

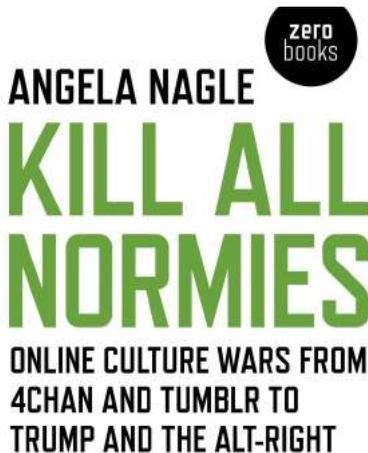
Review Essay

Revenge of the Nerds

Recidivist Masculinity, Identity Politics and the Online 'Culture Wars'

On the recent *Kill All Normies: Online culture wars from 4chan and Tumblr to Trump and the alt-right* by Angela Nagle, Zero Books, June 2017, £9.99

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A mere seven years ago media commentators, journalists and cultural anthropologists alike talked with optimism and unwarranted confidence of the coming utopia of networked global societies, and the emancipatory potential of the leaderless digital revolution. What has come to pass is a decidedly more amorphous morass of cultural, moral and ethical transgressions – facilitated and propagated by social media – which are governed by an all-encompassing and disquieting ideological indeterminacy. What we are confronted with in Angela Nagle's admirably forbearing study is, disregarding the obviously unpalatable and criminal, something in the manner of a vexing playground dispute. It is a world of maladjusted malcontents of diametrically opposing ideologies but seemingly analogous lives; a world of perpetual adolescence, of misattributed and misinterpreted knowledge, misdirected intellectual energy, ineffectual posturing devoid of any political content, irony without humour,

and tedious transgressive behaviour by peevishly dull obsessives who are prone to tantrums. That serious critical attention is now given to the discussion of such topics, and more so that such focus has become highly necessary, speaks to the moronic and infantile depths to which culture in our late capitalist digital age has descended. Thus far it appears that information technologies, the internet, social media, and so called 'networked societies' – far from liberating and emancipating them – have overwhelmingly made people more annoying, more stupid and more miserable.

As an initial caveat it is necessary to state that Nagle's work – though incisive and original in its scope – is lacking a coherent theoretical framework, in addition to the



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standard methodologies expected of a work of anthropological investigation. However, the subject matter itself, which exists on a level of absurdity and frivolousness perhaps rightly dismissed as inconsequential in previous years, almost demands the flippancy and lack of rigour of Nagle's approach – and in this sense, it is extremely apt. The indeterminacy of the subject matter, in short, is captured well (whether intentionally or not) by the author's somewhat chaotic prose and analysis. Despite its weaknesses, Nagle's can be regarded as the first work to initiate an engagement with the newly emerging digital ideologies – and the first work which departs from the facile utopianism which pervades discussions of digital culture to instead explore its darker and more harmful consequences.

The roots of the recent resurgence of right-wing digital populism are to be found in the 4chan internet forum. The forum was once lionised by progressive columnists and cyber utopians in the wake of such events as the Arab Spring and the Occupy Wall Street movement as the perfect example of a leaderless digital network – a potential harbinger of radical social and political change. Originally a platform for sharing Japanese anime, the site (which has 750 million page views a month) transitioned into a forum for pranks, memes and obscene images – and gave birth to the Anonymous hacker collective. Nagle notes that despite uncritical progressive praise for the site in the early 2010s, from its very outset 4chan was 'deeply and shockingly misogynistic' while also openly self-mocking of the nerdy 'beta' males who frequented it. The site's aesthetic and cultural referents are war based video-games, David Fincher's *Fight Club* and the Wachowskis brothers *The Matrix*. Curiously unexamined by Nagle is the interesting fact that the creators of *The Matrix* and its sequels – apparently a gold standard of the misogynistic aesthetic culture of 4chan, providing many of its idiomatic phrases – no longer identify as Larry and Andy, but Lana and Lilly. They are thus presumably more amenable to what Nagle considers to be 4chan's ideological and cultural opposite: the blogging site Tumblr. Nagle argues that the anonymity of 4chan aided its evolution into an environment of dark, transgressive thought; from incestuous desires to suicidal and murderous feelings; images of violence, shocking pornography, and of course racism and misogyny. All of this comes through the lens of 'nerd' culture; in-jokes based on role playing computer games such as *World of Warcraft*, comic books and the creation of countless ironic memes. The site's happenings and interventions unsurprisingly took the form of trolling pranks, which, for the most part light-hearted, increasingly assumed more sinister motives. This initial incarnation of the site was proud of its degeneracy and moral turpitude but decidedly apolitical. What was it then that turned 4channers from nihilistically perverse basement dwelling jokers into anti-egalitarian far-right race-baiters with a penchant for a clash of civilisations rhetoric, and a propensity to express these desires through the avatar of a cartoon frog? The watershed moment came with the 'GamerGate' scandal in 2014, and here we can easily observe Nagle's analytical patience wearing thin. The name derives from a controversy surrounding issues of sexism and progressivism in the Gaming industry, and the harassment campaign coordinated around the hashtag #GamerGate.

The exact details of this unduly famous cause célèbre will be hazy for anyone who is uninitiated or indeed uninterested in video games or the culture surrounding them – but Nagle attempts to give a concise account of what transpired, and a response characterised by levels of emotion 'more fitting for a response to a genocide' (Nagle

2017, 19). This characterisation does not, however, even come close to adequately describing the chaotic inanity of the scandal and its fallout. The controversy centres on the creation of a relatively rudimentary and lacklustre text-based computer game known as *Depression Quest* by the developer Zoe Quinn. The game was received very favourably by the gaming media; a reception considered disproportionate to its quality by a sizeable majority of male gaming fans. Their opprobrium appeared to be grounded in the proposition that Quinn's text heavy game was not, in fact, a game – indeed it was referred to by one reviewer as an 'anti-game' – in failing to provide the player with an interesting and entertaining experience. *Depression Quest* is instead a game which features, according to Nagle, 'many of the fragility and mental health fetishizing characteristics of the kind of feminism which has emerged online in recent years' (Nagle 2017, 21). The game itself functioned, Nagle asserts, as a parody of many of the characteristics which 4chan's male gamers perceived in their so called 'social justice warrior' opposites. However, something is missing in this analysis.

There is undoubtedly a gendered conflict at play between the naïve insistence upon an uncomplicated *jouissance* on the part of male gamers – and the maladroit *écriture féminine* of Quinn's game. Yet this perhaps obscures some of the more straightforwardly visceral features of the scandal. After *Depression Quest* was released, Quinn's ex-boyfriend, a computer programmer named Eron Gjoni, published a lengthy blog post detailing a litany of infidelities and instances of manipulative behaviour that he claimed to have experienced during their relationship. This included several sexual relationships with video game journalists. Once this blog post was discovered by 4chan, its users began to mobilise against the perception of a grand conspiracy – one in which the video games media were colluding with feminists with the ultimate nefarious aim of making video games more boring. This over-the-top response consisted of a maelstrom of abuse, 'doxxing', revenge porn, rape and death threats being unleashed on Quinn and her supporters. But what Nagle does not adequately address in her section on Gamergate is the aggrieved identification which these 4chan trolls felt with the spurned Gjoni (almost one of their own, after all), and his emotive tale of allegedly being cheated on, sexually humiliated and used in an emotionally abusive way by Quinn. Given the demographic which these men fall into, it was a narrative of emasculating and cruel treatment which many were no doubt personally familiar with. Humiliation factors heavily in their collective overreaction.

Indeed, if Gamergate was the event which precipitated the rise of the Alt-Right, resulting from the amalgamation of 4chan's nihilistic trolling culture with more traditionally neo-fascist preoccupations, its origins are as libidinal as they are political. In this particular vein, Nagle dedicates one chapter to the online culture of pick-up artistry which she views as a gateway to the Alt-right. On these sites, sexually frustrated men are taught to approach the seduction of women in much the same way as one would approach the hacking of a computer system – a methodology that many of these men perhaps excel in. According to Nagle, this represents the first step in the dehumanising of female autonomy that leads to the virulent misogyny of the Alt-Right. This chapter is, like another chapter on the Men's Right's Movement, a tad unconvincing and dilutes her analysis by assuming a uniformity that doesn't exist. Even a cursory examination of these movements reveals a heterogeneity of ideological allegiances, which, in fact, do not act merely as different appendages to the Alt-Right body politic. For instance, the type

of Pick-up Artist culture she describes has obviously been around for quite some time; and was most memorably satirised in the character of Tom Cruise's hilariously manic Frank T. J. Mackey in Paul Thomas Anderson's *Magnolia* (1999). The platform may have changed from function suites in hotels to internet forums, but I suspect that the snake-oil strategies and 'lessons' are quite timeless.

The notion that this virulent form of right-wing digital populism is distinct from the reactionary or even conservative movements of the past is a recurring thesis in Nagle's book. She views the transgressive ironic culture which surrounds 4chan as having more in common with the dismantling of moral certainties, traditional familial institutions and the opening of discourses on sexuality unleashed in the wake of the 1960s counterculture. The historical and cultural origins she ascribes to this transgressive impulse are wide-ranging, yet at the same time seem woefully incomplete and lacking focus. Everything from De Sade, Nietzsche, Georges Bataille, Michel Foucault and R.D. Laing to the Sex pistols and Siouxië Sioux are thrown in for good measure. Absent, however, is a fuller examination of the comparable and equivalent transgressive elements of historical fascist and right wing populist movements. These include for instance the pornographic and often sexually explicit anti-Semitic caricatures of Julius Streicher's newspaper *Der Stürmer*, which enjoyed a weekly circulation of 450,000 at its peak. Or the distinctive form of the Nazi SS uniform produced by Hugo Boss and designed by the artist and reserve officer Karl Diebitsch – reportedly in homage to the S&M bondage clubs he is thought to have frequented in Weimar Berlin. Nazi ideology was deeply enmeshed in cultural transgressions against the dominant morals and mores of the German Christian society. This took many forms; from the little known interest in extreme and unusual sexual practises of various party members to their well-known interests in esotericism and eastern religions – in addition to other pursuits such as vegetarianism, nudism, numerology, Theosophy, Anthroposophy, bio-dynamic agriculture, astrology, homeopathy, ley lines, and various forms of new-age spirituality and mysticism. Many of these latter pursuits are now more readily associated with the liberal cosmopolitan left in contemporary western societies; even in their time – the Nazis were referred to as 'Armed Bohemians'. Indeed, as the English critic, Jonathan Meades, once remarked: 'at the Heart of Nazism were hippies in uniforms' (Meades 1994).

Nor is there any allusion in Nagle's work to the significant number of young men that were attracted to other, earlier reactionary movements such as Charles Maurras's *Action française*. After a period of national and military humiliation following the Franco-Prussian War, the movement and its accompanying journal espoused a message of national renewal based on a peculiarly anti-establishment traditionalism. Evidently, this is something which still holds sway among the economically disenfranchised working class youth of the northern hinterlands of contemporary France, in a country blighted by unemployment, economic stagnation, societal decay and terrorism. *Action française* was founded in the wake of the Dreyfus Affair by Catholic nationalists who objected to the presence of Jews in their military; the Third Republic's *Gamergate*, if you will. In addition, there are the transgressive elements of fascist modernities within avant-garde art and literature; from the works of Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, Julius Evola, Louis-Ferdinand Céline, Robert Brasillach, Pierre Drieu La Rochelle and, to a lesser extent, Wyndham Lewis. Julius Evola, something of a dilettante, made the not uncommon

transition from a Dadaist poet to a fascist ideologue – taking in Buddhism, paganism, orientalism, occultism, new age esotericism, and a somewhat comically baroque misogyny and an attendant (and predictable) interest in sadomasochism. Incidentally, it was a line of thinking inspired in large part by the self-hating Jewish anti-Semitic philosopher and misogynist Otto Weininger – who, disregarding his early suicide and his purported celibacy, was something of a 19th century Milo Yiannopoulos. It is interesting to note that Evola is cited as an inspiration by the former US presidential advisor and bargain basement demagogue Steve Bannon. The generation of writers and artists which included Evola had experienced the traumatic and technologically induced brutality of the First World War – which perhaps goes some way to understanding, while not excusing, their eventual ideological paths. Wyndham Lewis, who fought as an artillery officer in the war, and was later an official war artist, captured this sense of post-war crisis in his *Art of Being Ruled*:

[D]uring the war no doubt men too were saying to themselves subconsciously that at last, beyond any doubt, the game was not worth the candle: that the Heroic Age was nothing to this: that the ‘kiss’ they would receive ‘when they came back again,’ if they ever did, did not make them look any less foolish as ‘heroes’, but more so; and that the institution of manhood had in some way overreached itself or got into the caricatural stage (Lewis 1926, 279).

However, the lost boys of 4chan and the ‘Alt-Right’ can count a dispute over a video game as their generation’s watershed moment. In common with past historical examples, the contemporary re-emergence of these putatively destructive masculine impulses has seemingly occurred when the totemic power of the institution of manhood was brought into question. These impulses, however, are rarely coherent or uniform – and are more often than not expressions of powerlessness and symbolic impotence. It is thus masculinity as recidivist criminality – fully aware of its self-destructiveness but temperamentally incapable of acting differently. Hence, the conclusion that we are confronting an entirely new problem is a simplistic inference, one which is easy to make given the unfamiliar technological paradigm. Yet the notion, rather widespread these days, that there exists a pervasive and insurmountable culture of ‘toxic masculinity’ is questionable at best. This has hardly been the first, nor do I suspect the last, crisis of masculinity – though it is undoubtedly one of the least sympathetic. Finally, conspicuously absent in Nagle’s counter-intuitively occidental analysis, is the highly relevant discussion of outcast and excluded young men of immigrant backgrounds, often petty criminals, radicalised online by a potent mixture of Salafist religious fundamentalism and computer game fantasies of guns, taboo-breaking violence and sexual excesses, abandoning their home countries and families to fight for a mind-bogglingly barbaric ‘caliphate’ in Syria and Iraq.

What is apparent within all of these disparate accounts of frustrated and impotent masculinities is the alienation and inadequacy inculcated by our present technological society – one that sits uncomfortably with the dominant Promethean narrative of emancipatory advancement. It is a condition which has become susceptible to the ridiculous posturing and opportunistic entreaties of right-wing zealots and religious fundamentalists alike – a condition which furthermore, much like the fascist populisms of the past, is replete with a tragic gullibility: one that will ultimately be disappointed.

To imply, however, which Nagle to some extent does, that this incongruent collection of culturally alienated males is solely responsible for the absurd Trumpian reality in which we now find ourselves fails to give an account of the full picture. It was after all the voters of America's de-industrialised rust-belt, who voted enthusiastically for America's first black president in 2008 and 2012, which tipped the balance in Trump's favour – and their own narrative is one of the return of the repressed working class, and thus also of the various failures of the contemporary progressive liberal left.

'Everything that was once directly lived has receded into representation', Guy Debord wrote in his seminal 1967 work *La société du spectacle* (Debord 1967, 7). With characteristic bravado, he once described his work as the most important of the twentieth century. In 1994, three years after the internet went public, Debord shot himself – perhaps in despair at the reified world which he had so accurately predicted: a victim of the spectacular society. But Debord was also a victim of the de-radicalisation of his thought, the transmutation of ideas meant to inspire a radical political response into bourgeois subjectivity and academic poses sanitized of their original intent. The prolific left-wing critic Mark Fisher also took his own life in early 2017. He too was a victim, and in many ways he was also betrayed, perhaps ironically, by a left which has become singularly obsessed with the notion of victimhood. Fisher is the tragic hero at the heart of Nagle's book, a ghostly presence whose life and eventual death is deployed as a stark warning against the emergent modes of progressive liberal politics which have facilitated and abetted the rise of the 'Alt-Right'. Tangentially, and unacknowledged by Nagle, Mark Fisher had some contact with one of the shadowy ideologues of a branch of the 'Alt-Right' – the ostensibly more intellectual right-wing accelerationist philosophy of Neo-Reactionism and the Dark Enlightenment conceived of by the English academic Nick Land. Land was a highly idiosyncratic scholar of George Bataille and director of the Cybernetic Culture Research Unit at The University of Warwick, which Fisher co-founded as a doctoral student. Since his resignation from academia, Land appears to have gone native; resident in Shanghai – with rare public appearances – writing mainly for his blog 'Xeno Systems.'

Nagle's analysis of contemporary online progressive liberalism denounces an increasingly regressive identity focused but politically impotent movement. Identity has, according to Walter Benn Michaels, surpassed economic equality as the left's central organizing principle (Michaels 2010). This shift, Nagle argues, has 'reached its most absurd apotheosis with a politics based on the minutia and gradations of rapidly proliferating identities, and the emotional injuries of systematic cultural prejudices' (Nagle 2017, 69). 'Symbolic representative diversity and recognition became its goals', she continues, 'it admonished transgressors for 'erasing my identity' and urged white/straight/male/cis people to "listen and believe"' (Nagle 2017, 70). Furthermore, the identitarian liberal left is, as Nagle notes, pathologically obsessed with a 'cult of suffering, weakness and vulnerability' (Nagle 2017, 69), often openly laying claim to a compendium of disabilities which are 'psychological in origin or are unrecognized by modern medicine.' Nagle also notes that in online spaces such as the blogging site Tumblr, young women who self-identify as 'radical intersectional feminists' have imbued ideas of 'under-recognized, undiagnosed or un-diagnosable illness' (Nagle, 2017, 74), with a quasi-political zeal. She also enumerates, not without a hint of mocking derision, an extensive array of different 'genders' which Tumblr users lay claim to within their

highly insular discourse. Here Nagle writes with a sense of incredulity which is surely shared by many slightly older feminists of her generation, one which is astonishingly only separated by a few years, but nonetheless remains at odds with the dichotomies extant within Fourth Wave Feminism; from its insistence on the ‘cult of suffering’ and its over-reliance on a ‘clicktivism’ of questionable efficacy to its widespread, hostile internecine atmosphere of one-upmanship. Equally alienating, as Nagle recounts, are the wrong-headed policies of trigger warnings and the now infamous no-platforming of earlier generations of prominent feminists and gay rights activists perceived to be opposed to increasingly stringent, but constantly changing, central doctrines. As these telling occurrences of self-cannibalising conflict suggest, it would be erroneous to presume that the Munchausean ‘victims’ of this identitarian left are incapable of a febrile viciousness of their own, albeit one that does not quite match up to the more masculinised violent rhetoric of their right-wing counterparts. When Mark Fisher wrote his critique of the emergence of this liberal leftist identity discourse, which he chose to call the ‘Vampire Castle’, he already pre-empted the response he would receive:

The danger in attacking the Vampires’ Castle is that it can look as if – and it will do everything it can to reinforce this thought – that one is also attacking the struggles against racism, sexism, heterosexism. But, far from being the only legitimate expression of such struggles, the Vampires’ Castle is best understood as a bourgeois-liberal perversion and appropriation of the energy of these movements. The Vampires’ Castle was born the moment when the struggle not to be defined by identitarian categories became the quest to have ‘identities’ recognised by a bourgeois big Other (Fisher 2013).

The response to what was a very balanced and well-grounded critical article was such that Fisher permanently quit Twitter. The most purportedly nuanced of the criticism hinged on the fact of Fisher being a white heterosexual male, and thus a winner in the privilege lottery, the execrable and detestable pyramidion of the identity hierarchy – someone incapable of even attempting to speak on these issues. Fisher came from a working class background and spent the majority of his academic career teaching in Further Education colleges – institutions in Britain which remain overwhelmingly working class and cater to young people who for various reasons, such as social exclusion and poverty, have been failed by the formal education system. Fisher wrote in his work *Capitalist Realism* that, as such institutions were removed from public control and became privatised, these places provided the best examples of how an increasingly sclerotic late capitalist society was failing its young people. ‘Education’, he wrote, ‘far from being in some ivory tower safely inured from the “real world,” is the engine room of the reproduction of social reality, directly confronting the inconsistencies of the capitalist social field.’ He continued, recalling his role as a teacher in these institutions:

With families buckling under the pressure of a capitalism which requires both parents to work, teachers are now increasingly required to act as surrogate parents, instilling the most basic behavioural protocols in students and providing pastoral and emotional support for teenagers who are in some cases only minimally socialized (Fisher 2009, 26).

He also noted an inability among his students to demonstrate basic literacy skills, to maintain concentration on rudimentary comprehension tasks – of how technology, social media and various other forms of passive and active consumerism entirely monopolised their attention. They came across as almost physiologically incapable of even the most basic intellectual pursuits – and were politically disengaged, despite their situation under neoliberalism being incomparably worse than their more politically active counterparts in continental Europe. Such a condition derived not from apathy nor cynicism, Fisher argued, but from a ‘reflexive impotence’ – the knowledge that things are bad, but accompanied by a conviction that it is impossible to change them. Furthermore, most were afflicted with some form of acute psychological distress. Such insights were highly astute, and the irony is that they continue to have relevance for many of those same people who excoriated Fisher online, simply because of factors which he had no control over.

As someone who is not white, but who grew up in a country which is 96% white, and in white working class communities – I must admit to an inherent suspicion towards the notion of ‘white privilege.’ To be more specific, I am suspicious of any discussion of privilege that is not also heavily mediated by social and economic class – which despite attempts to displace them, retain their central importance within cultural and political discourses. Fisher defined putatively leftist identity politics as modes of bourgeois subjectivity that have contaminated the cause of progressive politics. Some practitioners of such politics have a vested interest in deflecting attention from the tangible material privilege which their class and economic origins have conferred on them and enjoy a sense of solidarity with oppressed and exploited groups which is both unearned and inauthentic. Two polarising figures on both sides of the ideological divide, who in their different ways are deeply engaged in the online ‘culture wars,’ are Laurie Penny and Milo Yiannopoulos. A cursory examination of their background is telling: both are privately educated English journalists from middle-class backgrounds whose writing thrives on the production controversy. They also appear to be friends, though admittedly Penny appears to be in denial about this. They come from a class which overwhelmingly dominates academia, the media, contemporary art and the wider culture industry – and is unlikely to relinquish this control in the near future. Indeed, neither has shown more than an ephemeral interest in discussing class politics. Penny, even though she started her journalistic career for the socialist newspaper *The Morning Star* and is an editor of *The New Statesman*, only pays obligatory, transitory lip service to class politics in her various columns on intersectional issues. The majority of writings are laden with references to every single conceivable form of the radical pose, alternative interest or passing fad, and are characterised by a level of tedious self-reflexivity that borders on the parodic. Yiannopolous (perhaps more honest in his role as a charlatan) once created a college fund for white working class men and subsequently defrauded it.

Identity politics, as Fisher correctly observed, is a constantly evolving and proliferating narrative of grievance which serves only to obfuscate and distract, to monopolise energies and intellectual resources that could be deployed against the violent economic exploitation and extreme inequality that continues to be inflicted upon our societies. What drives this narrative forward, its appropriately Bergsonian *Élan vital*, is guilt. It is a very specific type of guilt, which Fisher noted was a combination of ‘a priest’s desire to excommunicate and condemn, an academic-pedant’s desire to be the first to be seen to

spot a mistake, and a hipster's desire to be one of the in-crowd' (Fisher, 2013). 'Rather than seek a world in which everyone achieves freedom from identitarian classifications', he noted that this movement which seemingly struggles against racism and sexism, seeks only 'to corral people back into identi-camps, where they are forever defined in the terms set by dominant power, crippled by self-consciousness and isolated by a logic of solipsism which insists that we cannot understand one another unless we belong to the same identity group (Fisher 2013).' The absurdity of this logic was on full display two years ago, when a group of minority Yale University students angrily confronted the medical sociologist Nicholas Christakis, the warden of their dorm house, about an e-mail sent by his wife Erika, and himself, to students. The couple advised against injunctions prohibiting culturally insensitive Halloween costumes – and in favour of confronting the wearer of such costumes by 'telling them you are offended.' 'Free speech and the ability to tolerate offense', they maintained, 'are the hallmarks of a free and open society' (Christakis 2015). 'American universities were once a safe space not only for maturation but also for a certain regressive, or even transgressive, experience,' the e-mail stated. 'Increasingly, it seems, they have become places of censure and prohibition (Christakis 2015).' The uncomfortable confrontation was captured on video. He attempts to engage in dialogue with the histrionic crowd, who in turn spontaneously burst into tears and scream when he refuses to apologise for what was merely an earnest intellectual challenge. Christakis, who worked for years as a hospice doctor in the most deprived areas of Chicago, makes futile pleas for dialogue on the basis of common humanity; the students, unwilling to accept anything but an unqualified apology, and insisting that his job is to provide them with a 'safe space', merely respond that he cannot understand their experience because he is white.

Such are the impasses, both within the 'Alt-Right' and the identitarian left, that we find ourselves in within the online 'Culture Wars' which Nagle attempts to give an account of. It is a digital landscape dominated by two highly vocal and comparably intransigent groups of youth, who hold illusions of power, but are both hopelessly adrift within the contradictory and rapidly shifting chaos of our current societies, cut off from the political struggles of the past, vulnerable to unprecedented levels of precarity and economic exploitation, but without a coherent goal in mind nor any discernible political program to rally behind.

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