and racially exclusionary forces now driving politics in contemporary Western democracies. The 2016 U.S. presidential election, as well as its predecessor in Brexit, revealed the continued importance of race, ethnicity, religion, nationalism, and territorial identification in the public life of advanced Western democracies.

For example, a trio of books written in advance of the presidential election—Cramer's (2016) *The Politics of Resentment*, Gest's (2016) *The New Minority*, and Hochschild's (2016)

Strangers in the Own Land—reveal the underlying dynamics of U.S. politics that help explain the outcome of the presidential race. In an ethnographic study, Cramer revealed the degree to which *rural* identity shapes people's perceptions of politics, from who has political power to who benefits from governmental action. Gest, in a comparative ethnography and survey of people in white working-class London and Youngstown, Ohio, shows how people's perceptions of their identity group's decline in status shapes their turn to radical, exclusionary politics designed to restore white cultural, social, and economic status. Hochschild's ethnographic study of Tea Party supporters in Louisiana reveals how white identity, partisanship, and religion shapes perceptions of the un-deserving (black) and deserving (white) poor, and fueled the identity movement that carried Donald Trump to the presidency. Trump was the candidate who provided emotional release from the "feeling rules" that govern normative relations toward others (e.g. people of color, lesbians and gays, Muslims), and which the president's supporters chafed at (Hochschild, 2016).

I turn now to an analysis of the white nationalist website Breitbart to reveal what the identity media of a cultural commune looks like.

<A>Breitbart and the Rise of the New White American Nationalism

<Txt>What is Breitbart? There are few published academic studies of the site. Those that exist cover the highest profile controversies involving the early history of the site, including its undercover sting operations and selectively edited videos of ACORN, the progressive low-income housing organization, which ultimately led to the organization's demise, in addition to the site's exposé of supposedly racist comments made by former Department of Agriculture employee Shirley Sherrod (Shah and Yamagami, 2015). Both of these incidents received media coverage in hundreds of articles. Existing academic commentary situates Breitbart as a

contemporary manifestation of Richard Hofstadter's (1966) influential critique of a "paranoid style" of American politics on the right, putting the site in line with Rush Limbaugh, Glenn Beck, and Bill O'Reilly, especially for its style of political outrage and combat (Berry & Sobieraj, 2014). Dreier and Martin (2010) called Andrew Breitbart an "opinion entrepreneur" for this role in the ACORN incident, particularly the way he was able to manufacture a controversy in national legacy media, and see the site generally as a faux outrage media outlet.

There is truth to these views. As a site, Breitbart is prone to disinformation, selective editing, faux outrage, and juvenile tactics of dishonest "gotcha" journalism. However, this is not the whole story. Media and journalism matter for their importance with respect to identity as much as information. An analysis of the articles published on Breitbart during and immediately after the election reveals the ideology of Breitbart's contributors, the stories they told themselves about American politics, and their collective political identity as a movement.

Breitbart packages a white nationalist ideology in a twenty-first-century media entertainment style. In doing so, Brietbart should be understood as a form of commercial identity media that helped give rise to, and supports, a defined white nationalist cultural commune, to use Castells's terms. As the following pages demonstrate, the various contributors to Breitbart reject *multiculturalism, globalization, and cosmopolitanism* in favor of white, nationalist, identity.[2] In accord with Castells's theory of identity, Breitbart turns from cultural and social pluralism and embraces homogeneity, enrolls individuals in a collective, defensive project to reclaim the symbolic borders of the nation against a tide of immigrants and Islam, and promotes and inculcates a coherent collective identity and ideology (Harris-Lacewell, 2010) that presumably offers a protected defensive space for its followers, while turning from individuated identity projects.

In other words, there is a coherent worldview and collective identity threaded through Breitbart's content, which revolves around the rejection of multicultural democracy, cosmopolitanism, and globalization. The first encodes a deep distrust of Islam, but also symbolically defines non-whites as aberrant and pluralism as a negative feature of American society and democracy. The rejection of cosmopolitanism is a critique of politicians and others who espouse an outlook, worldview, or style that extends beyond America's borders, in favor of an embrace of nostalgic and backward-looking constructions of Americans' cultural traditions. Finally, and related, the third is a critique of economic and institutional globalization in favor of a new American nationalism in economic and international affairs.

In identifying these elements of Breitbart's symbolic work as a forum in support of a cultural commune, the site cannot be reduced to populism as a style, rhetoric, or a set of governing ideas (Block and Negrine, 2017; Kazin, 1998; Panizza, 2005). The reality is, unfortunately, darker. Breitbart, and the broader alt-right movement of which it is an integral part, not only rejects pluralism, but, like all populist movements, also advance claims for a singular "people" (Muller, 2016). Breitbart explicitly rejects pluralism in favor of an expressly white American identity. Breitbart offers a coherent ideology, a set of ideas for understanding politics, narrative tropes that help people situate and understand politics, and a collective identity of white American and Christian nationalism.

For example, perhaps the most common theme to emerge in articles published on Breitbart during the election was the general idea and refrain of "taking back our country." Trump himself tweeted after Brexit that "They took their country back, just like we will take America back" (Swoyer, 2016). Across these articles, Trump supporters were said to be taking their country back from a litany of explicit targets including: Democrats, the socialist left,

Muslims, the media, people of color, women, immigrants, establishment Republicans, free traders, Wall Street, and Washington DC insiders. Throughout many of these articles, those "taking back their country" were characterized in terms of "middle America," "real America," "deplorables," and "fly over country." These groups were hailed by Breitbart for standing up, asserting themselves and their values, and rejecting those who would repudiate them.

With respect to multiculturalism, Breitbart authors explicitly rejected immigrant *incorporation*, particularly for Muslims, into democracy (Yiannopoulos, 2016a). Numerous Breitbart articles espoused the idea that Islam is incompatible with democracy, freedom of speech, and the peaceful and law-bound resolution of conflict (e.g. Yiannopoulos, 2016b). And, in others, there was a broader critique of contemporary immigrants for their failure to incorporate themselves into American democracy. For example, in an article entitled "The Emerging Trumpian Majority" that entwines both ideas, James Pinkerton (2016a) writes:

> <Ext>Once upon a time, immigration to the U.S. was a positive civic ritual that affirmed American values; that is, foreigners would come here legally, get a job, learn English, and embrace American ways. And presto! They too were Americans. It's hard to think of anything healthier for a country's psyche than to see others come and adapt to its ways.
>
> By contrast, today, the situation is much different; too many foreigners come here illegally, wangle *[sic]* their way onto public assistance, and then sit as unassimilated clumps at best, as terrorists at worse. No wonder the American people are angry. And the Republican Party, at least, is reflecting that anger.

<Txt>Breitbart contributors also rejected cosmopolitanism in favor of U.S. cultural,

economic, and institutional nationalism. In an article entitled "The ten ideologies of America," Breitbart writer Virgil (2016a, emphases in the original) defines cosmopolitanism as:

<Ext>the view that we are all, everywhere, a part of a single world community, and that such things as nation-states, including the United States, only slow down the fulfillment of our true destiny—coming together in a global harmonic convergence … *Left* Cosmopolitanism means support for open borders, of course, and also for multiculturalism. As might be said, "Celebrate diversity—or else!" In addition, Left Cosmos love international organizations, such as the United Nations; to them, that's the future—one big New World Order. *Right* Cosmopolitans also support open borders. In addition, being good capitalists, they support free trade and anything else that multinational corporations might wish for. And since they are private-sector-loving corporatists, they avidly embrace pro-business international combines, such as the World Trade Organization.

<Txt>Broadly, Breitbart contributors espouse an American nationalism, one that explicitly turns inward to the United States for its source of moral values and strength. At the same time, the rejection of cosmopolitanism is linked to the critique of elites, who are seen as looking down upon ordinary Americans and their values in favor of an other-directed, outward-oriented, cosmopolitan outlook. Cosmopolitanism here is in part a cultural critique, linked to a perceived style of being and carrying oneself in the world, in sharp distinction to "American" identity and values.

At the same time, as is clear in the quote above, there is an associated critique of globalism on Breitbart that assaults global financial flows and international financial capitalism and free trade in favor of protectionism. It also encompasses a distrust of international governing

bodies such as the United Nations and alliances that are perceived to weaken American sovereignty. For example, in a piece published in August titled "The worldwide Trumpian majority: Lessons from Brexit, Britain, and the United States," James Pinkerton (2016b) writes:

<Ext>Indeed, we can step back and see that around the world, the dueling forces are globalism, on the one hand, and nationalism, on the other.

Globalism, as we have observed, is a curious combination of socialism and capitalism—that is, bureaucrats and bankers, working together to flatten national boundaries and, indeed, to flatten the nation-state itself…

As for nationalism, that's the credo of all others, whether we like them or not. Trump, Farage, and LePen are nationalists, but then so, too, are the Russians, Chinese, and Iranians. In other words, just about all the peoples of the world are instinctive nationalists; it's globalism that is the strange mutation, afflicting mostly the West.

<Txt>Taken together, Breitbart offers a rather coherent and over-arching critique of contemporary currents in politics and the existing Democratic and Republican establishments. What is striking is the degree to which the positions in Breitbart commentary—which closely tracked Trump's own rhetoric during the campaign—tell a clear political story. Breitbart is, in part, about defining the symbolic border of the nation and protecting the white, Christian body politic in a way that is premised on *exclusion*. This is precisely the expectation of Castells's ideas regarding the homogeneity of cultural communes; Breitbart espouses a collective identity marked by a defensive retreat into white Christian and American nationalism.

Even more, many of Breitbart's contributors argue that the embrace of globalization and multiculturalism are both anti-democratic and anti-American. They argue that these policies

erode services for white, working-class Americans and undermine the nation-state. Indeed, the interests of those pursuing identity politics, in the view of articles on Breitbart (contributors roundly fail to recognize their own arguments as a form of white identity politics), are seen as irreconcilable with those of "real" Americans. Virgil (2016a) writes:

<Ext>The old Democrats of FDR's time were happy enough with capitalism; they just wanted to extend solidaristic job-protections, and basic social-insurance plans, to all Americans.

By contrast, today's Democrats, filled with Cosmopolitan dreams, want to extend government benefits to the world—and that's not just a budget-buster, it's also a political loser.

In truth, today's Democrats aren't much interested in the well-being of working stiffs. Instead, they are enraptured with new plans to advance identity politics, co-ed bathrooms, and #BlackLivesMatter. All the while, of course, keeping the border open and suppressing energy production and economic activity.

<A>Breitbart, Cultural Communes, and the Problem of Democratic Incorporation

<Txt>Rousseau famously argued that crafting the identity of a *citizen* is difficult. People are instinctively drawn to small groups, whether they are formed from their local communities or their near-to-hand social affiliations and identities. Constructing civil solidarity on the basis of an abstraction such as a global world, or even a nation, is difficult and, ultimately, fragile. Alexander (2006), meanwhile, has argued that the idea of a "democratic self" is a hard-won

achievement, ultimately premised on people understanding their identities in terms of being a

member of a collective premised on the protection of individual rights, a commitment to social

solidarity and mutual obligation, and civil moral codes that structure democratic relations.

As Manual Castells has demonstrated, in a world of global information networks,

constructing democratic identities and solidarity is an even more complicated affair. While the

global elite has prospered and can now fluidly and self-reflexively construct their identities, the

more common response has been the flight into cultural communes defined by religion, nation,

ethnicity, and locale. If 2016 has revealed anything, it is the degree to which these defensive

identities have become the refuge of whites across the United States and Europe, fueled by a

growing sense of the loss of their privileged cultural, economic, and social status in a global

world (Hochschild, 2016; Gest, 2016).

Comparatively *older* forms of identity in the United States, and indeed, global politics,

not only have continued relevance, but also, it appears, they are actively being renewed. As

noted above, Castells proposed, two decades ago, that the construction of identity in the network

age could take two forms. The first is the embrace of hyper-individualized, global forms of

identity rooted in expressive choice, which is only available to elites. Castells goes so far as to

refer to "individualism" as a collective identity. The second entails the retreat to the defensive

trenches of nationalism, religion, and ethnic and racial identity. As Castells (2011, p. 7) argues,

in contrast with much of the existing literature:

<Ext>It is easy to agree on the fact that, from a sociological perspective, all identities

are constructed. The real issue is how, from what, by whom, and for what. The

construction of identities uses building materials from history, from geography, from

biology, from productive and reproductive institutions, from collective memory and

from personal fantasies, from power apparatuses and religious revelations. But individuals, social groups, and societies process all these materials, and rearrange their meaning, according to social determinations and cultural projects that are rooted in their social structure, and in their space/time framework.

<Txt>What are the consequences of retreat into what can best be conceptualized as white identity fundamentalism, an identity easily forged from the history of white supremacy in America and the perceived encroachment of non-whites on that power? Breitbart provides a window into a future shaped, in no small part, by a defensive identity defined by conceptions of white group interest. A significant number of Trump's supporters celebrated his rise precisely because it symbolically signaled, and would set in motion, the rejection of multicultural democracy in favor of the protection of white interests. Breitbart contributor Virgil (2016b), who published an essay the day after the election entitled "Ten takeaways of the revolution of 2016," argued:

> <Ext>**Middle America has asserted itself, and these folks have their own ideas.** Throughout the '16 election, the MSM and the rest of the chattering class viewed the American working- and middle class with a combination of contempt and pity. To illustrate, we can look back to July 13, when *The New York Times* headlined a news story, "For Whites Sensing Decline, Donald Trump Unleashes Words of Resistance." We might pause to ask: Would the *Times* use the word "decline" in regard to any group, other than whites? Indeed, as well we all know, the MSM has been joined in its anti-white mockery by big chunks of what's billed, these days, as "comedy… ."

Moreover, we can observe that while this smug culture of incomprehension and

condescension has been a characteristic of the left, it can also be observed, in milder form, on the right. That is, many Republicans, perhaps even today, just can't quite believe that Trump stands for anything more than reality-TV showmanship. Yet, as anyone who reads Breitbart, for example, knows, serious thinking has been going on about what a populist-nationalist center-right coalition might look like, even if the familiar DC think-tanks haven't been interested.

<Txt>Breitbart's contributor here entwines white identity with populist-nationalism, celebrating an insurgent Trump candidacy and a new nationalism he rhetorically stood for during the campaign that will benefit white people. Breitbart is the symbolic media, and organizing platform, for a defensive cultural commune that rejects diversity, global institutions, and an expansive, cosmopolitan worldview in favor of white, Christian, and American nationalism. Breitbart also embraces the rejection of establishment Republicanism and older forms of conservatism, especially given its *explicit* (as opposed to *implicit*) racial appeals to white identity and racial framing of the sources of political and social conflict (see Bonilla-Silva, 2010; Hemmer, 2016; McGirr, 2015). At its heart, the defensive cultural commune of the alt-right is a rejection of the pluralism that defines contemporary multicultural democracy.

While on one level the retreat from reflexive global identities is noteworthy against the backdrop of the literature on networked selves, the normative democratic concern lies in the fact that cultural communes, made visible on and constituted through sites such as Breitbart, reject *democratic incorporation.* Democratic politics is possible when individualism is a collective identity, to use Castells's terms. There is no basis for othering or exclusion when everyone is free to construct their own identity; it is a politics premised on a universal individualism. Cultural communes, however, are premised on exclusion. The history of Western democracies can be

understood through the lens of the problem of civic "incorporation," the fight to extend

citizenship beyond the boundaries of birth, race, gender, and class – the question of which types

of people sharing which identities can and should be incorporated into the civil sphere. Social

theorist Jeffrey Alexander (2006, p. 61), for instance, has argued that the historical development

of Western democracy came in part through the work of social movements to ground

particularistic, excluded identities in terms of democratic universality. There is an almost

teleological sense of history in Alexander's account, where the cultural discourses in the

founding documents give rise to their later interpretations and ultimately are made manifest in a

more inclusive civil sphere. As Alexander (ibid., p. 61) argues:

> <Ext>Political struggles over the status of lower-class groups, or racial, ethnic, and
>
> religious minorities, of women, children, and homosexuals, of those who are
>
> constructed as criminals and as mentally, emotionally, and physically handicapped
>
> – these conflicts have always involved discursive struggles over whether and how
>
> the discourse of liberty can be extended and applied. Insofar as the founding
>
> cultural myths and constitutional documents of democratic societies are
>
> universalistic, they implicitly stipulated that the discourse can always be further
>
> extended, and that it eventually must be.

<Txt>In the 250 years since the founding of the United States, civil solidarity and formal

electoral participation has indeed been extended significantly to include many of these formerly

excluded groups. While this liberty does not necessarily mean full economic equality, and the

degree to which rights are extended was highly uneven, particularly in the south (Mickey, 2015),

universalistic democratic cultural claims have come prior to these broader shifts.

In a world where flexible selves are the predominant mode of constructing identity,

incorporation would be less of a pressing issue. In our own time, however, the rise of cultural communes has made the question of democratic inclusion again central to our politics. The particular contours of the"civil" is an ongoing achievement, not a foregone conclusion, and it is not static, it is subject in part to the power of contingent events in history, anxiety about race and status (Hochschild, 2016), and fear about the contours of the body politic (Alexander, 2006). As Castells predicted, the network society can give rise to forms of defensive identity fundamentalism that fuels powerful conservative and reactionary movements. While Castells (2011, p. 63) focused on African-American identity, and saw ethnicity ultimately being *less* powerful than nationalism and religion, it is clear that in the United States *white* cultural communes have extraordinary opportunities to revoke symbolic inclusion and formal rights. As the sociologist Chris Bail (2014) has demonstrated, in our own time the public sphere, dominated by white Christians, has grown more radical in response to terrorism in ways directly counter to the discourse of liberty and equality under the law in calling for the punishing and profiling of Muslim Americans, long before Trump's rise.

The discourses of liberty, equality, and justice at the center of the United States and many Western constitutional democracies are, in the end, historically contingent and an ongoing achievement. They are subject to cultural debates, embedded within fields of power, over what liberty, equality, and justice mean, arguments over how far democratic solidarity should be extended, and elite, institutional, and public evaluations of the values and morals that should govern democratic life. While founding cultural documents, and the communicative and regulatory institutions that give them shape and life, are powerful, defensive movements can draw on their own alternative cultural identities, elaborating their own myths, constituting themselves through media, embedding themselves in powerful institutions, while making fear

and identity-based appeals to the public that enables them to foreclose progressive attempts at democratic equality and expand their defensive cultural communes. And, in so doing, they have the power to weaken democratic identities, norms, values, and institutions. That is the darkest lesson of the cultural commune of the alt-right and Trump's ascendency to America's highest office.

<A>Notes

<Take in end of chapter notes here>

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[1] 1488 combines two white supremacist symbols: 14 refers to the words "We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children;" 88 for Heil Hitler (H is the eighth letter of the alphabet.)

[2] An earlier version of the empirical portion of this chapter appeared in Kreiss (2017).