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Angela Nagle, Kill All Normies

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Today I review Angela Nagle's book 'Kill All Normies: Online Culture Wars From 4Chan and Tumblr to Trump and the Alt-Right' - <https://amzn.to/2XgBGg1>

Here is the article on Walter White as Nietzschean hero that I mentioned: <https://americanaffairsjournal.org/2018/08/breaking-bad-walter-white-as-nietzschean-hero/>. Here is the Slate Star Codex post, 'The Ideology is Not the Movement': <https://slatestarcodex.com/2016/04/04/the-ideology-is-not-the-movement/>.

My blog for my podcasts and videos is found here: <https://adversariapodcast.com/>.

If you have any questions, you can leave them on my Curious Cat account: <https://curiouscat.me/zugzwanged>.

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Transcript

Welcome back. It's been some time since the last did so, so I thought I'd review a book today. Today's book is Angela Nagle, Kill All Normies Online Culture Wars from 4chan and Tumblr to Trump and the Alt-Right.

And within this book, she's discussing the rise of a particular sort of culture online, very cynical, reactive, a culture of irony, parody, mocking, trolling, and a particular sort of detached humor. So she gives the example of the movement from Kony 2012, that movement that was seeking to displace and overturn a warlord in Africa, to Harambee

and the response to the guerrilla that was shot after having the child. This is something that she sees rising in response, in part, to a humorless mainstream virtue signaling and PC policing culture.

So a culture that is very much about closing down different toxic or problematic movements, and that's this movement that has risen in response to it. It's very hard to discern what is real and sincere and what has merely been done for trolling purposes or for the lulz. Interpretation is constantly frustrated by the cynical irony and detachment, and so it's very difficult to understand to what extent, for instance, people genuinely hold Nazi sentiments or to what extent they're just saying things to provoke others.

Now she sees some of the origins of this movement in the celebration of leaderless digital movements. So things like Anonymous, a few years ago, you'd have a lot of news about Anonymous, and Anonymous was seen to be this primarily left libertarian movement, and you'd have the symbol of the Guy Fawkes mask, and you still have that being worn today, but it's a symbol that she describes as having politically fungible sensibilities. And so it can go in any direction.

It can play for the right, it can play for the left. You just do not know what side it's on. You're advocating for a particular sort of culture, but that culture can play in surprising ways.

So she talks about the inconsistency and inconsistency and incoherence of Anonymous as a movement, where it would stand for different sorts of things, and it wasn't entirely clear what side it fell down on. It was a chaotic movement and diffuse, and this larger movement contains everything from Pepe memesters to things like Gamer Gators to characters like Milo Yiannopoulos, pick-up artists, men's rights activists, 4channers, and a lot of other things like this. And one of the common themes that she sees are a sense of anti-political correctness and aggrieved masculinity, and these are very much things that express themselves in an especially misogynistic and anti-feminist tendency.

So you see, for instance, Gamer Gators originally arising around ethics in game journalism and fighting feminist challenges to their culture. People like Anita Sarkeesian, characters like that who were pointing out problematic aspects of gaming culture and the games that maintained images of women that were inappropriate and things like that. She discusses in one of the more interesting sections a celebration of transgression and the aesthetics of the counterculture that traditionally is associated with the left.

So we think about transgression and we think about the counterculture and we tend to associate that with 60s, 70s onwards. The left developing a particular sort of aesthetic and movement that pushes against the mainstream and celebrates a subculture and opposition to norms and that sort of thing and breaks taboos. But, as she points out, there is absolutely no reason why that cannot be appropriated by the right and that this is just what has happened.

So the taboo-breaking culture of 4chan and other movements, they're highly amoral, they're deeply hostile to women and minorities and they reject traditional norms upheld by conservatives and Christians. So a good example of this is a character like Milo Yiannopoulos. And in this respect the book does seem a bit dated.

Milo's star has considerably fallen. But he's a figure who represents libertinism, individualism, bourgeois bohemianism, postmodernism, irony and ultimately nihilism. That's her description.

And he's very much someone who celebrates misogyny for laughs and anti-feminism for laughs, drugs, sexuality, these sorts of things. That's the sort of character he is. She writes, The rise of Milo, Trump and the alt-right are not evidence of the return of the conservatism, but instead of the absolute hegemony of the culture of non-conformism, self-expression, transgression and irreverence for its own sake.

An aesthetic that suits those who believe in nothing but the liberation of the individual and the id, whether they're on the left or the right. The principle-free idea of counterculture did not go away. It has just become the style of the new right.

She describes an alt-right movement as the bridge between the more obscure alt-right movement and the mainstream support of Trump. And so this new alt-right movement, which someone like Milo would be an example of, Breitbart, things like that, these were very adept at using tactics and methods of cultural destabilisation and changing of cultural norms and consensus in ways that were traditionally associated with the left and with figures like, for instance, Saul Alinsky and others. They created and mobilised a vast and very diffuse internet culture.

So everything from political incorrect boards on 4chan to right-wing blogs that would be circulated on Facebook links, and lots of YouTube bloggers, sites like Breitbart, projects like the Rebel Media. And these proved a strategic match both for the liberal and left-wing equivalents and also for what we might think of as the lumbering dinosaurs of the old media. If you look at the old media, they have not been successful in outwitting this.

They're just not as adept in this sort of culture. They don't have the cool and the hip of the subculture that the right has in these sorts of quarters. She discusses the way that politics has increasingly been reduced to a spectacle of a culture war and that the presidential race between Hillary and Trump is a great example of this.

It's a struggle between traditional conservative and neoconservative politics as well, a struggle against that. So the old right is not just a return of the old right sorts of politics. It's a new transgressive right that's associated with a particular attack upon traditional conservatives, we're calling them cuck-servitives and things like that.

They're those who have rolled over and just given in to the left and its demands. And

they fail to stand up for country, they fail to stand up for their principles, they fail to stand up for their movement. And the new right wing, this transgressive right wing, is highly literate in modern media, digital culture, and the dynamics of counterculture.

It's not a movement that is just depending upon old methods. They're highly innovative and they're people who are very organized and able to connect in new ways. And they understand their opponents a great deal better than their opponents understand them.

This alt-right movement has developed in concert and in direct reaction against a movement on the other side. So this is one of the areas where I'm impressed with Nagel's account, that she recognizes how these two things interplay, that it's not just a matter of this alt-right movement arising independently. No, these two movements are arising in concert with each other.

And on the left, you have identity politics culture that celebrated anti-male. This is her words, anti-male, anti-white, anti-straight and anti-cis rhetoric. And it's focused upon ever more obscure, boutique and bespoke identities.

And it talks about intersectionality, safe spaces, trigger warnings, and ever more subtle forms of oppression. And she talks about this as a culture of suffering, weakness, self-flagellation, vulnerability, and these sorts of things that, and it's no more, it's no less important for understanding the current situation than its right wing equivalent. And she observes just how vicious and vindictive this culture is.

Her quote of Mark Fisher's understanding of the movement is particularly helpful. She writes, The strangest feature of this online call-out culture was this mixture of performative vulnerability, self-righteous wokeness and bullying. The online dynamics of this call-out culture were brilliantly described by Mark Fisher as driven by 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.

I would add to this that the key driving force behind it is about creating scarcity in an environment in which virtue is the currency that can make or break the career or social success of an online user in this milieu. The counterforce of which was the anonymous underworld from which the right wing trolling cultures emerged. And so when virtue is the currency, there's a constant need to create scarcity.

And this occurs through call-outs and purging and an increasing identity-focused bullying. So if you're white, if you're privileged in some sense, if you're male, you can be purged, more or less for that reason, or you have to adopt a very apologetic and supplicatory tone. And so people on the mainstream left largely gave in to this new form of left-wing identity politics culture.

They largely failed to stand up to it. They couldn't easily without losing credibility. But

people on the right in some quarters stood up against it.

And figures like Milo gleefully assumed the part of provocateurs. They wanted to needle this movement to cause it to react and take delight in the mean potential of the viral potential of videos and other things like that that show the left overreacting and making fools of themselves. You can think of Trigglypuff and things like that, those sorts of images of an overweight woman shrieking and jiggling in rage.

And that sort of thing was the meat and drink of this movement on the right, taking delight in bringing down and ridiculing the ridiculousness of the left and how weak, oversensitive and all these other things it was. And there's a sense that weakness itself was the blood in the water that attracted this movement. That when they see this extreme sensitivity, it just triggers them.

They find it intolerable. They find it distasteful and repulsive and they want to push back against it. And this is a crucial part, she believes, in the background for the election of Trump.

I think this is important that there's something about the shamelessness of Trump that renders him rather immune to the social justice culture of the left. And also his success in the election is a radical triggering of the left. And there's a delight in actually seeing them overreact to this ultimate injustice.

And she observes that the movements that she's describing cluster in many respects around the orbit of the manosphere, as it's been called. So you have pickup artists, you have men's rights activists, you have things like the Migtown movement, men going their own way, as it's called, and seeking to a male separatist movement. Incels, involuntary celibates.

Now the left has their own form of incels where they talk about transgender persons that can't get anyone to sleep with them. But these are incels who tend to be younger men who can't find romantic success. And in their various guises, these typically attacked feminism.

They attacked each other a lot. So pickup artists and men's rights activists typically will not like Migtown incel types. But they're all united in their attack against feminism.

And often in their attack upon women more generally. Despite the claims concerning Trump and populism, Nagel observes that this sort of group of the vanguard that he has online in the alt-right has a subcultural snobbishness towards mass culture. So the idea that Trump's is a popular movement is kind of missing the point, she argues.

Trolling and meme culture both require intense subcultural literacy to navigate and gain cultural capital. And they're very merciless in keeping out outsiders and rooting out anyone who's a supposed interloper. And there's a Nietzschean character to this,

something that you see in a film like Fight Club.

And it sets itself against lesser conformist persons who haven't been so-called red-pilled. And there's a fight back against what are conceived of as the emasculating conditions of modern life. Now I think Nagel probably misses part of what's going on here.

The issue with Trump was not just mass culture and populism in that sense. But it was a pushback against certain elites. And the subculture of this online group really ties in with the popular reaction against the elite with their virtue signaling and their PC policing and other things like that which were very much about maintaining virtue within this very closely defined elite group.

Highly educated people who have the right form of woke left-wing politics. It was a pushing back against that. And in that respect, the popular electorate and the subcultural group have a lot in common.

Within these cultures, girls and women in particular can be ruthlessly removed. They can be seen to represent, she describes women as representing the inauthenticity and conformism of mainstream culture with its restrictive demands and controls that they place upon people that everyone has to be nice and conformist, they have to play by the rules, that sort of thing. And women, as they enter into these online cultures that typically are male-dominated they are seen to bring with them all those controls and demands.

And in actual fact, that's often what happens. But she observes the way that this has been played out in previous movements. So particularly interesting is her discussion of the movement of new atheism that anticipated many of these developments with its own turn towards the right and a male-focused culture in its internal struggles with feminists.

So it becomes increasingly the people who were once involved in the new atheist movement are increasingly more vigorously involved in anti-social justice movements and struggles with feminists who are seeking to disrupt its young male culture and also pushing back against some of its key values. And she concludes by observing that this culture on the right has grown increasingly nasty and antagonistic towards the norms and morality of society. And she concludes by castigating the left for its failure to stand up against this sort of thing and for the way in which it has fed it by fostering and celebrating a culture of transgression and other things like that.

Writing about Milo at the very concluding paragraphs, she observes his tour painfully exposed the deep intellectual rot in contemporary cultural progressivism and it found itself completely unable to deal with the challenge coming from the right. The problem with the contemporary style of Tumblr liberalism and a purely identitarian self-oriented progressivism that fomented in online subcultures and moved on to college campuses is that the very idea of winning people over through ideas now seemed to anguish, offend

and enrage this tragically stupefied shadow of the great movements of the left. Like the one that began on campuses like Berkeley in 1964.

Milo may be vanquished but not through a battle of ideas. The online culture wars of recent years have become ugly beyond anything we could have possibly imagined and it doesn't look like there is any easy way out of the mess that has been created. Suddenly, how far away the utopian internet-centric days of the leaderless digital revolution now seem.

When progressives rejoice that the disgust had become a network and burst suddenly into real life. Now one is almost more inclined to hope that the online world can contain rather than further enable the festering undergrowth of dehumanizing reactionary online politics now edging closer to the mainstream but unthinkable in the public arena. Just a few short years ago.

Now I found this book very helpful. It's a short book. It's only about 120 pages long.

So it doesn't get into as much depth as it could get into in a number of these issues. There were a number of ways I was impressed with it. I thought it was very even-handed.

I thought I was expecting something a lot more one-sided but I thought it gave a fair assessment of the situation. I thought it was generally accurate in its analysis. I think it identified movements and connections that many people failed to recognize.

I think it had its finger on some of the underlying dynamics. There were other ways in which I thought it could be improved and developed. I thought particularly there needed to be more direct interaction with people who are involved in this subculture.

What are they finding out of it? I think there are a lot of young men particularly who find a lot of things that are important to them in this subculture that they don't find elsewhere. The question is why and what? That is something I don't think that she fully addressed or explored. There needs to be a lot more said about the bridge between the alt-right and the online subculture she describes in the mainstream.

She focuses a bit too much upon this alt-right movement and other things like that that describes part of the dynamics but a lot of it is a lot less focused and its resistance to the movements on the left is a lot more diffuse and it's not as conceptually or ideologically integrated as she might suggest. I think she puts too much emphasis upon the spirit of the transgressive online right for the rise of Trump. That's part of it but there's a lot more going on there.

They are an important factor but they're far from the only one. I think on the left there's a lot of people who are inclined to trace the majority of Trump's support down to its uglier roots and I just don't think that's accurate. Many Christians for instance I think saw in Trump a force to fight against forces that were deeply hostile to them and their

institutions that would happily destroy them given the chance and so these people on the online right they're far from the only ones who have a deep vested interest in opposing the rioting social justice warrior virtue-signalling culture that's gaining ground in mainstream institutions and culture and politics and the rise of Trump I think is in part because he was seen as a character that had the power to stand against that because he was shameless and there were very few others who would actually effectively stand against it and his antagonisms against that culture were proof that he had the balls as it were to be someone who wouldn't just lay over and give in to it and so his willingness to say the taboo to come out with taboos enabled the Overton window to be stretched in the direction that it needed to be.

That's part of the reason I think also that defensive urge that we need to defend against a fearful defensive urge against a deeply vicious left that will try and destroy right institutions and the right conservative institutions Christian institutions and Nagel's only a petty offender on this front but I think she fails to recognise just how widespread and disparate the forces and parties that were opposed to this social justice warrior class actually are and some of the more interesting and illuminating characters I think weren't really discussed. She maybe focuses a bit too much upon the extreme she's talking about a toxic a deeply toxic extreme culture and yet there are a lot of figures that the idea that you have this deeply toxic culture and then you have this bridge that moves it into the mainstream I don't think that's the most helpful way of seeing the situation I think what you're seeing are broader shifts within the culture and there are pockets exploding outside of the existing Overton window because the Overton window has become more and more restrictive and so you have these deeply toxic sorts of bubbles that are opening up elsewhere where these subversive subcultural movements are arising but there is this broader tension within society and it may be more illuminating to focus upon other more moderate reactions and shifts that are occurring so people who are the borderline characters rather than the people at the extremes focus on the margins not the extremes and I think you'll see a lot more so I thought her focus on the new atheists her attention to the new atheist movement was particularly promising and interesting on this front and there could have been a lot more said about that in particular why is it that the new atheist movement has become so anti-social justice warrior why is it that it's become so much more clearly associated with men I think there's a number of reasons for this I think the first thing is that there has been a breakdown of consensus in the atheist movement so increasingly now you have a movement that is very much about social justice atheism that's pushing back against atheism that's pushing back against Christianity and these sorts of things that are culturally imperialist whatever it is and all these toxic homophobic transphobic etc views the white male patriarchy that's represented by religious cultures the me too concerns about abuse within Christian and other religious contexts and so these are the sorts of concerns that are really animating a particular sort of atheist movement that's more feminist in its tone but yet the traditional new atheist movement was founded around

the hard sciences so you had the hard sciences and debating so it was a culture that was as she observes very well the culture of so-and-so destroys such-and-such this title that you'll often find on YouTube in the past that used to be about new atheists destroying some Christian thinker and some religious viewpoint and now it's increasingly associated with someone defeating a social justice warrior a feminist whatever it is and that is important it recognizes a shift that has occurred within that culture and the shift is also in part because the tactics of that old movement were deeply pugnacious belligerent you unflinchingly hold up face the reality of the world and society and you speak the truth and so it's a culture of truth it's a culture of conflict and struggle and combat of strong debate so it's people like Christopher Hitchens and characters like Richard Dawkins Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris these sorts of characters and these characters first of all they're male they're associated with a particular Oxbridge culture of antagonist of agonistic debate and struggle and combat through ideas and with a very male hard sciences focus and sometimes more towards certain areas of the autistic spectrum would come out there as well and what you have is a deeply male movement hard sciences things like that and the key issue for them in many respects is evolution and evolutionary theory which deals with the reality of nature the reality of the world its objective force that must be reckoned with and the danger of ideologues trying to distract us or oppose the reality of the world and make it more palatable and so it's interesting seeing the way that these movements against the social justice left have increasingly been placed on the fault line of evolutionary theory so people like Bret Weinstein is a good example of someone who's evolutionary biologist and someone who's got caught up in these struggles the movement of Jordan Peterson is a good example again Jordan Peterson's position is very much focused upon let's come to grips with nature as it really is recognize there are differences between men and women that hierarchy is something that's built into our ways of interacting with the world that we are adapted to reality that chaos and order and these sorts of things are part of reality that Jungian psychology is a way of grappling with a sort of human ethology and you have movements like Jonathan Haidt as well Jonathan Haidt his view of morality is very much focused upon evolutionary adaptation to the world and the way that certain moral structures and categories arise out of that and he's again moved against the social justice left and argued for more free speech his involvement with the heterodox academy he is an interesting character because he's not straightforwardly on the right or the left he's more of a centrist liberal but he's someone who's been pushed in this direction same with Peterson, Weinstein a lot of the people in Quillette the Quillette movement these are anthropologists, evolutionary scientists other people in the sciences who feel that there is a push against the hard sciences from the social justice left and attempt to close down these things it's also associated with STEM subjects with maths and with engineering and with young men particularly who are involved in these areas and increasingly feeling that they're being described as toxic that all these ideas that have no foundation in actual science or research are being pushed against them and are beginning to close down their culture other interesting characters that would be worth

exploring are someone like Julian Assange who previously had been very associated with the left the sort of libertarian left and now is far more associated with the libertarian right those sorts of shifts are very instructive it's the marginal characters the one that shift that show where the fault lines have emerged the new atheist movement shows that it's a fight about nature it's a fight about are we going to deal with the hard reality of nature and that can take forms from actual morality that's working with the grain of the world understanding gender differences it can also move in the direction of human biodiversity race realist movements and things like that in all of these cases what we see is evolutionary theory and nature are seen as fault lines so are there innumerable genders are there innumerable sexes is there such a thing as the sex binary these are the questions that we're increasingly fighting over so this hard and soft social science soft or social science conflict is very important one for understanding what's taking place and there's the confusion of left and right wing oppositions at this point so a lot of the people who had previously have been very strongly against conservative Christians now find themselves joining with Christians in struggling against social justice left characters who are not willing to accept nature and other categories like that that would close down their idea of a highly egalitarian inclusive society where there is no sort of where there's no restrictions upon the way that we can engineer things construct things and socially manage the ideals and enact them and so you have on the right there's some of it there's a triggering of this hate facts things like that all these facts that really show that the left's theories do not fit the progressive left's theories do not fit but then there's also this strong resistance on the part of serious scientists who are saying that there are deep problems here other factors to look at are the left's alienating significant or pathologizing certain portions of their traditional base so Bernie Sanders supporters are associated with brocialism and Sanders sort of Bernie bros and things like that the idea that this is a male culture and so it's a male white male straight white male culture and so it can be described as toxic and so it can be squeezed out other interesting characters to observe rationalists and the grey tribe the libertarians people who Scott Alexander characters like that who increasingly they would have been in the loose orbit of the new atheist movement they would also have been very much involved in online debating other things like that very concerned with sciences STEM subjects and yet although all their traditional leanings are towards libertarian left they are increasingly finding themselves pushed out those circles struggling with the context that is pathologizing their white male character attacking nerds things like that and geeks and so someone like Scott Alexander's blog Slate Star Codex 90 about 90% of the readers there are male and it's a culture that is not straightforwardly libertarian it's something a bit more complicated that nor is it straightforwardly new atheist and he has come out in favor of someone like appreciative of Jordan Peterson and pushing back against some of the scaremongering on Trump other things like that and yet he's someone who very much fall down into the left in many respects fall within the left camp but there is a push there and there's a sense that the left is its base is fragmenting and the progressive left is increasingly squeezing out other parties other things to be in for will be interesting is focusing upon

the lighter end of gaming and meme culture so these are not just the old light people who are pushing an ideology think more about as a culture a loose culture that bounds people together so people like Felix Kjellberg or PewDiePie who's the most subscribed maybe not anymore but the most subscribed YouTuber and he is a character that gathers a lot of particularly young men together meme culture is very much his thing but yet he's an interesting character in other ways he's more complicated than he might seem he's a sort of provocateur in some respects gets in trouble for some of the things he says edgy thing, edgy humor that is increasingly pathologized and problematized and that sort of thing but yet there's more to him than that and I think that culture that has developed around him that has increasingly become immune to many of the statements on the left that would progressive left that would try and show how toxic all these things are they've actually paid attention to the most subscribed person and he's actually a lot more straightforward he's not someone who's trying to be a Nazi or anything like that he's a silly comedian and yet he's also someone who's starting to read 70 books in the past year things like that he's a lot more thoughtful than he might appear and there are a lot of people within that consistent constituency that recognize that and identify with that that's their culture through games, through sharing memes and that sort of subcultural context and they're constantly finding them pathologized by themselves pathologized by the mainstream and now they just have gone off the mainstream they don't believe the mainstream media anymore they're not natural extremists they're not Nazis or anything like that but they just don't trust the mainstream and they realize that the mainstream has it in for them and so that is a constituency that is increasingly shifting away from left-wing groups that they would have previously been quite happy with they would generally be socially liberal but yet now they're finding themselves more drawn to people on the right so the rise of people on YouTube right-wing commentators things like that and people who are appealing Dave Rubin and Joe Rogan and other characters like that are appealing to this sort of demographic demographic that has been alienated by the mainstream culture that constantly pathologizes them other characters that might be interesting to pay attention to are smart popularizers of neo-reaction thought I'm thinking of someone like Steve Saylor very smart guy, very observant predicts certain trends before they emerge deeply politically incorrect and has race, realists and other things in there but he recognizes real trends that other people do not allow themselves to see other things that would be interesting would be how Nagel would update her thesis so you can make a reasonable case at the time of Trump's election that someone like Milo was the key character and the alt-right and 4channers they were the vanguard of anti-social justice but is that the case anymore? I'm not sure that it is those figures and movements seem to have taken a considerable dip in popularity partly due to social media crackdowns Milo being removed from Twitter and the scandal over his remarks about paedophilia and in other cases these characters have sunk without a trace no one's really talking about them much anymore and so I think it might be helpful to distinguish between the constituency and the groups and the organizations that represent them or the figures that they put forward so there's a

broader constituency here and there's a lot of figures that loosely emerge from that constituency as leaders or representatives of that constituency and there are various movements that they associate with but they can easily switch and there's no sense that this is a very hard defined group and Nagel recognizes the fungible politics of digital groupings but in parts I think she might over-determine the commitments of the group she's describing there is a very loose commitment to a certain sort of cultural feel and a resistance to other forms of culture and that can take a great deal a great number of different forms depending upon the context and the time and the way that things are playing out so these constituencies aren't that committed to any one movement, person or organization and they can swiftly move on and this is in part because we're talking about young people here particularly young boys and young men and they grow up they change as they grow up and a lot of the tensions I think another factor is a lot of the tensions of the culture war have become much more mainstream so to actually struggle against these factors that you're facing within the culture war you don't have to turn to the marginal figures like Milo in the same way to struggle with the call-out culture of the left is so much more familiar now and one doesn't have to look to someone like Milo to find someone speaking out against it a lot of people are moving against that progressive culture and it's more mainstream now and so I think that's made a difference there's also the need for catharsis a lot of people when they're facing this sort of culture again and again they just get sick of it particularly when they see that the mainstream comedians cannot make fun of this stuff anymore it's all politically correct it has to abide by the norms it has to be right on humour it has to always make fun of Trump and things like that and it just gets boring after a while because you see people saying that biological sex is not a real thing can't you make fun of that? I mean if there's anything to be made fun of that is something to be made fun of and so this cracking down of humour I think is in part an explanation for the rise of this ever more taboo humour when the mainstream has so squeezed out humour you will have it popping up in areas that are deeply outside very much outside of the mainstream and Milo's appeal I think is part of this that you need to understand just how cathartic it is for people to see someone poking this culture in the eye and making fun of it and just showing how ridiculous it is and to have fun in a culture that tends to stigmatise all of this the other thing that's worth paying attention to is the fact that so many young men are drawn to characters like Jordan Peterson to religion, to movements like the so-called intellectual dark web that these are new things that have happened primarily since Nagel's book was written the rising young right doesn't seem to be straightforwardly about a commitment to transgression there's a lot being said about classical civilisation, traditional architecture and things like that and they become charged with culture war significance as any appreciation for historic Western culture and norms in the face of the tide of modernity, post-modernity these gender ideology anti-Western grievance culture all these sorts of things and the assault upon the humanities all of that is something that represents an appreciation for traditional Western culture as regressive and transgressive but is it really that transgressive? when the whole culture has normalised transgression actually standing

for something traditional can be seen as transgressive and edgy particularly there are ways in which this gets often smeared as having connection with crypto-racist positions and sometimes actual racist positions but there's a lot that's taking place there that does not easily fall into the category of transgression and the appeal of someone like Jordan Peterson part of it is Jordan Peterson destroys Cathy Newman or something like that or this feminist position but a lot of it is young men wanting to find young people but young men especially trying to find their way and trying to find a sense of purpose and meaning and possibility within the world the intellectual dark web for all its pretensions about itself is also wanting a culture where we think seriously where thought isn't completely colonised by anti-Western ideology by anti-white male ideology by gender ideology all these sorts of things let's think seriously about the world let's think seriously about nature let's think seriously about society many people are wanting to do this and it needs to be recognised that this isn't just about transgression this is people wanting to construct something in a society that has made their very identity transgressive if you're asserting anything as a white, straight, straight white cis male there is something suspicious about that if you're asserting your identity not in the sense of an identity white identity politics or anything like that but just being unapologetic and pursuing something for yourself and recognising culture that has a dignified place for you as something good that is increasingly pushed back against so transgression is more complicated I think than it seems on the surface there is certainly a significant element of transgression but there are also a lot within these movements that are pushing back against a mere transgressive aesthetic it's saying transgression is not actually all that good but we do have to have the balls and the backbone to stand up against this sort of culture and this emasculated attitude of just rolling over and giving in to it is not going to do you have to stand up and be a man and that is a lot of what's taking place and there's a transgressive element to that this ability to resist and go against the mainstream culture but it's not in the ultimate service of transgression as such or just celebrating an aesthetic of transgression she also recognises the gender dynamics but there's a lot more that can be said about this Scott Alexander has written a great piece called The Movement is Not the Ideology and what he observes within that is that movements have certain ideas that they're associated with certain principles that they uphold and we are mistaken if we think that they are primarily about those ideas that those ideas are what explain everything about the dynamics of the movement in many cases it's people needing a group to which to belong and so for instance the new atheist movement were typically young men looking for a movement to belong to that unflinchingly wrestled with the resistant objectivity of the world that appreciated combative debate hard over soft sciences they're more thing than people oriented they're very much opposed to conformist movements movements that stigmatise and close down dangerous inquiry or which pose rougher interactions it's about resistance to censorship of ideas this idea that we can censor ideas for social ends that you don't want to unsettle the status quo and many new atheists have become anti-social justice warriors warrior figures and found common cause with many conservative Christians that they once forcefully attacked

precisely because that is the sort of they have a sense of identity they have something that is really that movement is catering to them and the social justice movement is very much closing down and attacking and stigmatising the type of people they are quite directly as young white males and generally straight but also as those who are interested in dangerous ideas who are interested in wrestling with the objectivity of the world as those who hold a belief in evolution and evolution is not appreciated on the social justice left so there are a lot of common causes there but it's important to recognise that this movement is not just about atheist ideas it is about that it's about evolution it's about things like the hard sciences but it's also about a certain feel that helps people to belong it's about a certain type of movement that attracts a certain type of personality and if we recognise that I think it will help us to understand just how gendered a lot of the dynamics that we're experiencing today are what we're seeing in many cases are male versus female tendencies in group in socialisation and sociality so female groups enforce conformity through manufactured consensus so mean girls dynamic and it's rendering certain people toxic bad mouthing people and having a situation where gossip and other things like that lead to people being squeezed out so you don't actually beat people through direct debate and conflict about ideas rather you squeeze people out you appeal to third parties to close other people down and you have a culture of performative weakness a weakness that gets other people to intervene that's very much about harnessing the power of the group rather than individuals so it's a hive mentality particularly male groups have a much rougher more direct antagonistic agonistic dynamic and often antagonistic when we're talking about male and female groups for instance when we talk about Gamergate Gamergate had all these it was a had an ideology and it was associated with a particular movement but it needs to be recognised just how much of this was about male spaces and women's involvement in those male spaces so men young men have particularly bonded through the context of games and gaming culture and geek culture and that's traditionally been something that men have formed young men have formed and participated in and found a sense of belonging in that context then young women enter that context and particularly young women who aren't interested in the dynamics of that group and they want to change everything they want to make it more hospitable to them and so they close down the culture they declare that the sort of men that form that culture the sort of culture that has drawn people to that context those contexts is toxic and problematic and they want to reform it radically and in a way that pushes out the people who originally form primarily form that culture and who primarily populate that culture and so the Gamergate thing is very much about that sort of struggle about a struggle over a particular sort of culture and who can belong with it within it so there's a sense of cultural appropriation here but when we talk about cultural appropriation we're usually talking about minority cultures the idea that there might be a culture for young white males that they can belong to that they can affiliate with others in that is seen as a bad thing but there's a lot of talk about the need for female spaces the need for women to enter into traditionally male spaces and change the dynamics but there are a lot of

young men who feel stifled because all of their contexts are increasingly having to play to they're having to conform they're having to play nice and things like that but they find a great deal of belonging in more agonistic combative places and that's not a bad thing but the mainstream is not giving them any outlet for that and so increasingly they're being pushed to ever more extreme cultures and this is a real problem and I think it's also a problem where we're seeing this dynamic of a certain sort of female society that's becoming more extreme as it's struggling with a society that is extremely male and antagonistically male and deeply hostile to the mainstream and then you have this female society that's hyper protective and maternal in its dynamics it's wanting to protect the vulnerable and then taking this mama bear approach to anyone that would attack the cubs vicious and vindictive and deeply hostile to anyone who's seen as a predator character and those predator characters are associated with identities such as white male and so these antagonisms that we're seeing online are deeply gendered they're playing into typical gender tendencies men and women are very different in their sociality and their dynamics of association and as groups these things rise to an extreme so whereas if you're talking about individuals there are lots of individuals who are outliers men who associate more like women and women who associate more like men but when we're talking about groups male and female groups they will play to the tendency and that tendency will be exalted and will tend to be more extreme and so male groups will tend to be more agonistic they will tend to struggle and value that they'll be more about agency they'll be more about bonding through a common thing orientation through a common orientation to some activity or action or obsession or interest and so there's a reason why Wikipedia is 90% male there's a reason why debates on news sites are 80% male these are contexts that play to male tendencies on the other hand 80% of fan fiction sites are female if you're looking at something like Pinterest that's very much sharing images of home and things like that it's predominantly female and there are different tendencies here and unless we take seriously that men and women are different we'll find it difficult to understand just how different these tendencies are and how they are playing out in the online environment so what you're seeing is an intense antagonism on both sides men who are deeply misogynistic antagonistic to anything that represents women and on the other hand women who represent anything that's male and that's typically male as toxic as something that needs to be closed down and that is a problem for both sides it's not good for anyone and so the male groups that are being formed in this context are increasingly extreme because they're pushing back against a mainstream that is trying to close them down and the more that they try and do that the more their culture will have to become toxic to prevent it from being appropriated there are real issues here the appeal of Jordan Peterson again is illuminating in this context Nietzschean ideas can hold a particular appeal for young men especially in a society that is emasculating as ours and Nietzsche puts his finger upon something very important something about the difference between the man whose goodness consists merely in meek conformity in weakness of will, passivity spinelessness, moodiness and resentment to the world this

anima possessed man as Jung might call it this man who's just decent and good because he's not able to stand for anything he's not got any backbone he's just a conformist someone who says yes dear to everything that his wife demands of him and the man who the alternative to this is the man who forms order out of chaos the man who exercises robust agency the man who manifests strength, courage mastery and honour and the man who's able to stand up for himself and form a coherent life and a sense of identity and destiny and Peterson's work really speaks to that sort of character it speaks to the sort of moral vision that scratches an itch in men in particular the itch that exists where the goodness of their virility is being suppressed by modern society and the vicious reaction to Peterson is instructive as well especially in how often it is focused upon explicitly the fact that he's empowering young men you shouldn't empower young men young men are needed to be quiescent, accommodating they need to be empowering of women but they need to step back they can't assert themselves they can't stand up they can't exercise their strengths and the contemporary vision of young men tends to focus upon their accommodating to the needs of feminism and the empowerment of women and that's the case in the church too in many many cases men must learn to be nice and tame to submit entirely and apologetically to women's determination and moral virtue whereas for Peterson he recognises there is something about virility that is good that needs to be recovered there's a very good piece written on American affairs a while back that I just read recently about Walter White as a Nietzschean character and it gets things really it really observes it well that Walter White as he exists at the beginning of Breaking Bad is seen as a good decent character but yet he's this man who has no agency really he's someone who's weak and quiescent he's someone who's conformist he's someone who's just you have his wife Skyler who's very much about safety and who really stifles him and has this very claustrophobic environment within the home that she creates he has this overbearing boss in the car wash he's ridiculed by his students and not taken seriously by them he has a young female headmistress who's I mean it's not really developing his strength in any way he can't exert his strength he's someone who has all these gifts in chemistry and now he's just a high school teacher he's someone who wants to have a dignified role in his family but he's just mildly coddled by his wife and he's someone who wants to have a sense of mentorship and to raise the next generation and yet he's ridiculed and so there's all these things that are lost and within his work what he's trying to do is form order out of chaos the chaos of his life to find some sense of destiny and involves a turn towards evil but that turn towards evil is also a development of certain virtues of strength moral agency of all these sorts of things that are trying to forge an identity forge order out of chaos and not just meekly submit to the situation of the last man and this is something that Nietzsche put his finger upon and I think someone like Peterson is speaking to that that many young men are concerned that within a society that gives them no real dignity of agency it squashes their virility it gives them no sense of a dominion that they can have that they can rule within that they can have a dignified place within their family they're primarily supposed to step back to disengage and to be meek and apologetic and

this is a problem for many young men who are growing up and find no bearings and so either they become anima possessed as Peterson and Young would talk about it or they become people who stand up for themselves and that will often involve a sort of transgression a stepping outside of the mainstream now that forms a move a lurch towards deep transgression for some that they find a light in transgression itself because it's this sort of puerile rebellion against the mollycoddling the nannying the nagging and the scolding of the feminized mainstream or it can become a far more thoughtful and an approach with more integrity of its own that stands up and says we're going to develop strength not in reaction against the culture and in a puerile sort of rebellion but we're going to be people who have character and we're going to forge a sense of self and purpose within that context and so I think many of the people within this culture pushing back for instance against the meme of the non-player character the NPC the one who is the consummate conformist who doesn't speak or act for him or herself but is merely an outlet for the reigning ideology as Peterson talks about it the ideologically possessed that you can predict exactly what they're going to say on any particular issue and part of the purpose of the transgression and the resistance is the sense that that is what the mainstream wants you to become the mainstream wants you to become a non-player character someone who has no agency of their own who meekly just parrots the ideology and yet has no sense of who you are the dignity that you might have and a purpose that you might have perhaps the biggest gap in the book was the failure to discuss the media that are catalyzing these conflicts so what we're seeing in many respects is a conflict that is created by digital media and digital social media in particular what digital social media has done has amplified the traditional dynamics of more female spaces of female sociality which is very much about tight hyper-connected densely social networks and the means of establishing conformity within those through a certain sort of social pressure through ostracizing certain people through presenting other people as pathological or toxic through appealing to third parties or the crowd to act on your behalf and those sorts of networks are amplified by social media so it allows traditionally female dynamics that would be enacted primarily within the close network of a community or in the context of the home and domestic or family environments it allows those dynamics to play out on the larger social and political stage and so the sort of politics that we're seeing now is very much a female sort of politics it's a politics of hyper-protective maternal instinct protecting the childlike figures against who victims who have no agency of their own against predator figures and those predator figures are seen very much just in terms of identities white males, cis, straight etc and then on the other hand you have this need for deep sociality against these toxic forces that are trying to infiltrate and undermine that culture from without so they have to repel the barbarians they have to form this culture that's deeply that is constantly weeding out transgressors that is maintaining this really close this really close clique at the heart the other thing that's important to notice is this alternative culture which is an unmappable culture of meme culture of trolls, of anonymous and pseudonymous characters that are existing within a form of internet that is the old internet 4chan is the old internet Reddit is the old

internet YouTube is a different sort of sociality but not so much the old internet but it has certain of the characteristics of the old internet particularly in the comments and the sorts of communities that exist within the comments and the comments of sites as well commenting culture that's the old internet and these are differences between male and female networks men primarily finding community through doing things together through common agency through common obsessions and interests and female networks that very much person focused inclusion focused focused upon protecting people upon forming a community a fandom a community of some type that gives people a sense of belonging and the different methods associated with these are significant to notice too so the technology has enabled different sorts of methods so for the male groups the marginal groups they're very much meme and troll culture that requires, it's unmappable culture the old internet is unmappable it's the dark web and it's one of the reasons I think it's significant the intellectual dark web is known as the intellectual dark web there's a struggle for the very structure of the life of the internet here there's a struggle between the new paved over and social internet that's policed by groups like Facebook and Twitter that you can appeal to and get them to act on your behalf close down toxic groups that's hyper social very much playing into female tendencies and the old anonymous internet which is very much like the frontier that you go to and you interact about ideas and you struggle with each other and you don't have a clue who these other people are but there's a sense of belonging in the crowd and within the group and these connections are far looser they're far broader they're far less personal and these are differences between male and female networks facilitated by different forms of social media and I told we understand that I think we'll struggle to understand exactly why the dynamics play out as they do and the unmappable character of meme and troll culture that you really I mean there's no algorithm that you can easily develop to map this I mean how do you tell if someone's being ironic or serious or not you just have to be deeply embedded in that culture you have to know it intimately and that requires a sort of knowledge that cannot be policed in the same way it's resistant to policing it's resistant the means of the new internet which very much is about mapping and forming people to algorithms making people so that interchangeable profiles that can all be mapped onto that can all be mapped onto a social media system and then mined by algorithms for useful properties the old internet of the meme and troll culture of anonymous personalities things like that is resistant to this it's resistant to the conformism it's resistant to the policing and the closing down of culture that this involves a lot more that could be said on this book it's a very interesting book it raises some huge issues that deserve a lot more attention than it can give it but I hope this video has been of some help and interest thank you very much for listening God bless and Lord willing I'll be back again tomorrow