Days of Alt-rage: using the Weatherman movement to deconstruct the radicalisation of the alt-right

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Abstract

No matter whether they adhere to a left-wing or right-wing political ideology, the evolution of a radical activist group shares a common trajectory. As such, it is possible to explore the rise and fall of a far-left organisation like the Weathermen in order to better understand the development of the alt-right, and to devise strategies to combat extremism in a contemporary context. By examining the role of identity politics in fermenting a radical socio-political agenda, as well as the tactics that contribute to the formation of a groupthink mentality, it is made clear that the very strategies of indoctrination and direct action that solidify a radical base are the very same as those that work to divide such groups and isolate them from mainstream socio-political discourse.

Key words

Introduction

No matter whether it exists on the far-right or extreme left of the political spectrum, the rise of a new social movement never occurs in a vacuum. Most are driven by the inherent need of a politicised citizenry to address a perceived injustice or inequality in society; others still may evolve as a response to rapid social change, and the apparent need to take action in order to preserve the existing status quo of social norms (Della Porta & Diani, 2009). Respectively, these central motivations have been responsible for the development of some of the most

influential social movements of the last half-century: the countercultural left-wing activism of the 1960s and 1970s, and the more recent alt-right movement of the early 21st Century. While these movements are fuelled by socio-political views that exist at extreme ends of the ideological spectrum, there are nevertheless clear commonalities which reflect their shared construction as channels for participation in public affairs. A feature of most large-scale group actions is that levels of participation in a social movement varies widely between individuals (Verba & Nie, 1987). Just as there are members of the movement who show support in relatively passive ways, there are always participants in social movements that contribute in a more extreme and proactive manner; these committed activists play a central role in the formation of group identity by engaging in highly-visible actions, aiding in shaping wider public perceptions of the movement and attracting support for its stated cause celebre.

In many cases, it is the actions of the most committed vanguard of a social movement that has the most impact in its success or failure. An exploration of the rise and fall of highly-visible radical organisations like Weatherman highlights the ways in which the adoption of a militant approach in social movements can undermine its ability to achieve its objectives. Through a two-pronged approach that used identity politics to foster division between the left-wing activists whilst simultaneously labelling the bourgeois middle-class as collaborators with the capitalist establishment, the Weathermen effectively undercut their ability to attract new support for their mission and establish itself as a legitimate vehicle for socio-political change (Murphey, 2015). Lessons can be taken from the Weathermen's dramatic rise and fall that can be applied to the ongoing establishment of the alt-right as a viable socio-political movement. Unlike the Weathermen, the alt-right has made significant ground in its infancy with the election of an American president that is sympathetic to its views, and has benefitted considerably from the support of committed alt-right figureheads and activists (Mead, 2017). Nevertheless, the similar group dynamics of the Weathermen and those of the alt-right provide an opportunity to use the failure of one to predict the viability of the other. If it is possible to determine the ways in which Weathermen failed to establish itself in the late 1960s, it may in turn be possible to identify potential weaknesses in the alt-right that would allow its opponents to undermine its effectiveness and appeal as a socio-political ideology.

Literature review

Developing out of the traditionalist study of social movements in the mid-1960s, Habermas (1981) asserts that the field of new social movements is primarily focused on the paradigmatic shift from movements focused on economic parity towards those seeking to address non-tangible issues associated with human rights. New social movements and the rise of post-industrial activism was a central factor in the Weathermen's ability to assume a position of prominence in far-left politics in the late 1960s. John Patrick Diggins describes the radical American Left of the 1960s as 'the New Left', and distinguishes it clearly from the Marxist, labour-oriented 'Old Left' that preceded it. In outlining the history of the American Left, Diggins observes a unique feature in each phase of the evolution of left-wing politics in the United States: while each phase – including the New Left – engaged with traditional Marxist ideas, these concepts were predominantly used to support a movement already in motion that was inextricably driven by uniquely American concerns to do with race, gender and politics (Diggins, 1992). Diggins' perspective is clearly observable in the evolution of the Weatherman organisation. Originally a faction of the wider student activist movement, Jacobs argues those that would become the nexus of Weatherman were only able to shape the narrative of political action as a result of a broader social shift away from collective action that was concerned with the promotion of a proletariat revolution (1997, p. 66). By their very nature, new social movements are a more divergent affair than conventional labour-based leftist politics: whilst most committed left-wing activists continued to express the same kind of inclusive personal views as were prevalent under the former economic-based paradigm, the majority of political action groups formed under this new model were focused on single-issues such as LGBT rights or racial equality (Kriesi, 1996).

Unlike the case in the labour movement, issues-based social movements have been observed by Bagguley (1992) as being far more likely to develop in the middle-classes of society given their focus on existential concepts of equality instead of practical improvements in the well-being of the lower classes. Offe (1985) claims that new social movements occur primarily in civil society rather than the political sphere, and as such are less concerned with directly challenging the state than previous types of social activism. Offe's position is obviously problematic when it comes to groups like the Weathermen, who focused almost exclusively on challenging the authority of the state; aside from their confrontational characteristics, however,

Weatherman meets the vast majority of criteria required to be classified a new social movement. Thus, whilst its militancy makes it an outlier and must be acknowledged as a distinguishing factor, the Weathermen should regardless be considered a new social movement that is reflective of the cultural shift in left-wing activism that was dominant in the late 1960s.

While the theory of new social movements is concerned solely with left-wing activism, the tenets of identity politics have been associated with socio-political campaigns waged by both the far-left and radical right-wing groups. Identity politics refers to the belief that a person's socio-political perspective is inherently shaped by their experiences as a member of a social group with which they personally identify (Parker, 2005). Schlesinger (1991) argues that, while seemingly focusing on addressing the issues faced by marginalised subpopulations, identity politics has the converse effect of increasing levels of division in society. Schlesinger critiqued the tendency of the left to engage in identity politics in the 1960s and 1970s, arguing that 'movements for civil rights should aim towards full acceptance and integration of marginalised groups into the mainstream, rather than… perpetuating that marginalisation through affirmations of difference' (Chaudhary & Chaudhary, 2009, p. 112). Crenshaw asserts that the problems of identity politics go beyond the division it fosters between subpopulations: further, she suggests that 'the problem with identity politics is not that it fails to transcend differences… but rather the opposite – that it frequently conflates or ignores intragroup differences' (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1241). Just as shared ethnic background did not mean that the SNCC were united in all aspects of their experience and socio-political perspective, Crenshaw argues for a more intersectional approach that acknowledges that identity – whilst an important aspect in shaping an individual's worldview – is not the sole determining factor when it comes to their personal political philosophy.

Although the Weathermen advocated for a broad cross-section of socio-political causes ranging from civil rights to feminism, the organisation has been routinely accused of incorporating identity politics at the core of its mission statement. Identity politics has been attributed as a driving cause for the escalation of the Weathermen's strategies of violent militancy: an organisation predominantly consisting of participants who were white, educated and middle-class, it has been suggested that the extremist tactics of Weatherman 'was motivated by a mixture of despair at the prospects for change and of guilt arising from members' acute

consciousness of their own white privilege' (Hodgdon, 2008, p. 144). Despite the almost exclusively Caucasian make-up of the Weathermen, much of the identity politics that the group engaged in was centred on providing a vanguard for other oppressed, minority populations. In *Prairie* Fire, a 1974 political statement issued by a later incarnation of the Weather Underground, the organisation makes clear that 'the development of guerrilla organisation and armed activity against the state is most advanced in the black community' and that 'the crises of the society provide the training grounds' for effective resistance (Weather Underground, 1987, p. 173). In *Prairie Fire*, the Weathermen identify American cities as the battleground of an urban warfare campaign, against using the language of contemporaneous insurgencies in Vietnam and Central America to characterise their own domestic struggle. From the initial formation of the Weatherman movement, identity politics played a significant role in guiding the group's ideology, as well as the methods employed in their campaign against the imperialist United States government.

In his history of America's radical underground, Burrough (2015) provides a comprehensive analysis of the formation of the Weathermen and attempts to place it within the broader context of activist culture in the 1960s and 1970s. It is Burrough's contention that, like most of the radical groups that were born in the 1960s, Weatherman was largely inspired by the 'foco theory' advanced by Debray (1967); in musing on the nature of a successful revolution, and informed by the experiences of Cuban revolutionary Che Guevara, Debray promoted the belief that 'small, fast-moving paramilitary groups can provide a focus (in Spanish, foco) for popular discontent against a sitting regime, and thereby lead a general insurrection' (Hang, 2013, p. 65). Burrough, quoting former Weatherman leader Mark Rudd, notes that the Weathermen saw their mission as 'a holy faith' and believed that they were 'the only white people prepared to engage in guerrilla warfare in the imperial homeland' (2015, pp. 184-185). Reference to the United States as 'the imperial homeland' is central to the Weatherman ideology, formed as it was amid the anti-Vietnam War movement that galvanised leftist protest across the country. To the Weathermen, the Vietnam War was another example of an American oligarchy profiting from conflict in the Third World (Varon, 2004). Indeed, the Weathermen saw their own domestic campaign against the United States government as analogous with the struggle of the Vietnamese against American imperialism — after its leadership met with North Vietnamese officials in Cuba in 1969, the Weathermen explicitly drew on the experience of the Vietnamese insurgency to inform the creation of a 'People's War' that drew on 'the support and active

involvement of the masses' to achieve success (Varon, 2004, p. 137). As is to be expected given its relatively unique place in the history of domestic terrorism in the United States of America, most scholarly constructions of the Weathermen are preoccupied with the group's focus on armed struggle; as such, gaps in the literature exist when it comes to a thorough analysis of Weatherman's group dynamics and the ways in which its objectives were informed by the tenets of identity politics.

Given its far more recent introduction into the socio-political discourse, it is unsurprising that there is considerably less literature available that analyses the alt-right in comparison to that which exists in relation to the Weathermen. Lyons (2017a) describes the term 'alt-right' as referring to the 'alternative right', a community of politically conservative outliers identified by white supremacist ideologue Richard Spencer in 2008. It took the better part of a decade for the term to enter into mainstream political discourse: Hawley (2017) claims that the alt-right first rose to global prominence during the 2016 election, and refers to a right-wing movement that rejects establishment conservative in favour of an isolationist, white nationalist socio-political philosophy. Indeed, white nationalism has increasingly played a role in the development of the alt-right as the movement has continued to establish itself as a political ideology. From an academic perspective, the alt-right draw a sense of legitimacy from the work of controversial scholars like evolutionary psychologist Kevin B. MacDonald, notorious for research on the Jewish community that have been roundly criticised as anti-Semitic (MacDonald, 1998). MacDonald's views on Jewish collectivism – widely considered to endorse the concept of a Zionist conspiracy – were credited by political scientist Abraham Miller as 'the philosophical and theoretical inspiration' for much of the anti-Semitic slogans and signs seen at the 2017 Unite the Right rally (Miller, 2018). MacDonald's influence on alt-right ideology is noted by Hawley (2019), who notes the movement's obsession with a philosophy dubbed 'race realism'. The concept of 'race realism' builds on MacDonald's belief that biological influences inherently motivate the behaviours of certain ethnic groups, and underpins an isolationist and anti-immigrant position adopted by members of the alt-right worldwide. It also underpins the work of Renaud Camus, who postulated that mass immigration would ultimately lead to a 'great replacement' in which Western culture would be gradually destroyed (Camus, 2011). Reference to the Great Replacement has taken on a mythic role in alt-right ideology, assuming a central role in a several manifestos released by perpetrators of mass shootings linked to the alt-right and its overarching principles.

Just as the left-wing new social movements of the mid-20th Century focused on changing cultural values rather than affecting political change directly, Nagle observes that the alt-right 'will continue to infiltrate mainstream US formal politics through culture' in an attempt to cultivate a groundswell of grassroots support that would essentially normalise its presence in the mainstream political discourse (2017, p. 52). It is widely considered that the election of Donald Trump to the presidency of the United States of America is reflective of this normalisation of the alt-right to a certain extent, due to the perception that there is a significant level of cross-over between alt-right ideology and the values of those who support Trump's anti-establishment agenda (Barkun, 2017). As a result, 'many Alt Rightists see themselves as the Trump coalition's political vanguard, taking hardline positions that pull Trump further to the right while enabling to look moderate by comparison' (Lyons, 2017b, p. 16); the concept of vanguardism was also central to the modus operandi of the Weathermen, furthering the argument that the alt-right serves a similar role in modern conservative politics that their radical counterparts played in the left-wing movements of previous generations. Phillip W. Gray (2018) supports this position, describing the alt-right as 'overlapping' with American left-wing politics in several ways. He argues that 'rather than a quirk of the 2016 electoral cycle' the alt-right will build on the foundations of nationalism and identity politics that it is has already established to 'increase in its importance as a "rightist" form of intersectionality' that has a persistent role in American political discourse into the future (Gray, 2018, p. 141).

Identity politics and ideological schism: the rise of the Weatherman

For both the Weathermen and the alt-right, it was an enthusiastic adoption of identity politics that would create the ideological schisms that would precipitate their formation. A desire to advocate for an oppressed population is central to the existence of activist groups that trade in identity politics. The transition from a traditional broad-coalition model of activism to a more clearly directed identity-oriented paradigm can be seen in the birth of the Weatherman movement at the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) National Convention held in Chicago in June 1969 (Burrough, 2015). An evolution of the long-standing socialist organisation the Student League for Industrial Democracy (SLID) established in 1960, SDS sought from the outset to expand its scope from the traditional labour-focused platform of its predecessor organisation; the Port Huron statement, released in 1962 and serving as SDS's

ideological manifesto, called for 'the establishment of a democracy of individual participation… [wherein] the individual share[s] in the social decisions determining the quality and direction of his life' (Miller, 1994, p. 14). While undoubtedly more broadly focused on achieving equality for oppressed populations in American society, the values underpinning the Port Huron statement nevertheless remained a clear reflection of the Marxist ideology that was typical of its previous incarnation as the SLID.

SDS's national convention in Chicago in June 1969 marked a turning point for the organisation that would see these core values held to ransom by a hard-line faction dedicated to identity politics, which would eventually become known as 'Weathermen' and, later, the Weather Underground. By the 1969 conference, a considerable faction had developed within SDS who were convinced that the organisation should be focused on combating American imperialism and institutional racism, rather than continuing to make appeals to the proletariat using the tired socialist mantra of class struggle (Sale, 1973). This faction, calling itself Revolutionary Youth Movement (RYM), exerted more influence over SDS than the traditionalist Progressive Labor faction by 1969, and used its power over the organisation to force a split in SDS over the issue of the organisation's support for black nationalism (Burrough, 2015). RYM leader Bernardine Dohrn announced on the conference's third day that her faction could no longer collaborate with Progressive Labor based on a singular ideological difference: their reluctance to become further involved in black nationalism based on their fundamental belief that it was a 'diversion from the all-important class struggle' (Barber, 2010, p. 12).

Using their strength of numbers RYM was able to have Progressive Labor expelled from SDS, effectively taking control of the group and 're-branding' itself as a more radical revolutionary front called 'Weatherman' (Burrough, 2015). It is clear that identity politics were at the forefront of the schism in SDS, and were the primary reason that the Weatherman faction was able to negotiate its way into a position of ideological power in the left-wing activist community. Had it not been for the basic concepts of identity politics entering into the mainstream of socio-political discourse, it is likely Progressive Labor would have had far more support for its tried-and-tested socialist philosophy. Identity politics was not a creation of RYM, yet this faction were able to capitalise on the growing appeal of New Left ideology to

obtain the support required within SDS to take control and use the organisation as a platform for a more radical agenda.

'Aggrieved whiteness' and the identity politics of the alt-right

It is somewhat ironic to consider that the issue of black nationalism played such a significant role in re-shaping the construction of SDS when so few members of the university-based organisation were from an African American background. Though ardent supporters of militant African American groups like the Black Panthers and the Black Liberation Army, the leadership group of the Weathermen were mostly university-educated, came from upper-middle class backgrounds and, importantly, were exclusively white (Vertigans, 2011). Whereas the Weathermen acted from a position of white privilege to campaign primarily for a marginalised African American population, the alt-right has taken a more purist approach to identity politics in the sense that it is a movement built predominantly on a sense of what Thompson and Thurston (2018) describe as 'aggrieved whiteness'. Under this paradigm of 'aggrieved whiteness' it is the white American that is perceived to be oppressed, threatened economically and morally by the influences of liberal values on issues from national security and immigration to feminism and globalism. Buchanan, credited with contributing to the rise of the alt-right with his book *Death of the West* (2001), acknowledges that it is the expansion of conservative focus that is most appealing about this new social movement. He claims that the appeal of the alt-right derives from 'the idea of economic nationalism, an end to globalism, putting America first in trade, securing our border, one nation, one people… this is a new and enlarged agenda' (Nagle, 2017, pp. 56-57). Buchanan's explanation of the alt-right's appeal correlates clearly with the concept of new social movements that defined left-wing politics in the 1960s. Rather than focused on affecting political change directly on individual issues, the alt-right provides a holistic worldview that its adherents can ascribe to; this overarching socio-political ideology is firmly based on the premise of an individual's identification as an 'aggrieved white person', once more reviving the identity politics that was so influential in previous generations.

A key distinction between the Weathermen and the alt-right derives from the varying levels of formality in each movement's management and leadership. While never seeking to become a

legitimate political force, Weatherman's origins as a faction of SDS were highlighted by the adoption of a formal command structure that is non-existent in the alt-right. Perhaps the most applicable equivalent to SDS in the alt-right's origin narrative is the Tea Party movement which in many ways served as a spiritual predecessor sharing many of the same anti-establishment values espoused by members of the alt-right. In contrast to SDS, however, the Tea Party movement has never been officialised in the sense that it has a clear leadership structure: instead, the Tea Party is led by charismatic political figures expressing anti-establishment sentiments promoting the virtues of limited government and deficit reduction (Zernike, 2010). As was the case with Progressive Labor and its class-oriented focus, the Tea Party movement is limited in scope to the extent that it could not be considered a fully-realised 'worldview' in the same sense that the alt-right could be; that said, its role as a soft-version of radical conservatism is analogous to that played by SDS in that it served as a precursor to radicalism albeit with an efficacy and appeal that is challenged by the influence of identity politics (Stein, 2016). Racialised constructions like that of 'aggrieved whiteness' go beyond identifying the problem with American society in the way that the Tea Party did. Instead, the alt-right is able to use these social constructions to diagnose the root causes of social problems, and provide solutions for these causes that are aligned with the holistic global perspective it has created.

Groupthink and self-criticism in building radical collectives

While the cultivation of influence is an important aspect for social movements attempting to control the ideological narrative, it is less important than the process of radicalisation that occurs when indoctrinating core members of the group. After the split in SDS and the RYM's re-branding into the Weathermen, the organisation's leadership group determined that it would be necessary to engage in purposeful strategies designed to weaken existing connections between members and their families; it was the belief of the Weathermen that loosening these bonds and breaking down personal barriers would 'toughen up' the group's mostly white, intellectual volunteers and transform them into an 'urban fighting force' (Burrough, 2015). To ensure that Weathermen recruits had made a commitment to the cause, they were also allocated to a 'collective' by the leadership; these collectives were positioned in locations around the United States of America, and essentially acted as self-contained cells for the Weathermen that operated with minimal oversight from the group's central committee (Varon, 2004). Creating a disconnect between a radical organisations membership and the norms of society-at-large is

a tactic typical in the foundation of terrorist organisations, and is particularly prevalent in groups whose objectives are unobtainable and engaging in violent action is widely perceived to be 'self-defeating' (Tsintsadze-Maass & Maass, 2014, p. 735). More than just fostering organisational unity, the separation process contributes to a sense of anomie in which an environment of normlessness allows the leaders of an organisation to reshape the worldview of its members in a way that would otherwise be considered extreme or deviant (Merton, 1968).

In order to achieve this, the Weathermen required its members to do more than just cut ties with the lives they had before joining the movement: the Smash Monogamy policy developed in the latter half of 1969 required romantic couples to separate, even if both were members of the Weathermen and living together in the same collective (Burrough, 2015). A short-lived addendum to the Smash Monogamy policy was the directive that members of a collective participate in sexual orgies that would serve the dual purpose of severing romantic bonds with greater finality, as well as contributing to the development of a groupthink mentality in an individual Weathermen unit (Thoburn, 2008). It was the official position of the Weatherman leadership that 'people who fuck together, fight together', a policy typified by the 'Wargasm' orgies held prior to political actions in an attempt to motivate group members to participate with greater enthusiasm and commitment (Mewshaw, 1984, p. 45). Essentially, it was the goal of the Weathermen to construct an environment in which a member's loyalty was exclusively to the group; this process of isolation inevitably creates an echo chamber in which an individual's only contact is with those holding the same views as them, allowing them both to regularly confirm the veracity of their perspective and become increasingly extreme in lieu of exposure to dissenting socio-political positions.

Whilst their anti-monogamy strategy created strain by purposefully dismantling personal relationships, the Weathermen's program of criticism/self-criticism has been labelled as the aspect of collective conditioning that took the most significant toll on members. Criticism/self-criticism, a strategy borrowed from Maoist China, was intended to foster a sense of emotional and psychological honesty, as well as further break down the barriers between members of the collective (Varon, 2004). These sessions, which often would stretch on for hours without pause, typically began with all members of a collective singling out one of their peers and outlining all of their perceived flaws; it would then fall on the individual to publically criticise their own

thoughts and behaviours, in an environment described by Varon as 'part political trial, part hazing, part shock therapy, part exorcism, and, in a word used by more than one member, part "brainwashing"' (2004, p. 59). Bill Ayers, an early Weatherman leader, referred to criticism/self-criticism sessions as a case of members 'tripping over one another to be exactly alike, following the sticky rules of congealed idealism' (Ayers, 2001, pp. 160-1); another former Weatherman, David Gilbert, claimed that the sessions were 'permeated by the dominant culture of competitive individualism… marred by efforts to pull people down in order to gain a higher rung in the hierarchy' (Gilbert, 2012, p. 124). It appears that instead of being an emotional unburdening activity, the criticism/self-criticism program had the effect of streamlining the group mentality. By formalising the public criticism of others, members were socialised to adhere closely to the collective norms of the group in order to avoid scrutiny. Just as the formation of collectives contributed to the creation of an echo chamber, criticism/self-criticism reiterated the importance of ideological unanimity within the Weathermen, and strengthened an individual's connection to the revolutionary purpose of the organisation.

Echo chambers of the alt-right in the online world

Even though the alt-right do not tend to live in collective communities in the same way that their counterparts in the Weathermen did, this does not mean that they are not subject to similar kinds of echo chambers that serve to reinforce their ideological positions. For the alt-right, these echo chambers typically come in the form of online forums either dedicated to an ultra-conservative worldview or otherwise co-opted by members of the alt-right community for these purposes (Malmgren, 2017). In a practical sense, it seems that the echo chambers established by the Weathermen and the alt-right differ considerably — while the Weathermen went to great lengths to isolate their members from support networks and sought to break down their resistance in a collective environment of co-ideologists, radicalised members of the alt-right experience a far softer, more passive approach wherein this process typically occurs in their own home via the medium of the internet. While not sharing the same apparent degree of intensity as the strategy used by the Weathermen – which had an immediate, tangible impact on participants – the tactics of isolation and radicalisation employed in the alt-right differ only by degree, rather than substance. Instead of forcing isolation as the Weathermen did, the alt-right fundamentally takes advantage of a vulnerable population that is already self-isolated. Participants in alt-right forums and associated online activity often do so individually, as a

means of finding a community that shares their own pre-existing views on issues like race, gender and politics (Nagle, 2017). Having already self-isolated, and in the process of actively using the internet to seek out similarly-minded individuals, the new alt-right member does not need to undergo the same type of deprogramming program that the Weathermen used in the 1960s and 1970s. Already primed to participate in the movement, the new alt-right member undergoes a slower process of increasing involvement in online forums that, over time, results in the same outcome of total isolation within the echo chamber.

To a certain extent, this version of the radical collective adopted by the alt-right is more pervasive and easier to access than those of the 1960s: if an individual has access to an internet connection, and the desire to do so, they are able to gain access to these online communities that exist with their own sets of social norms and values. Nagle argues that the accessibility of the online world has 'undoubtedly allowed fringe ideas and movements to grow rapidly in influence' (2017, p. 30). While it was necessary for the Weathermen to purposefully engage in re-conditioning of their members in order to construct a movement with its own set of internal norms and values, the alt-right has been able to create a fully formed subculture with internally consistent normative features without the same kind of intentional direction (Phillips & Milner, 2017). Forums dedicated to alt-right values on the internet are not venues where divergent socio-political opinions are welcome and, in fact, those expressing views contrary to the normative philosophy of the group are usually removed from the community either by informal means like trolling, or formal bans issued by moderators (Owen et al, 2017). In doing so, online forums contribute to the normalisation process of alt-right views by creating an echo chamber where dissent is prohibited in a manner not unlike that created in the collectives established by the Weathermen.

Members of alt-right forums hosted by popular websites like 4chan and Reddit have, to some degree, gone further than the Weathermen in constructing these echo chambers: more than superficially connecting over shared objectives and ideological perspectives, the online alt-right even uses its own language conventions to communicate with each other and shape the way that participants interpret their own reality (Nagle, 2017). In creating its own lexicon, the alt-right works to preclude participation from those that are not familiar with the minutiae of their philosophy. Adherents of the alt-right are able to communicate with each other using

terms that have been created as a shorthand for prejudicial or discriminatory rhetoric: popular terms like 'femoid' seek to dehumanise women, whereas words like 'cuck' draw on racialised connotations to insult those deemed by the alt-right to be weak or otherwise emasculated (Sonnad & Squirrell, 2017; Squirrell, 2017). The veritable dictionary of alt-right devised terminology works as more than just a way for members to show a sense of fraternity with each other; it also serves as a means of identifying interlopers in alt-right forums, allowing them to be targeted by 'true believers' (Malmgren, 2017).

While in some cases these interlopers might be left-wing activists seeking to infiltrate their political opposition, it is more common than not that these individuals are soft-proponents of the philosophy attempting to engage with the wider alt-right community. In situations such as this, the targeted hazing of new members of the alt-right is decidedly reflective of the criticism/self-criticism program of the Weathermen: in order to gain entry and be considered a true member of the ideological vanguard, a member must undergo a process of group criticism wherein they are forced to acknowledge their shortcomings and defend their right to join the movement (Hartzell, 2018). Surviving the criticism/self-criticism process fosters a greater level of investment in the group, forcing members to conform to the canons of alt-right philosophy or find themselves excluded from the community (Owen et al, 2017). By making the decision to actively conform to the normative values established in these echo chambers, members of the alt-right undergo a process of radicalisation that effectively separates them from mainstream society on a philosophical level, if not a physical one.

Disruption through direct action in the 'Days of Rage'

Fostering the creation of a subpopulation with its own internal norms and values is at the heart of the radicalisation process, and is an essential precursor to facilitating an organisation's transition from intellectual activism to a rawer, more physical form of direct action (Tsintsadze-Maass & Maass, 2014). Making the leap from non-violent protest to an overtly violent revolutionary activity is not an easy step for most organisations; as it was with the Weathermen in 1969, the adoption of a revolutionary strategy often results in a haemorrhaging of support from within the ranks of the non-radicalised that can prove fatal when it comes to the organisation's influence and survival as a socio-political force (Tilly, 2003). The failure of the

'Days of Rage' action held in Chicago from 8 October 1969 to 11 October 1969 has been widely attributed to the sudden shift to overtly violent tactics that was triggered by the RYM's *coup d'état* at the SDS conference held several months earlier. It was at this event that the RYM leadership – who would go on to become the core 'Weathermen' – devised the strategy for the Days of Rage: drawing on the faction's philosophical belief that 'the elections don't mean shit' and rather 'our power is in the street', it was the intention for the Days of Rage to act as a large-scale demonstration in which members of the activist community would join the Weathermen in several days of street-fighting and, particularly, violent engagements with Chicago police (Burrough, 2015).

Ultimately, the Days of Rage achieved little in terms of either tangible socio-political change or cultivating increased support for the Weathermen's revolutionary approach to activism. To a considerable extent, it was the very concept that these demonstrations would serve as little more than public street-fights that began to dismantle the broad-based coalition cultivated by SDS over a period of years. Leaders of the cross-sectional National Mobilisation Committee dismissed the projected violent outcomes of the Days of Rage as 'counterproductive' and refused to participate (Burrough, 2015); similarly, many of the more mainstream members of SDS rejected its own resolution to hold the Days of Rage after the Weathermen faction used an explosive to blow up a statue of a police officer in Chicago's Haymarket Square two days before the protests were due to commence (Jacobs, 1970). The bombing of Haymarket Square was intended as a symbolic strike against police in their role as 'agents of the state', yet was seen by moderate activists as further evidence that the Weathermen were rogue operators that were more intent on violent struggle against the state than they were in facilitating lasting socio-political change. Even the group used as a predicate for the Weathermen's takeover of SDS, the Black Panthers, were vehemently opposed to joining them in their Days of Rage. Chicago Panthers' leader Fred Hampton argued heatedly with Weatherman leaders not to proceed with the Days of Rage, and went on to distance himself from the protest action describing the Weathermen as 'anarchistic… Custeristic' (Beattie, 2004, p. 93). Losing the support of Hampton and the Black Panthers was more than a loss in terms of participation in the Days of Rage: it fundamentally undercut the Weathermen's philosophical stance espoused at the SDS conference several months earlier. In spite of having organised themselves around the principles of identity politics by asserting it was their primary focus to support the agenda of black nationalism, the Weathermen's pressing desire to exert violence against the state

overrode these organisation principles to the point that only the most hardened adherents of their movement were able to justify the Days of Rage in the broader context of the movement.

In practice, the Days of Rage proved to be a failure for the Weathermen. Far from the thousands that had been expected to participate nationwide, only a small cell of roughly 350 protesters were willing to face down the more than 2000 Chicago police officers gathered on the evening of 8 October 1969 (Burrough, 2015). Rioters attempted to storm the Drake Hotel in downtown Chicago, but were unable to gain access after being stopped at a police blockade. Over four days of protest actions, the Weathermen injured several police officers and caused $35 000 in property damage; conversely, the Days of Rage resulted in 287 members of the Weathermen group being arrested, including most of the organisation's leadership (Bingham, 2016, p. 131). The organisation was forced to regroup in the period after the Days of Rage. Part of this regrouping process involved a 'war council' held from 27 December 1969 until 31 December 1969 in Flint, Michigan, intended to determine the group's approach to radical activism going forward (Jacobs, 1997). It would be expected that, following the Black Panthers' public rejection of the Days of Rage, that the Weathermen would have sought to revisit their core commitment to supporting the cause of black nationalism.

If the Flint War Council showed anything, it was that the opposite was true and that the Weathermen were as committed to identity politics as ever before. The location of the meeting, a dance hall in the middle of a 'black ghetto', was specifically chosen for its symbolic value; dried blood stains from a shooting the night prior still remained in one corner of the room, a fact which Weatherman leader Mark Rudd claims made the room a 'fitting place' for the war council to be held (Rudd, 2009, pp. 185-93). Indeed, amongst the images of revolutionary leaders posted around the room as decoration, an entire section of the hall was covered in pictures of Fred Hampton, who had been killed by police in the months between the Days of Rage and the Flint War Council (Rudd, 2009). In yet another example of identity politics, the Weathermen sought to use Hampton's death as a cause to rally around, and as further proof of the police's brutal response to black activists; using Hampton to justify their revolutionary actions can only be perceived as an example of the Weathermen's identity politics, particularly considering that Hampton had been an outspoken critic of the organisation and no friend to its leadership while alive. While the Days of Rage had failed to achieve the objectives the

Weathermen had intended them to, it was the decision of the Flint War Council to dissolve SDS and continue the revolutionary struggle as a clandestine fugitive organisation dubbed 'the Weather Underground'; instead of focusing on more mass mobilisations like the Days of Rage, the group would limit involvement and focus on the development of a smaller revolutionary vanguard that was committed to a violent struggle against the state (Varon, 2004).

Charlottesville: Has the alt-right had its own Days of Rage?

While the Weathermen fell short in when it came to their goal of using the Days of Rage to unify left-wing radical groups behind their agenda, the Unite the Right rally held in Charlottesville, Virginia, in August 2017 could be perceived to have achieved this objective on the opposite end of the socio-political spectrum. Unlike the way in which the Days of Rage grew out of a motion passed at the SDS conference in 1969, the Unite the Right rally was from its beginnings a collective action organised by a wide diaspora of alt-right groups from neo-Nazi website *The Daily Stormer* to the National Policy Institute, and featured the involvement of organisations from the well-established Ku Klux Klan to the relatively more recent Fraternal Order of Alt-Knights (Peters & Besley, 2017). Though many of those participating in the Charlottesville event shared white nationalist views, the core factor binding this broad coalition together was an adherence to the ideological position of the alt-right, and the view that mainstream conservatism was no longer effective in defending true right-wing values (Atkinson, 2018). Nominally, the Unite the Right rally was held in protest of the removal of a Confederate statue by Charlottesville officials on the grounds of racial sensitivity in the wake of the racially motivated Charleston church shooting in mid-2015 (Atkinson, 2018); in reality, this cause was more of a representation of the broader grievances held by the alt-right, and a recognition of the centrality of racial identity as an organising principle in the movement.

When it came to the use of violence in the Days of Rage, the Weathermen were clear about the fact that they intended to engage in physical confrontations with police and counter-protesters. Whilst organisers of Unite the Right argued that their event was only ever intended to be a civil protest, there is reason to believe that this was not the case and that – as in the Days of Rage – the provocation of a physical confrontation was a central objective of participants. On the first day of the protest, 11 August 2017, Unite the Right protesters marched towards the University

of Virginia campus where a number of counter-protesters had gathered; as they marched, they chanted white nationalist slogans like 'white lives matter' and 'you will not replace us' (Stolberg & Rosenthal, 2017). Again, the specific use of these slogans highlights the fact that identity politics was perhaps even more central to the organisation of the alt-right coalition than it was to the Weathermen. Many of these marchers wore matching outfits comprising of khaki shorts and polo shirts, and carried tiki torches, in a further suggestion that a well-defined and purposeful group identity had been constructed around the alt-right by this point (Lopez, 2017). Members of this alt-right group encircled a small group of counter-protesters on 11 August, and a brawl ensued that was broken up by police; it appears that this confrontation was unprovoked, and was driven primarily by the Unite the Right marchers in a purposeful effort to engage in violence in a way not entirely dissimilar from the Weathermen in their Days of Rage (Lopez, 2017).

Conflict between Unite the Right and counter-protesters increased exponentially the following day, as around 500 alt-right demonstrators clashed with more than one thousand anti-fascist opponents on the morning of 12 August 2017, causing the City of Charlottesville to declare a state of emergency in an attempt to disperse the rioting taking place on the streets (Stolberg & Rosenthal, 2017). The conflict culminated in the death of one anti-fascist protester, killed when an alt-right demonstrator aligned to the group Vanguard America drove his car into a group of counter-protesters (Bromwich & Blinder, 2017). Given this fatality, and the highly-public demonstrations of violence in Charlottesville, the rally attracted a considerable level of condemnation with even alt-right sympathisers like former Breitbart News chairman Steve Bannon declaring ethno-nationalist protesters to be 'losers… a fringe element… a collection of clowns' (Levin, 2017); the rejection of Bannon, considered a key figure in promoting the alt-right through its infancy, serves as a crushing blow to the movement not unlike the way in which Fred Hampton's dismissal of the Weathermen fundamentally undermined its stated purpose to advance the cause of black nationalism. While the Unite the Right rally had the potential to terminally impact on the alt-right in the same way that the Days of Rage did for the Weathermen, a key distinction exists between the two events: whereas the Days of Rage attracted almost universal criticism, the Unite the Right movement was tacitly supported by United States President Donald Trump in several statements wherein he indicated that blame for the violence could be apportioned 'on many sides' and claimed that 'you had some very fine people on both sides… the press has treated them [Unite the Right] absolutely unfairly'

(Levin, 2017; Gray, 2017). By normalising the events of Charlottesville on a presidential level, the divisive impact of the Unite the Right rally was mitigated at a political level in a way that the Days of Rage never were; this is a key distinguishing factor between the two events, and one that could have ramifications in terms of the future survival of the alt-right movement. In essence, the normalisation of alt-right ideology is tied to the electoral success of Trump in many ways — it was Trump who was elected in a campaign that bought into alt-right ideas, and Trump who assembled a support team in the White House that was made up of a number of political theorists and policy-makers affiliated with the alt-right (Glueck, 2016). Even recently, over half of the way through his first term, Trump continues to feed into alt-right ideology, through both his policy decisions and informal comments, as in August 2019 when he retweeted a prominent alt-right conspiracy theory suggesting the Clinton family was responsible for murdering disgraced financier Jeffrey Epstein (Egan, 2019). Considering the case of the Weathermen, the possibility of the alt-right becoming an increasingly established part of American political culture is apparent. Despite being self-acknowledged domestic terrorists (or, in their own words, a 'guerrilla vanguard') throughout the 1960s and 1970s, many members of the Weathermen were gradually reintegrated into mainstream society after public furore over their actions had waned. Weathermen leaders like Bill Ayers and Bernadine Dohrn became preeminent academics, university professors and high-profile lawyers in spite of their violent, militant pasts (Swanson, 2001). Given this precedent, and the fact that many alt-right figures have already been legitimised in their official appointments by Trump, it is highly possible that the alt-right will continue to become further legitimised over time — particularly if Trump is endorsed by American voters with a second term as president.

Conclusion

Since first becoming a part of the socio-political discourse of new social movements in the mid-20th Century, the adoption of identity politics has played a dual role in uniting activist groups whilst at the same time dividing them from the ideological mainstream. Making the shift from traditional Marxist philosophy to the anti-imperialist identity politics that came into vogue in the late 1960s marked the beginning of the Weatherman movement. By dismantling the traditionalist structures of SDS and re-forming as a radical revolutionary unit, the Weathermen were able to construct its own group identity that contributed to its sharp descent into revolutionary violence (Burrough, 2015). Radicalisation of its membership both before the

Days of Rage and after was a key component of the new-found Weather ideology; while this program of radicalisation led to the formation of strong connections within the core Weatherman membership, it also acted to divide the far-left community and isolate Weatherman from its traditional base of supporters and allies. The fact that other violent radical groups like the Black Panthers sought to distance themselves from the Weathermen as a result of insurgent strategies like the Days of Rage highlights the ways in which the group's unorthodox approach made it less effective in galvanising public support for the revolutionary sentiment it intended to ferment (Murphey, 2015).

Lessons can be taken from the rapid rise and fall of the Weathermen, and applied to similarly radical groups that trade on identity politics. For the alt-right, the defence of white identity is a far more personal prospect than the advancement of black nationalism was for the Weathermen; nevertheless, many of the same radicalisation processes used by the Weathermen in a formal setting can be observed to be taking place in the online echo chambers frequented by the alt-right (Nagle, 2017). Self-separating from communities where dissenting views are expressed, supporters of the alt-right have constructed their own internal community norms that contribute to the perpetuation of a far-right worldview steeped in white nationalism and ethno-centrism (Hartzell, 2018). The formation of an alt-right community has led directly to the kind of radicalism that bubbled over in the Unite the Right rally: like the Days of Rage, the violence demonstrated in Charlottesville represented the transition from intellectual philosophising to a more proactive and revolutionary strategy.

It remains to be seen whether Unite the Right will mark the beginning of the end for the alt-right, as the Days of Rage did for the Weathermen. It is clear, however, that the alt-right has been built on the same foundation of identity politics that contributed to the ascendency of the Weathermen. More importantly, many of the methods used by the Weathermen have a significant amount in common with the processes of radicalisation that is developing in the alt-right — albeit in a contemporary, technologically-facilitated context. While acknowledging these points of comparison is interesting from a historical perspective, it also has the potential to inform and guide the ongoing communal approach to the alt-right. The opportunities presented by taking a historical perspective are two-fold: not only does understanding the methods of the Weatherman movement assist in understanding and preventing similar

radicalisation in the alt-right, cultivating an appreciation of why the Weatherman movement ultimately failed can also provide ideas that could be used to curtail the growth of the alt-right. If the contextual distinctions between the socio-political conditions of 1960s and 2010s can be accounted for, it is possible for the collapse of the Weatherman organisation to serve as a roadmap for policy-makers that highlights both tactics that worked in the past, and those that failed. By understanding the processes of radicalisation used by the Weathermen, and what led to the organisation's downfall, it may be possible to combat the alt-right more effectively and prevent the ongoing spread of the extremist agenda it promotes.

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