

A Spectre is Haunting... Mainstream Conservatism: Anti-Communism and the Construction of
'Radical-Left Democrats'

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June 2021

A thesis submitted to McGill University in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree
of MA in Political Science

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Abstract

This project attempts to specify the mechanisms of anti-communist discourse among two mainstream conservative ‘new media’ organizations: PragerU and TPUSA. In the context of the ‘interregnum’ which currently besets the present political conjuncture, a variety of left and right populisms emerge seeking to provide a persuasive narration of the crisis. The increased salience of the former has precipitated a condemnation of progressivism by conservatives who associate it with communism. Thus, to specify how mainstream conservative discourse conceptualizes the left and conclude on how this conceptualization results in the mainstreaming of radicalism, this project conducts a discourse analysis of a small sample of YouTube videos from PragerU and TPUSA to determine how these organizations seek to acquire ‘discursive predominance’ and specify the central themes employed in their construction of the left.

Ce projet tente de préciser les mécanismes du discours anticomuniste de deux organisations conservatrices traditionnelles de « nouveaux médias » : PragerU et TPUSA. Dans le contexte de « l'inter règne » qui assaille actuellement la conjoncture politique actuelle, une variété de populismes de gauche et de droite émergent, cherchant à fournir une narration persuasive de la crise. L'importance accrue du premier a précipité une condamnation du progressisme par les conservateurs qui l'associent avec la communisme. Ainsi, pour spécifier comment le discours conservateur dominant conceptualise la gauche et conclure sur la façon dont cette conceptualisation contribue à l'intégration du radicalisme, ce projet mène une analyse du discours d'un petit échantillon de vidéos YouTube de PragerU et TPUSA pour déterminer comment ces organisations cherchent à acquérir la « prédominance discursive » et précisent les thèmes centraux employés dans leur construction de la gauche.

Acknowledgments

This MA thesis would not have been possible without the help, advice, and patience of many.

I would first like to thank Prof. William Clare Roberts for his guidance throughout the writing process. While I was unsure how to approach this topic, Prof. Roberts was both patient and encouraging – always assuaging my doubts and giving me the freedom, confidence, and independence to explore my own ideas. His challenging questions, perceptive comments, and nuanced critiques were crucial. Thank you, Prof. Roberts, for tolerating my constantly extended deadlines and pushing me to ‘just start writing’. Without you, this would not have been possible.

I would also like to express my gratitude to Prof. Tania Islas Weinstein for her useful comments and revisions. As the examiner, her questions and suggestions were indispensable.

Thank you to Joey Mitchell for always being there for me when I was stressed or anxious throughout both my studies and research at McGill. Without his emotional support I don’t know if I would have gotten past first semester, let alone completed my thesis.

Thank you to the many friends who stood by me, calmly listening to my late-night ramblings about the dangers of neoliberal anti-communism. There are too many to mention here but I would like to acknowledge: Matt Weisz, Sam Mashaal, Solomon Rex, Ryan Dimentberg, Lauren Stubina, Sara Marks, Eva Oakes, Dylan Blatt, Zach Ornstein and Natasha Edmonds. I love you all.

Thank you to Avery Ward for her unwavering love and unique ability to calm my nerves in times of stress. Her assurances were always met with skepticism on my part in the form of the constantly repeated refrain: ‘we shall see’. Without her constant reassurance in the face of my skepticism, I would not have made it this far.

Lastly, thank you to my family. Thank you, mom and dad, for always believing in my intellect and for cultivating my passion for politics and the social sciences. I know it hasn't always been easy, but I am forever grateful to you both. Thank you, Julia Hornstein, for truly being the best sister a brother could ask for. Finally, thank you to my Baba Hanka for teaching me the importance of calling out oppression and persecution wherever I see it; the suffering you experienced as a result Nazism taught me the importance of solidarity and resistance.

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Introduction

It is said that ‘it is easier to imagine an end to the world than an end to capitalism’ (Fisher 2009). In other words, it is easier to imagine an end to the world than it is to imagine the implementation of socialism or any other post-capitalist alternative. Why is this? One explanation is that alternatives to capitalism, such as socialism or anarchism, are discursively constructed as dystopian ideologies that destroy, maim, and repress, rather than ones that build, heal, and liberate.

In the current conjuncture, marked by a crisis of hegemony wherein the state is increasingly the target of a range of popular discontent, a variety of actors emerge seeking to provide a persuasive narration of the crisis. Both right and left populists seek to fill the void left by the waning legitimacy of the neoliberal paradigm. However, as some academics have pointed out (Bruff 2013, 116; Tansel 2017; Bruff & Tansel 2019), the Right is currently winning this offensive. This is not limited to the presidential election of right-wing populist demagogue Donald Trump but is also evidenced in the rise of right-populists in Hungary, Poland, Brazil, India, and the Philippines. In all these cases, conservatives and right-populists have prospered by employing the discourses of anti-communism to foment fears of an internal subversive enemy seeking to destroy the freedom, culture, and security of the political community.

Often conceptualized on the fringe of the political mainstream, the anti-communism which animates the Right’s construction of the crisis is not confined to the radical corridors of alt-right media networks but is increasingly a central component of conservative discourse *tout court*. Reacting to the increased popular appeal of self-titled democratic socialists such as Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio Cortez, as well as responding to popular left-wing dissent more generally, the Right in America today constructs calls for progressive policy, redistributive

programs, and democratic reforms as inherently authoritarian power grabs in a ‘culture war’ for the heart of the nation. In doing so, conservatives position themselves as the only remaining bulwark against this leftist offensive – as patriotic defenders of a nation under attack by a subversive and insurgent totalitarianism.

Given the increased predominance of the discourses of anti-communism among mainstream conservatism, this project relies on an interpretive research design to explain and describe how two online conservative organizations – PragerU and Turning Point USA – discursively marginalize the left. More than merely teasing out the themes, frames of reference, and discursive mechanisms employed by these organizations to construct the ‘culture war’ mentioned above, this project will also attempt to specify how this anti-communist discourse seeks to acquire hegemonic status, or what Nonhoff (2018) labels ‘discursive predominance’, in its narration of the crisis. In doing so, it will also specify how the discourses of anti-communism among mainstream online conservative media organizations overlap with the conspiratorial and explicitly racialized discourses of the alt- and radical-right to conclude on how this discourse contributes to the radicalization of the mainstream.

To do so, this paper will begin with a discussion of the literature on the crisis of hegemony which currently besets the neoliberal paradigm, the populism that emerges as a result, and the anti-communism which pervades the right’s construction of the left. Then, following a brief overview of the history of anti-communism in America, a small sample of PragerU and Turning Point USA videos will be analyzed, followed by a discussion of their use of hegemonic discourse and a summary of the central themes which pervade it. It will then conclude on the role of anti-communist discourse in fomenting the radicalization of the mainstream– or the mainstreaming of radical ideas.

Literature Review

Crisis of Hegemony

The concept of hegemony, first developed by Antonio Gramsci, describes power struggles between different political ‘blocs’ over the social construction of reality. In this sense, it represents the mechanisms through which dominant social groups maintain ideological power and ensure – through a mixture of coercion and consent – the legitimacy of the capitalist system (Gramsci, as cited in Hoare & Nowell-Smith 2014). However, since hegemony is never fully established but rather a continuously shifting process of negotiated consensus and managed dissensus, it is always in flux (Parks 2020; Golinczak 2019). In this sense, cultural hegemony is a “continuous process of identity, status and belief being articulated, negotiated, and reproduced” (Parks 2020, 181). When the “assemblage of truisms accepted within a particular social world”, or what Gramsci calls ‘common sense’, is increasingly challenged, a shift occurs wherein the social bases are removed from their normal avenues of political representation, and a concomitant incongruity emerges between the ‘represented and the representatives’ leading to an ‘organic crisis’ wherein “the old is dying and the new cannot be born” (Gramsci, as cited in Hoare & Nowell-Smith 2014, 276). In such a ‘interregnum’, hegemonic actors of the past are unable to solve the current crisis within the confines of the old order, and a ‘crisis of authority’ emerges that leaves an ideological void to be filled by previously marginal actors vying to provide a solution and persuasive narration of the crisis.

The current conjuncture is marked by such a ‘crisis of authority’ wherein, since the political and economic stasis of the 2008 recession, the dominant neoliberal paradigm is increasingly becoming the target of a range of popular discontent (Fraser 2016; Dawson 2016; Bruff 2014; Tansel 2017). One such expression of discontent is the emergence of a variety of

different left and right ‘populisms’ which seek to draw a Manichean distinction between what is perceived as a ‘pure people’ and a ‘corrupt elite’ (Mudde & Kaltwasser 2018). Responding to what Hawkins et al. (2019) call the ‘intentional failure of democratic representation’, populism emerges only when it is ‘activated’ by a social milieu which makes the populist message sensible (8). In this sense, democratic deficits in representation and the increasing ideological gap between politicians and the constituencies they are meant to represent foregrounds the emergence of a populist politics. However, despite such a representational deficit, citizens may not directly interpret the crisis in populist terms. What is necessary for the predominance of populist discourses is the presence of political entrepreneurs who produce discursive ‘frames’ through which the crisis is constructed. In this sense, populist actors construct ‘the people’ and the ‘elite’ in specific ways which prefigure the policy reforms needed to restore their vision of the ‘sovereign’.

Whereas left populism draws a simple cleavage between the ‘people’ and the ‘elite’ in terms of social class and income, right-wing populism draws on ethno-national and cultural cleavages, forging a third point of division wherein the ethnic and cultural makeup of the ‘people’ is under siege by demarcated outside groups who ‘threaten the general will’ (Rodrik 2018). In this sense, antipathy for the elite among right populists is less about unequal access to political power and the centralization of elite rule, and more about the *form* of elite rule as begetting a politics of ‘gender-dysphoria’, ‘multiculturalism’, ‘political correctness’, and the resulting destruction of ‘traditional values’ (Joppke 2021). This is constructed as a ‘war’ in which America and the world are divided through a variety of friend vs. enemy dualities – with the white working- and middle-class male as its main subject. In this sense, the waning of the white man’s privileged status (both economically and culturally) is projected onto the whole of

America and is seen as representative of greater national decline (Joppke 2021). Although the focus of this paper is on the conservative Right rather than its populist derivations, as Lux & Jordan (2019) argue, drawing a *cordon sanitaire* between mainstream conservative groups and right-wing populism obscures the “numerous instances of traditional right-wing parties [and organizations] succumbing to increasing populist ideological capture [...] in both America and beyond” (5). Both seek to construct the crisis as a struggle “whereby the status, identity and interests of white America would be dominant and economic and cultural hegemony restored” (Kardaş 2017: 98)

In this sense, Nancy Fraser (2017) argues that right-wing populism is not a challenge to global finance and the technocracy of neoliberal elite institutions *tout court*, but *progressive* neoliberalism specifically. Though Fraser is discussing right-wing populism, her analysis is even more convincing when applied to mainstream conservative groups. Despite ideological capture by the populist wave, the mainstream paleo-conservative and libertarian Right is distinguished from the populist Right in their relative support for neoliberal elite-based policies, directing hostility towards the progressive inroads of the so-called left-liberal elites *in defense* of neoliberal modes of governance and their attendant cultural institutions (Samuelson 2016). Explaining its emergence in the era of the Third Way, Fraser describes how Clinton endorsed progressive notions of diversity, multiculturalism, and women’s rights while heeding to a paradigm of deregulatory banking, financialization and free trade that accelerated the deindustrialization of large sectors of the Rust Belt and industrial South (ibid.). Sustained by his successors, including Barack Obama, Clinton’s veneer of progressivism stood in stark contrast to the reality that his policies “degraded the living conditions of all working people [...] through the weakening of unions, the decline of real wages, [and] the increasing precarity of work” (ibid., 2).

It was this mix of insincere progressivism and ruinous financialization that was derided by Trump voters – the injury of newfound precarity was compounded by the “insult of progressive moralism”, which routinely portrayed the ‘left behind’ as culturally backward (ibid.).

The response to this compounded economic and cultural disillusionment, which Inglehart and Norris (2017) label the ‘silent revolution’ has precipitated a ‘cultural backlash’ wherein proximity to the discourses and outcomes of multiculturalism and diversity beget a revulsion towards the diktats of perceived progressivism: namely, the ‘post-material values of cosmopolitanism and political correctness’ (1). However, this analysis – focusing exclusively on the demand side of the populist tide – omits any mention of how the discursive construction of ‘political correctness’ and the ‘culture war’ it informs are reified and activated by the Right’s supplied narratives. In other words, to properly conceptualize the aforementioned ‘backlash’ and its relationship to the ascendancy of the Right, the ideological constellation of supplied right-wing and conservative discourse must be brought into view.

Anti-Communism

Anti-communism is one such discourse. Enzo Traverso (2016) speaks of a “new wave of anti-communism: a “militant”, fighting anti-communism, all the more paradoxical inasmuch as its enemy had ceased to exist” (2). Despite its nascent status in the literature on right-wing populism and the radical-right, anti-communism is an increasingly salient discursive device employed by the Right to marginalize its leftist competitors and construct the ‘culture war’ mentioned above. Thus, to properly understand anti-communism and its discursive constructions in the current conjuncture, anti-communism must first be mapped out theoretically to unearth its form and function.

Reiterating Inglehart and Norris' (2017) above contention, Ghodsee (2014) argues that anti-communism "must be viewed in the context of regional fears of a re-emergent left" and the desire to "link all leftist political ideals to the horrors of Stalinism." (117). Understood as an amorphous and pervasive political phenomenon, anti-communism extends across the political spectrum and is not exclusive to the Right, but manifest in liberal, progressive, and even leftist discourse as well – albeit articulated differently in each (Gökariksel 2020; Dean 2019)¹.

Although usually discussed in the post-Soviet context to conceptualize the rise of right-wing illiberalism in Central and Eastern Europe, as Jodi Dean (2019) argues, anti-communism is an 'international, inherently capitalistic, politics of fear' (1). It functions to demarcate the political field by establishing a 'terrain of possibility', delineating the possible from the impossible, the tolerable from the intolerable, the morally pure from the morally impure, and so on. (Dean 2019). It shifts focus away from the structural critique of capitalism and "delimits the imagination of what is possible in terms of praxis and social transformation" (Gökariskel 2020). It functions to insulate the neoliberal economic order – giving new life to Margaret Thatcher's claim that 'there is no alternative' by ensuring that "calls for social justice or redistribution are forever equated with forced labour camps and famine" (Ghodsee & Sehon 2020).

Traverso (2017) traces the genealogy of the phenomena of anti-communism in the so-called totalitarian (read: anti-totalitarian) paradigm. First introduced by Italian fascists to describe the totalizing nature of the fascist state, Traverso describes how the concept of totalitarianism ebbed and flowed through history, shifting from an alliance between anti-fascists and anti-totalitarians in the early 1940s to its redefinition as synonymous with anti-communism

¹ Liberal or progressive anti-communism can be exemplified in Elizabeth Warren's insistent claim that, despite her progressive platform, she is a "capitalist to my bones" (Goodheart 2020) or Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (who herself has been portrayed as harboring socialist and communist sympathies) denouncing the Democratic Socialists of America as 'privileged' and 'bad faith actors' who want to "destroy everything we have built" (London, 2021).

during the Cold War (Traverso 2017, 100). Traverso argues that despite its temporary decline as a concept between the 1960s to the 1980s, totalitarianism was reborn in the 1990s as a ‘retrospective paradigm’ through which the history of the previous century could be understood (Traverso 2017). He claims that the fall of the Soviet Union ‘inscribed the communist experience into a historical perspective’ which, rather than viewing communism as a “prismatic, multifaceted phenomena combining revolution and terror, liberation and oppression, social movements and political regimes, collective action and bureaucratic despotism” reduced it instead to a murderous ideology comparable to fascism or Nazism – with ‘Stalin as its true face’ (Traverso 2017, 98).

The totalitarian paradigm conceptualizes fascism and communism as two sides of the same collectivist and authoritarian coin, thus positioning liberal democracy as the pinnacle of freedom and marginalizing socialist or communist alternatives as inherently anti-democratic and authoritarian (Mrozik 2019). Today, this anti-totalitarian argument can be found in Jonah Goldberg’s best-selling book *Liberal Fascism: The Secret History of the American Left, From Mussolini to the Politics of Meaning* (2009). Reconceptualizing the totalitarian paradigm for the contemporary era of ‘political correctness’ and ‘identity politics’, Goldberg argues that we are living in a ‘unconscious civilization of fascism’ established by the so-called ‘fascist’ and ‘collectivist’ economic policies of Wilson and FDR (Goldberg 2009, 330). This anti-totalitarianism is buttressed by a canon of literature from conservative historians which, emerging in the 1990s and drawing on the ideas laid out in Hayek’s (1944) *The Road to Serfdom*, sought to portray communism as the totalitarian bedfellow of fascism². This not only rehabilitates fascism as a justified defense against the Bolshevik threat, it also denies and

² See Pipes’ *The Russian Revolution* (1990), Furet’s *The Passing of an Illusion* (1995), Courtois’ *The Black Book of Communism* (1997), and Malia’s *The Soviet Tragedy* (1994), among others.

obscures the important ideological distinctions between the explicit racism and ethnic nationalism of the former and the emancipatory doctrines of the latter³. Traverso (2016) argues that although the aforementioned historians belong to different national contexts, emerged in different intellectual generations, and adopted distinct historical methods, they can be conceptualized as part of a ‘unified front’ as “their battles as ‘engaged’ historians converge on an essential point: anti-communism raised to the status of a historical paradigm” (3).

According to Dean (2012), this anti-communist invocation of history takes three main forms: objectivity, continuity or determinacy, and lack of historicity. The former, objectivity, refers to the purportedly neutral recounting of facts which are ‘immune to interpretation and impossible to dispute’ resulting in the demarcation of communist history from the “politics and struggles that comprise this history” (ibid., 32). Next, continuity or determinacy refers to the use of ‘necessary sequences’ wherein contingent factors are abandoned in favor of a series of ‘consequences and effects that are both necessary and unavoidable’ – “if Lenin, then Stalin; if revolution, then gulag, if Party, then purges” (ibid., 33). The result is similar to the effect of ‘objectivity’, wherein communism is removed from the ‘politics of the militant subject and condensed to an imaginary and immutable object with a linear process and a pre-determined end’ (ibid., 34). The third and final invocation of history manifests as a lack of historicity. In this instance, the history of communism is understood as static and unchanging. The result is that a given ‘particular moment becomes the container for the essential whole – the Leninist party, the Stalinist show trials, the KGB, the Brezhnev-era stagnation all become interchangeable examples

³ For example, in Ernest Nolte’s abridged missive *The Past that Will Not Pass* from his book *The European Civil War*, Nolte argued against the uniqueness of the Holocaust and claimed that Hitler’s embrace of fascism was an ‘understandable’ reaction to the ‘Asiatic deed’ of Russian Bolshevism. He writes: “Wasn’t the gulag archipelago more original than Auschwitz? Wasn’t Bolshevik ‘class murder’ the logical and actual predecessor to National Socialist ‘race murder’?” (as cited in Ghodsee 2014).

of the intrinsic horror of communism’ (ibid.) By portraying communism as ‘impossibly static’, the appeal to history transforms a single instance as representative of the whole – as indicative of the inherent qualities of communism rather than the product of contingent political, social, or economic phenomena (Dean 2012). The outcome is that the crimes of Stalin and Mao’s communist regimes are essentialized onto leftist ideology itself, and any attempt of ordinary workers to challenge the reigning plutocracy and struggle for their rights under the banner of social democracy or democratic socialism are automatically associated with gulags, purges, and famines.

By portraying communism as inherently totalitarian, any progressive program or policy that is left of center can be discursively constructed as a communist threat to freedom and democracy, thus deriding any attempt to mitigate (let alone resolve) the inequalities and injustices of the status-quo. Attempts to do so are perceived as unpatriotic at best, and treasonous at worst. In this sense, a steadfast commitment to patriotism is actualized by an “unquestioning obedience to authority and an undying resistance to social change” – rejecting the doctrines of social justice and anti-racism by portraying them as ‘un-American’ and coopted by dangerous or misguided ‘leftists’ (Berlet & Lyons 1998, 4). In this way, anti-communism is often enveloped in highly racialized and prejudicial language and, among the Right, is used to demarcate and challenge “every political current which is not embedded in a clearly exposed nationalist and racist agenda” (Teoretyczna 2019). Mainstream conservatism, and increasingly more radical or populist derivations as well, no longer use the terms of overt racism, but rather have employed what scholars have labelled ‘new racism’ (Barker 1982) or ‘cultural racism’ (Hall and du Gay 1996). Instead of the old racism of ‘blood and soil’, systemic and institutionalized racism is constructed as nonexistent, thus delegitimizing anti-racists and the claims of the racialized and

marginalized groups they seek to protect. As a result, and as Davidson and Saul (2016) argue, the Right has been able to claim that outcomes such as “the marginalization and non-assimilation of ethnic minorities, dependence on the welfare state and the disproportionate numbers of non-whites in prison are because of inherent cultural identities and practices within such groups” rather than the product of systemic inequalities between groups (715). In constructing structural racism as a mere progressive fiction and essentializing racial inequities as endogenous to the cultural makeup of a given group, hierarchical and exclusionary social orders are insulated from criticism and the anti-racists are portrayed as either naïve or harboring a hidden agenda (namely, communism) – or both. In this sense, anti-communism obscures the racist inclinations of its devotees, shifting the locus of racialized discourse from an ethnic claim to a political one.

History of Anti-Communism in the US

Although an entire overview of American anti-communism is beyond the purview of this paper, sufficed to say anti-communism in America is not new – as Ghodsee and Schon (2020) argue, ‘it is as American as apple pie’ and is based in a deep culture of countersubversion “marked by a distinct pathology: conspiracy theory, moralism, nativism, and suppressiveness” (Donner 1981, 10). This countersubversion hysteria emerged long before the Bolshevik Revolution and its legacies have persisted long after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War, often ebbing and flowing in tandem with perceived leftist challenges to the status quo (Storrs 2015; Berlet & Lyons 1998).

Although initially manifest in the late nineteenth century Haymarket affair and the hysteria that followed, the first significant ‘moral panic’ surrounding the communist threat in America emerged in the shadow of the Bolshevik revolution and culminated in the first Red Scare of 1919-1920. Originating in the context of the hyper-nationalism of World War I, fear

over the Bolshevik Revolution, and rising domestic labor disputes, anti-communism (and countersubversion more generally) relied on what Berlet & Lyons (1998) call the ‘slippery slope theory’ which, exemplified in one 1919 cartoon from the New York Evening Telegram, argued that labor strikes and walkouts would ‘step by step’ ‘lead to disorder, then Bolshevism, and finally chaos’ (Greene 1919). This was reinforced by the media which not only vilified the Soviet Union as an existential threat to American ideals, but also constructed internal political events such as the black civil rights movement and the labor movement as captured by a communist insurgency (McWirth & Griffin 2012). This era was also comprised of a coercive suppression of communist and anarchist dissent, and the implementation of a variety of countersubversion projects, policies, and legislation, including but not limited to, the Palmer raids, so-called ‘red flag laws’, the Espionage Act of 1917, and the Sedition Act of 1918 – all of which sought to criminalize even symbolic displays of communist or anarchist sympathizing.

After the Great Depression and the passing of the New Deal, congressional conservatives (as well as some Democrats) who viewed the program as ‘influenced by communists’ began once again stirring panic about the presence of communist subversives in government. This, compounded by rising tensions with the Soviet Union and the beginning of the Cold War, culminated in the reappearance of the more pervasive and long-lasting anti-communism of the second Red Scare (1947-1957). Popularly referred to as the era of ‘McCarthyism’ after its main proponent, Senator Joseph McCarthy (R-Wisconsin), the second Red Scare was not reducible to a single politician but in fact predated and outlasted McCarthy himself. This period was marked by the red-tagging of organizations suspected of harboring communist sympathies, the passing of a series of sedition laws, sensationalized congressional hearings, and a comprehensive ‘loyalty’ program that ensured that Americans were not ‘un-American’ communists, but ‘loyal patriots’

(Goldstein 2008; Brown 1958)⁴. Despite McCarthy's waning legitimacy, the winding down of loyalty programs and blacklists as well as a series of court rulings which limited the utility of sedition laws, anti-communism continued to remain a salient force in America through the 1960s and beyond – with sustained monitoring and disruption of those individuals or groups deemed to be communist or subversive, such as the black civil rights movement, the anti-war left, and feminist and sexual liberation movements, among others. (Rosenfeld 2013).

In his overview of the history of anti-communism in America, Michael Rogin (1967; 1987; 2019) introduced the concepts of 'countersubversive tradition' and 'political demonology' "to call attention to the creation of monsters as a continuing feature of American politics" (1987, xiii). Critiquing Richard Hofstadter's (1964) claim that McCarthyism was the result of a 'paranoid style' confined only to the margins of American society, Rogin attempted to demonstrate how the 'countersubversion tradition' was not a product of the fearful inclinations of a deluded mass of disaffected citizens, but a well-established tradition of elite politics themselves — precisely those whom Hofstadter praised for their pragmatism and rationality (1987). As Rogin argues, "the masses did not levy an attack on their political leaders; the attack was made by a section of the political elite against another and was nurtured by the very elites under attack." (1967, 217). He traces this tradition of countersubversion and demonology to the historical origins of the American state, explaining how it manifested in the state's suppression of actors or movements deemed subversive to American culture, targeting native indigenous peoples, blacks, and eventually working-class discontent.

Rogin (1987) specifies three major moments of countersubversion hysteria in American political culture. In the first, Rogin explains how whites, in the late eighteenth and early

⁴ The policy of listing communist organizations, or what is commonly referred to as 'red-tagging', targeted a variety of organizations such as the NAACP, the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) union, and even the National Council of Jewish Women – however, of the roughly 280 organizations on the Attorney General's official list, very few were actually involved in illegal activity, even by the draconian legal standards of the era (Goldstein 2008).

nineteenth centuries, were pitted against peoples of color, who were perceived as a threat to American ideals, conceived in White supremacist and Christian terms. Rogin explains how the seeds of demonology planted in this era germinated in the aftermath of the Civil War, growing into a robust politics of anti-communist countersubversion in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and culminating in a series of Red scares which ‘marked the half century between 1870 and 1920’ (ibid.). In this second countersubversive moment, the internal threat of domestic labor organizing and working-class dissent was married to fears of the immigrant alien outsider, wherein the former were viewed as captured by the pernicious influence of the latter. This second moment lasted until the end of the Second World War which “exaggerated responses to the domestic Communist menace” and as a result “narrowed the bounds of permissible political disagreement and generated a national security state” (p. 40). The Cold War is the third major moment in the history of American countersubversion and represents the consolidation of the national security state. Rogin explains how this third stage was marked by a shift wherein formerly alien subversive communists — who looked visibly different from Americans in earlier Red scares — were now indistinguishable from everyone else. As the visible differences that stigmatized communists dissolved, Rogin argues that “it became all the more important to discover who was under foreign control [...] Instead of standing simply for savagery and disorder, the subversive was the instrument of an alien order”. It was this third stage which merged the discourses of the first two behind a condemnation of ‘international terrorism’ by the Soviet Union: ‘wedding the ‘savage’ of the first moment in American demonology and the revolutionaries of the second to the Soviet agents of the third.’ (49)

Although there has been nothing like the Red Scares since, its legacies continue to live on in U.S. collective consciousness, even with the absence of a real communist threat. This

manifests as an institutionalized culture of countersubversion hysteria “that is linked to government attempts to disrupt and crush dissent movements” which call for social change and thus undermine the status quo (Berlet & Lyons 1998, 3). As Donner (1981) argues, in times of social and economic change “during which traditional institutions are under the greatest strain the need for the myth is especially strong as a means of transferring blame” (as cited in Berlet & Lyons 1998, 4). This is accompanied by the propagation of conspiracies that national security is endangered by a sinister plot of subversives who are intent on conspiring against ‘God and country’ and – relying on a “package of right-wing countersubversion beliefs with deep roots in xenophobia and nativism” – resembles much of the ‘moral panic’ that was so prevalent in the first and second Red Scares (7). Today, this countersubversion hysteria manifests in what Berlet and Lyons (1998) call ‘centrist-extremist theory’ – a general aversion to political radicalism and, similar to the totalitarian paradigm explicated above, functions to blur the distinctions between the ‘radical-right’ and the ‘radical-left’, thus legitimizing the former as comparable to the latter (8). This even led Peter Viereck, a centrist conservative historian to remark that, in a twist of creative anti-communist irony, McCarthyism was “actually a leftist instinct behind a self-deceptive rightist veneer” (as cited in Berlet & Lyons 1998, 8).

Berlet (2012) relates this countersubversion hysteria to the birth of the Tea Party. He explains how right-wing populist rhetoric and producerist narratives were employed by power elites to enlist a mass base to defend their status, blaming economic, political and social tensions on ‘collectivists, communists, organized labor bosses, banksters and other scapegoated subversives and traitors’ (Berlet 2012, 1). This not only shifts attention away from the failures and contradictions of neoliberal capitalism, it also mobilizes a defense of unequal racial and gender hierarchies as part of the countersubversion effort (ibid.). Obscured by a veil of economic

anti-collectivism, “Tea party activists can use the economic argument to mask their anger at politicians who tolerate gay marriage, feminists, abortionists, Black presidents, and the wave of dark-skinned immigrants polluting our nation” (Berlet 2012, 5). Berlet (2012) traces the anti-communist tide within the Tea Party movement to the construction of a culture war wherein Christian cultural conservatives, allied with economic conservatives, propagate the notion that a ‘secular humanist demon’ (read: leftist) is eroding Christian and American values (24). This idea of the ‘culture war’ was born in the era of the ‘retrospective paradigm’ mentioned above, with Patrick Buchanan’s 1992 ‘Culture Wars’ address to the Republican National Convention as the linchpin which ‘invoked support for specific right-wing ideological positions on the economy, gender roles, and white racial solidarity [...] and the conservative critique of multiculturalism and ‘political correctness’ (Berlet 2012, 25).

Anti-Communism and the Radical-Right Cultural Marxist Conspiracy

As mentioned above, anti-communism, although manifest across the political spectrum, adopts different forms depending on the position of its articulation. Despite its salience in mainstream Right online media, anti-communism takes on an even more extreme form among the radical- and alt-right. Employing a “cultural Marxist conspiracy” theory (CMC), the radical-right deepens the narratives of anti-communism along severely more conspiratorial lines. Theorising a link between ‘political correctness’ and a sinister plot to demolish Western civilization, CMC is a reformulation of the old Nazi *Kulturbolschewismus* or ‘cultural Bolshevism’ conspiracy wherein the dual threat of a subversive Bolshevik-Jewish intellectual class seeks to destabilize traditional conceptions of nation, family, and identity (Mirrlees 2018). If Cultural Marxism, as a school of thought, emerged in the 1930s with the Frankfurt School, Cultural Marxism as a conspiracy theory initially emerged in the US following the fall of the

Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the Soviet Union⁵. Despite the disappearance of the communist threat, a plethora of conservative literature emerged in the 1990s which, challenging the naivety of the claim that the Cold War was in fact over, argued that the fight against communism was far from finished – it had merely shifted from the economic to the cultural sphere, from an external threat to an internal one (Jamin 2018). According to its main proponents, following the failure of political Marxism to establish itself in the West, in the 1930s, a group of Marxist Jewish intellectuals from the Frankfurt School and their ‘allies’ attempted (and largely succeeded) to destroy ‘white, patriarchal, Western culture ‘from the inside’ (Lux & Jordan 2019). This is an attempt to “discredit institutions such as the nation, the homeland, traditional hierarchies, authority, family, Christianity, traditional morality in favour of the emergence of an ultra-egalitarian and multicultural, rootless and soulless global nation” (Jamin 2014).

Jamin (2014; 2018) argues that among CMC interlocuters, William Lind’s work is ‘without a doubt, the most complete, most often cited, and most commented on among the core texts of the CMC and it has been unanimously cited as “the” reference since 2004’ (5)⁶. In a

⁵ As Joan Braune (2019) argues, ‘Cultural Marxism’ as specified in the CMC has never really existed as a ‘school of thought’ but, as a moniker used by the right to describe a particular intellectual movement – namely, Critical Theory and the Frankfurt School, ‘Cultural Marxism’ lumps together critical theorists with feminists and postmodernists. She goes on to assert that “Cultural Marxism does not exist—not only is the conspiracy theory version false, but there is no intellectual movement by that name.” (3).

⁶ Jamin (2018) argues, the CMC “draws on the same set of core texts [...] giving the appearance of a huge literature but using at the end only a few common sources” (5). These include, but are not limited to: “Michael Minnicino’s (1992) article “The Frankfurt School and ‘Political Correctness’” in *Fidelio* magazine; Gerald Atkinson’s (1999) article entitled “What is the Frankfurt School (and its effect on America)?” on the informational website *Western Voices World News*; William Lind’s (2000) article “The Origins of Political Correctness” on the website of the conservative institute, *Accuracy in Academia*, and taken from different conferences held in 2000 by the same organization; John Fonte’s (2000) article “Why there is a culture war” in a “policy review” by the Hoover Institution at Stanford University; a multi-authored work called “Political Correctness: A Short History of an Ideology” published by the Free Congress Foundation in November 2004 under the editorship of William Lind (2004); and finally, a shorter and more recent article by William Lind (2009), “The roots of political correctness” on the website of *The American Conservative* magazine.” (ibid.)

multi-authored work entitled *Political Correctness: A Short History of an Ideology* (2004) Lind's chapter "What is 'Political Correctness'", argues that a 'new all-powerful state ideology' is overtaking the United States (5). He labels this ideology 'political correctness' and swiftly associates it with Cultural Marxism, describing the latter as "Marxism translated from economic into cultural terms" (ibid.). Lind argues that this politically correct cultural Marxism "declare[s] certain groups virtuous and other evil *a priori*" – the former being 'blacks, Hispanics, Feminist women, homosexuals' and the latter being 'white men' (ibid., 6). Political correctness is a central concept of CMC and, while always vague in its articulation, refers to the idea that 'criticism of chauvinism, racism, or capitalist operation is an affront to the free speech rights of conservatives specifically, and white males in general' (Lux & Jordan 2019, 7). This is congruent with Lind's claim that Cultural Marxists must accuse their enemies of racism, anti-Semitism, or homophobia to insulate the process of cultural subversion from criticism (Jamin 2018). Relying on conspiratorial logic, any attempt at criticizing the CMC is deemed to be 'Marxist brainwashing' as Marxists have apparently already infiltrated 'Universities, schools, the entertainment industry, the media, and even entire governments [...] deploying postmodernism to destroy critical thinking" (ibid.). Thus, in a strange conjuring of the 'purity threat', external actors such as 'Marxist Jews' and 'Jihadist Muslims' are aided by internal subversives such as elites, socialists, 'deviants', and university lecturers in a project of intentional cultural demolition which defames any attempt to celebrate white, Western Culture as 'fascist', and promotes everything from the 'civil rights agenda, anti-racism, human rights, globalization, 'corporate capitalism', ecological ideology, 'health and safety', 'social justice' and 'political correctness' –all in the name of destroying Western civilization (Lux & Jordan 2019, 7).

'New Media' and Political Radicalization

In the context of the interregnum stipulated above, wherein the legitimacy of the dominant neoliberal paradigm is waning, political polarization has precipitated a general distrust in mainstream news media. This is supported by several polls (Brenan, 2020; Swift 2019), which describe American's trust in mass media as 'sinking to a new low'. Growing distrust in "old media" (journalism, television, radio, newspapers, etc.) has been accompanied by a concomitant rise in online "new media" (social media). One such "new media" platform that has been increasingly predominant in filling the void left behind by the demise of "old media" has been YouTube, where what Rebecca Lewis (2018) labels the Alternative Influence Network (AIN) has flourished. Claiming to provide an alternative media source for viewers to consume news and political commentary outside the normal channels of print media, the AIN is comprised of a wide variety of scholars, pundits, and internet celebrities from across the Right-spectrum – from mainstream conservatives and libertarians to self-identified white nationalists (Lewis, 2018). Despite a wide breadth of voices, the variety of actors operating within the AIN are all united in their mutual apathy for contemporary social justice movements and a general proclivity for reactionary and revanchist ideas (Lewis 2018).

Given that YouTube is the second most popular social network (after Facebook), with over 73% of Americans frequenting the site (this number jumps to 94% for 18- to 24-year-olds), and that much of its political content is dominated by the Right, it is a central medium for the dissemination of extremist and radical ideas among the general population (Kessel 2019; Whyman 2017). Despite being ignored by much of the literature on disinformation and the rise of the radical-right, as Lewis (2018) argues, "understanding the circulation of extremist political content does not just involve fringe communities and anonymous actors [...] it requires us to scrutinize polished, well lit, microcelebrities and the captivating videos that are easily available

on the pages of the internet’s most popular video platform” (6). Lux and Jordan (2019) mirror this sentiment, and in attempting to find the link between the fringe and the center, argue that a “focus on young, working-class – usually American – white supremacists sharing extremist material over the Internet masks incidences of closely related racist, conspiracist [...] misogynist and ‘anti-elitist’ ideology in wider, often middle-class, mainstream media, politics and social policy discourse” (2). This has led many to stipulate a possible ‘radicalization pathway’ on YouTube (Ribeiro et al. 2020; Agarwal & Sureka 2014; Sureka et. al 2010) wherein audiences are exposed to increasingly extreme content which precipitates a “change in beliefs, feelings, and behaviors in directions that increasingly justify intergroup violence and demand sacrifice in defence of the ingroup” (McCauley & Moskalenko 2008: 416). However, because most of the aforementioned studies of YouTube ‘radicalization pathways’ remain largely positivistic, relying on big data and tracking hundreds of users across channels, they forgo any real discussion of the ideological *content* and *form* of the discourses across groups and their potential overlap.

What is of special interest here is the role of anti-communist discourse in fomenting a stepwise exposure and interpellation of increasingly radical content. In constructing the current conjuncture as marked by the presence of a growing totalitarianism, anti-communism can provide an impetus for ‘intergroup violence in defense of the ingroup’ as it raises the stakes of political action beyond mere political disagreement to a ‘war for the heart of the nation’, portraying the communist threat as a real and pressing danger to traditional American values. Thus, to better understand the ‘radicalization pipeline’, focus must be directed to those YouTube voices that sit on the boundary between mainstream news media and the alt-right and alt-light channels – the subtlety of which lends them a unique legitimacy that not only leads to the potential radicalization of the viewer towards the alt-right, but also mainstreams anti-communist

conservative logics through short, popular, persuasive, and professionally made videos. It is these videos that coax in well-meaning liberals and centrists who, despite potentially harboring resentment towards ‘PC culture’, don’t yet associate it with totalitarianism or see it as battle for freedom itself, as the anti-communists would like to have it.

Methods

To unearth the nature and form of mainstream conservative anti-communist discourse on YouTube and specify its role in begetting the ‘radicalization pipeline’ discussed above, this project analyzes the discourses of two of the largest and most prolific conservative groups on the platform: PragerU and Turning Point USA (TPUSA). Together, these organizations have over 1 billion views on YouTube, allowing them to extend well beyond the confines of what Major (2020) calls the right-wing ‘countersphere’ and infiltrate the mainstream. In this sense, these groups act as a ‘foyer’ of radicalization, where unsuspecting viewers are potentially lured into common sense arguments about the dangers of progressivism, potentially easing the transition to the more radical online content of the alt-right. These organizations were chosen not only for their impressive size and reach, but also because they are positioned on the edge of the so-called ‘rabbit hole’ of radicalization, propagating anti-communist discourse without recourse to explicitly racist, sexist, or homophobic rhetoric. To uncover the anti-communist discourse which pervades these ‘new media’ organizations, a small sample of seven PragerU and seven TPUSA videos were selected and hand coded. Only videos which explicitly discuss socialism or communism were included in the sample. These sampled videos are treasure troves of anti-communist discourse, providing a corpus of rich data on how conservatives construct the left as dangerous, evil, and totalitarian.

Given that the goal of this research project is primarily descriptive – seeking to explicate the themes, premises, and multitude of meanings within conservative anti-communist discourse and its relationship to the radical-right – it will employ an interpretive research design which privileges ‘depth over breadth’ and seeks to uncover “human meaning making in [the] context” of neoliberalism’s waning legitimacy and the rise of the Right (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea 2015, 108-109). In attempting to describe and interpret conservative anti-communist discourse, this project provides a foundation for further causal or explanatory research. To do so, it will employ some central concepts of Laclau and Mouffe’s Discourse Theory (DT), integrating them within the larger framework of Fairclough’s three-dimensional Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA).

In fact, Fairclough, in his work with Chouliaraki (1999), himself advocates for such an approach, demonstrating the use of concepts such as *articulation* and *equivalence/difference* in unearthing hegemonic discourses and the attendant struggles over discursive predominance. Despite important distinctions between the epistemologies of DT and CDA, an in-depth comparison of the two theories is beyond the scope of this paper. That being said, the main difference between the two paradigms is where their interlocutors demarcate the discursive and non-discursive fields. DT views the social world as wholly constituted by discourse, whereas CDA distinguishes between discursive and non-discursive practices. As Rear (2013) explains, ‘if the historical materialism of Marxist theory occupied the extreme position of discourse being entirely constituted by economic materialism, Laclau and Mouffe would be at the opposite end, while [Fairclough’s] CDA would be somewhere between the two’ (12). Thus, in contrast to the all-encompassing and contingent nature of discourse as defined by DT, CDA views discursive and non-discursive fields as dialectically conjoined – both constituted by and constitutive of the ‘structural relations of dependency such as class, ethnicity, and gender’ (ibid.,13).

To capture the interaction between the ‘structural relations of dependency’ and the discourses which they produce and reproduce, Fairclough (1992) introduces a three-dimensional framework which combines the dimension of text, discursive practice, and social practice. The former, the dimension of *text*, refers to the ‘micro’, or the “linguistic features of text, such as coherence, lexicalisation, and structure” (as cited in Rear 2013, 17). The second dimension, that of *discursive practice*, refers to ‘meso-level’ processes related to the “production and consumption of text” and the third dimension, *social practice*, refers to the wider ‘macro-level’ processes of ideology construction, and, by drawing on the concepts of intertextuality and interdiscursivity, specifies the context and social milieu in which a particular discourse exists (Rear 2013, 18). According to Kristeva (2002), intertextuality implies the ‘insertion of history into a text and of this text into history’ or as Fairclough (1992) remarks, refers to ‘how a text responds to, reaccentuates, and reworks past texts’ (39; 102). Interdiscursivity is similar in this regard, though it refers to a more general and abstract borrowing of features of other pre-existent discourses or genres (Bhatia 2010, 35). In both instances, emphasis is placed on how the ‘communicative event’ incorporates other pre-existing discourses (ibid.).

To understand how the discourses of anti-communism seek to acquire hegemonic status, this project will also rely on the Discourse Theory of Laclau and Mouffe (2014). In applying Discourse Theory (DT) to anti-communism in Poland, Golinczak (2019) explains how anti-communist discourse has become predominant by providing an overview of the concepts of ‘hegemonic demands’ and ‘hegemonic strategy’ as outlined by Nonhoff’s (2018) operationalization of Laclau and Mouffe’s (2014) Discourse Theory.

The latter define discourse as “the structured totality resulting from the articulatory practice”, i.e. from the practice of differentiating between elements and the concomitant

production of meaning through the incomplete and temporary privileging of ‘discursive points’ (2014, 91). Despite the incomplete and temporary nature of political discourse, Nonhoff (2018) argues that, at some point, political discourse will make reference to a common good (or a similar concept such as ‘freedom’, ‘democracy’, or ‘security’). However, given that such a common good can never be discursively present nor physically manifest, it must be symbolized by a concrete discursive element. Nonhoff (2018) argues that this is an ‘impossible articulation’ which resembles “a kind of discursive short circuit between a universal that cannot be represented and a particular discursive element that wants to do just that” (74). These ‘discursive elements’ are what Laclau calls ‘empty signifiers’ – a space of ‘lack’ which, due to its emptiness, ‘continually invites new attempts at symbolically filling it’ (ibid.). Although Laclau and Mouffe introduce this concept of the ‘empty signifier’ to denote positive claims which unite democratic demands in a ‘chain of equivalence’, Stavrakakis (1999) distinguishes between positive and negative ‘empty signifiers’: “the signifier of exclusion [...] is also an empty signifier [...] a particular signifier is ‘emptied’ from its concrete content in order to represent a negative universal” (80-81). In short, meaning is not fixed and “[t]o contend that there exists such a given [fixed] meaning must be considered a hegemonic move in itself” (as cited in Golinczak 2019, 97). In other words, hegemony, or what Critchley (2004) calls “hegemonization”, is an attempt at achieving the ‘mythical fullness’ of a ‘fully reconciled society’ (Laclau 2005, 119) – it represents the ‘attempt to *fix* [emphasis added] the meaning of social relations’ (Critchley 2004, 113).

Operationalizing Discourse Theory

Laclau and Mouffe define hegemony as the process “by which a certain particular content overflows its own particularity and becomes the incarnation of the absent fullness of society” (as cited in Golinczak 2019, 97-98). To explicate the process of hegemony and demonstrate how it

works through political discourse, Nonhoff (2018) develops a typology of ‘demands’ or ‘elements’, and ‘core stratagems’, which specifies an analytical procedure for operationalizing DT.

Discursive Demands

It begins, at the smallest unit of discourse, with what Laclau calls a “demand”. Nonhoff (2018) stipulates three types of hegemonic demands: cumulative, subsuming, and encompassing.

The former, cumulative demands, articulates a necessary condition for resolving the lacking universal. Because they can be accompanied by further demands oriented towards the remedying of the universal, demands of this type are labelled cumulative. For example, Trump’s repeal of funding for educational institutions that teach Critical Race Theory is a very specific demand that can be easily supplemented by additional demands such as banning Critical Race Theory altogether or red-tagging Marxist or left-leaning professors.

Next, subsuming demands are also formulated as a necessary condition for remedying the lacking universal but “at the same time entails the assumption that its fulfilment is a sufficient condition for the fulfilment of other demands that are oriented toward the common good” (Nonhoff 2018, 75). For example, a demand to defend the US against the pervasiveness of cultural Marxism also implies that a successful defense would protect the doctrines of Christianity and “traditional family values” from the seditious influences of feminism and “gender ideology”, etc. (Golinczak, 2019).

Finally, encompassing demands refer to the ‘maximization of a subsuming demand’, denoting a sufficient condition for overcoming the lack of the universal (Nonhoff 2018, 76). An example would be Francis Fukuyama’s (1992) famed contention that with the downfall of the Soviet Union, liberalism had become the objective “end of history”, implying that the dissolution

of Soviet communism meant that liberalism, no longer challenged by institutionalized alternative models, had reached its ‘mythical fullness’.

Discursive Relations

Hegemony analysis also focuses on discursive relations between elements and Nonhoff (2018) distinguishes five types: difference, equivalence, contrariness, super difference, and representation.

The first type of discursive relation, the relation of difference (“x is different from y”), is the foundational relation between all discursive elements (Golinczak 2019, 99). In other words, all other types of discursive relations or elements (equivalence, contrariness, super difference) belong to a general relation of difference (with the exception of the relation of representation) (Nonhoff 2018, 73). The relation of difference can exist on its own, but “without the other three types of discursive space, would be a flat and even space of simple difference [...] without specific markings” (ibid.) The relation of difference can be exemplified in the simple distinction between, say, “conservativism” and “liberalism”.

Next, the relation of equivalence (“x is different from y, but in relation to a both go hand in hand”) (ibid.). A relevant example of this relation would be the theory of totalitarianism which, despite important distinctions between communism and fascism, portrays them as two sides of the same totalitarian coin.

Following this, the relation of contrariness (“x is different from y and in relation to a it is blocked by y”) articulates the inability to draw a connection between two elements and puts them in opposition to each other (Golinczak 2019, 100). In this relation two contrary elements are not opposites in every regard, “but one element blocks another one in regard to ‘a’” (Nonhoff 2018, 73). Golinczak (2019) provides the example of the oft-repeated claim in neoliberal discourse that

contrasts the mentality of the independent “entrepreneurial spirit” to that of the parasitic “homo sovieticus”, implying that the latter is incompatible with financial independence and the proper functioning of the free market (100).

Next, the relation of super-difference (“x” is different from y, and it has nothing to do at all with “y”) demarcates “discursive arenas”, articulating that the discursive elements are not only different, “but that there is no connection between them whatsoever” (Golinczak 2019, 100). A paradigmatic example of this relation would be the assertion that communism has nothing to do with ‘freedom’ or democracy’ – or as one spokesman for the Trump campaign argued, the election is a “binary decision between freedom and socialism” (Arnold 2020 [Bloomberg]).

Finally, in the relation of representation (“x” stands for “y”) one element symbolizes a second one. Take for example Trump’s claim that steadfast centrist Joe Biden is a “Trojan horse for socialism”, thus implying that the Democratic party represents America’s descent into socialism (Fabian & Moshin 2020).

Hegemonic ‘Core’ Stratagems

The aforementioned discursive relations are integrated into a larger hegemonic struggle, or what Nonhoff (2018) calls ‘stratagems’. Nonhoff (2018) specifies nine such stratagems, three of which constitute what he calls ‘core stratagems’ because they are adequate in assessing the nature and form of the given hegemonic strategy. Although they are always entangled and overlapping, the separate examination of each ‘stratagem’ is useful for analytical purposes (Golinczak 2019).

The first ‘core stratagem’ is the ‘articulation of equivalences between different demands made with regard to the universal’. In this instance, the logic of equivalence articulates different

demands as equivalent so that a variety of actors can perceive them as their own. As Nonhoff (2018) explains, “your demand is actually the same as ours, so if our demand is fulfilled, so will yours be” (214). This leads to the formation of chains of equivalence wherein, similar to the relation of equivalence, discursive elements are different, but equivalent with regard to some other element (Golinczak 2019). Such chains of equivalences are formed negatively, and in opposition to a ‘constitutive outside’ are united in “their opposition to a common enemy” (Laclau 1996: 40-41).

The second ‘core stratagem’ is the ‘antagonistic division of discursive space’. It demarcates all the demands which do not resemble the central hegemonic demand and are tied together in its own opposing chain of equivalence (Nonhoff 2018). In this instance, “one’s own essential demand is contrasted with an antagonistic one, which is perceived and represented as the “core of all evil”” (Golinczak 2019, 102). The result is the construction of two opposing blocks of demands and their attendant chains of equivalence which are constantly remade and reformulated given the perpetual struggle over the discursive creation of meaning.

The third and final ‘core stratagem’ is that of ‘representation’. As previously mentioned, hegemonies are formed by reference to a specific discursive element which is meant to represent the universal. Thus, the stratagem of ‘representation’ unites the chain of equivalence, acting as the predominant “demand in which all particular demands are represented” (Golinczak 2019, 102).

PragerU and TPUSA

Before conducting an analysis of the textual and linguistic features of anti-communist discourse among conservative ‘new media’, or what Fairclough (1992) calls the ‘micro’ dimension, the ‘meso-level’ processes of ‘production and consumption’ which underlie PragerU

and TPUSA YouTube content must first be specified. To do so, a brief synopsis of PragerU and TPUSA will uncover the donor networks which fund these organizations and attempt to explicate their central aims and organizational missions.

PragerU was founded by Allen Estrin and talk show host and writer Dennis Prager. It is a 501(c)(3) non-profit media organization that creates videos on a variety of political, economic, and social topics from a conservative perspective. Given its non-profit status, PragerU relies on conservative donors such as the Wilks family, and the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation, the Morgan Family Foundation as well as receiving donations from individuals such as Republican mega-donor Sheldon Adelson and conservative Cinemark founder Lee Roy Mitchell (Bowles, 2020). Despite its name, PragerU is not an academic institution, but rather, as is stated on their website's 'About Us' page, is focused on 'changing minds through the creative use of digital media [...] educating millions of Americans and young people about the values that make America great' (PragerU accessed May 2, 2021). The organization was founded to offset what Dennis Prager regards as the 'undermining of college education by the left' or as their website claims "to provoke thought and change minds by presenting an alternative to the leftist worldview that saturates most of our nation's media, entertainment, and academia" (WikiZero, PragerU accessed May 2, 2021; PragerU accessed May 2, 2021). Their YouTube channel has garnered over 1 billion views and reaches 4 million daily viewers on average (PragerU, accessed May 2, 2020). According to internal polls of its viewership, PragerU claims that over "70% of viewers' minds were changed on at least one issue after watching PragerU videos" and that "85% of viewers say they reference PragerU videos during ideological discussions" (ibid.). Thus, PragerU's online content is not only popular, but also persuasive. The majority of their viewership is confined to their famed 5-minute video series, which provide brief overviews of

different topics from immigration to healthcare and will make up the bulk of the following discourse analysis.

TPUSA is a right-wing organization founded in 2012 by Charlie Kirk and William Montgomery and advocates for conservative narratives on university campuses which are perceived as hotbeds of ‘cultural Marxism’ and ‘islands of totalitarianism’ (Walsh, 2019). The organization is funded by conservative megadonors like Bernard Marcus’ the Marcus Foundation, the Ed Uihlein Family Foundation, the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation, as well as by a variety of Koch-linked organizations such as Donors Capital Fund (Kotch, 2020). Famous for their oft-repeated slogan “socialism sucks”, TPUSA’s mission is to “identity, educate, train, and organize students to promote the principles of freedom, free markets, and limited government” (tpusa.com accessed May 2, 2021). According to their website’s ‘About Us’ page, they believe that the ‘the United States is the greatest country in the history of the world’, ‘the US constitution is the most exceptional political document ever written’ and that ‘capitalism is the most moral and proven economic system ever discovered’ (ibid.). In addition to posting a plethora of ‘educational’ conservative and right-wing content on YouTube, TPUSA also organizes student clubs across university campuses, hosts conferences and annual summits, lobbies for conservative candidates in student elections, and, most controversially, compiles a ‘professor watchlist’ to expose professors which TPUSA claims “discriminate against conservative students and advance leftist propaganda in the classroom” (ADL 2020). Regarding their YouTube content, TPUSA has a large following – having produced over 1,500 videos which have amassed over 52 million total views (YouTube accessed May 2, 2021). Much like PragerU, which TPUSA has worked closely alongside, the group has begun producing short

‘educational videos’ which propagate anti-communist rhetoric and claim to provide “ammo to win America’s culture war” (Isabel Brown, TPUSA YouTube, accessed May 2, 2021).

Analysis

Prager U

Is Communism Moral?

In the video entitled *Is Communism Moral* (PragerU 2021), Dennis Prager attempts to construct communism as morally opprobrious and inherently evil. He begins by abstracting from the ideological content of communism by proclaiming that “motives are much less important than behavior” (ibid.). This introductory statement foregrounds the discussion to come by obscuring the intentions and motivations of the ‘militant subjects’ who have struggled for social revolution – reducing their revolutionary intent to a mere illusory cover for the inherently authoritarian and violent outcomes that result from the socialist experiment.

Defining communism as “everyone shares everything equally” and capitalism as “the individual pursues success to the best of his abilities”, Prager draws on producerist narratives which obscure the central critique levied against capitalism by socialists– namely, the lack of democratic ownership over the means of production.⁷ Rather than defining capitalism as an economic system of private ownership, it is portrayed as a system which allows the individual to self-actualize and ‘pursue success’ (PragerU 2021).

Prager then argues that “capitalism has produced freedom and it alone has lifted millions from poverty, while communism has kept millions impoverished and without exception crushed freedom” (PragerU 2021). The depiction of capitalism as singularly and universally prosperity-

⁷ In the context of this discourse analysis, the terms ‘socialism’ and ‘communism’ will be used interchangeably. Although there are important differences between the two, wherein the former is meant to denote an incomplete and transitory precursor to the latter (at least among leftist theorists), both PragerU and TPUSA employ the terms interchangeably and so this project does not distinguish between them in the following discourse analysis.

conferring and void of any structural faults is contrasted with the inherently ‘freedom-crushing evil of communism’. Thus, through the creation of a relation of *super difference*, “capitalism enables a decent society” and “communism, whatever its stated intentions, leads to evil” (ibid.).

Prager claims that despite “creating modern totalitarianism”, “people either ignore or deny the evil of this ideology” (PragerU 2021). Compounding the widespread denial of communism’s “moral record” by willfully ignorant socialists, the communist threat is reified by the claim that ‘communists were just normal people’ – “which means that any society, including free ones, can devolve into communism or some analogous evil” (ibid.). This not only reemphasizes the evil of communism, it also negates the concerted effort on behalf of elites to block socialism’s implementation in America, instead constructing it as a real and present danger to American society.

Prager then goes on to cite the *Black Book of Communism* as an “authoritative” source on the crimes and death toll of the socialist experiment.⁸ Next, he targets the willfully ignorant socialists themselves, proclaiming that “those who do not confront real evil often make up evils – like systemic racism in 21st century America, or toxic masculinity or patriarchy – that are much easier to confront” (PragerU 2021). In this instance, Prager discredits any call for reckoning with structural racism and sexism in America by portraying such phenomena as mere political constructions and leftist fictions used by socialists to detract from the crimes of communism. Implicit in this claim is the *subsuming demand* that if we just acknowledge that structural racism

⁸ As several academics have pointed out (Behr et al., 2020; Traverso, 2017; Ghodsee & Schon, 2020; Ghodsee, 2014), *The Black Book of Communism* is largely discredited as a fallacious portrayal of Soviet and communist history that is more of an anti-communist tirade than a genuine recounting of facts. After its publication, two of the prominent contributors to the volume (Jean-Louis Margolin and Nicolas Werth) attacked the editor, Stéphane Courtois, eventually distancing themselves from the book because as Ghodsee and Schon remark, “Courtois’ obsession with reaching the number of 100 million led to careless scholarship” (2018). There was also criticism levied against the book’s theoretical conception of ‘totalitarianism’ as well, which underestimated the brutality of Nazism, and claimed that ‘single minded focus on the Jewish genocide’ had obscured the crimes of communism.

and sexism do not exist, BIPOC and women would shed their ‘victim mentalities’ and realize that they are in fact already free⁹.

Prager concludes by citing the book of Psalms, asserting that “those of you who love god must hate evil [...] those of you who love people must hate evil. If you don’t hate communism, you don’t care about, much less love, people” (PragerU 2021). Employing Biblical passages to legitimize his argument, Prager insists that those who do not display aversion to communism are not only evil, but sacrilegious and anti-humanist.

Capitalism or Socialism: Which one is More Democratic?

In this video, narrated by conservative political pundit Dinesh D’Souza, capitalism is constructed as the more democratic alternative to socialism. Citing Irving Howe, D’Souza argues that socialism is the idea that “democracy in our political life should also be extended [...] into economic life” (PragerU 2020). He argues that “the basic idea here is that socialism is vindicated through its roots in popular consent. If a majority of people [...] declare something a public entitlement [...], they are justified in extracting resources from those who create the wealth to pay for it” (ibid.).

To dispel the persuasiveness of the socialist argument, D’Souza relies on three rebuttals. The first restates the Friedmanite claim that “genuine popular control of our government institutions is a mirage” (ibid.). In making this claim, proposed institutional structures of local and direct democracy such as referenda, worker cooperatives, neo-republicanism, syndicalism, and confederative communalism are all rendered moot – relegated to a ‘mirage’ of the left. This

⁹ This is based on the oft-repeated claim in the conservative counter-sphere that the existence of structural racism evaporated with the passing of the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Act and, as conservative economist Thomas Sowell argues racism is only “kept alive by politicians, race hustlers and people who get a sense of superiority by denouncing others as ‘racists.’” i.e. ‘the anti-racists are the real racists’ (Miller, 2020). The same can be said about the gender wage gap, which according to PragerU regular and Intellectual Dark Web superstar Jordan Peterson, is not due to structural inequities between sexes, but the result of inherited psychological preferences which predispose men to higher income earning positions than women (McIntyre, 2019).

is no surprise of course given that the construction of socialism as an inherently centralized, authoritarian, and anti-democratic system provides no room for discussion of alternative decentralized models of collective ownership.

The second rebuttal is that popular mandate does not determine whether a given politics is just or right. As he argues:

“if fifty one percent of Americans vote to confiscate the resources of a single person, say, Bill Gates, does that make it right? Under an authoritarian socialist government, a single dictator seizes the fruit of your labor. Everyone is against that. Under democratic socialism, a majority does. The end result is the same. You’ve been robbed.” (PragerU 2020).

According to the example D’Souza gives, the subject ‘you’ in the sentence ‘you’ve been robbed’ is billionaire Bill Gates. ‘Robbery’ is meant to denote high taxation under a socialist government. However, chances are that the viewer of this video would likely not be Bill Gates in this example, but the one receiving increased benefits from the revenues accrued by taxing billionaires like him. In phrasing the sentence in such a way, D’Souza gives the impression that socialism would render the viewer worse off.

The third rebuttal D’Souza employs to argue against socialism as more democratic than capitalism is the latter’s supposedly already direct democratic character. Employing the argument that as consumers, “we vote many times a day”, D’Souza claims that “only a fraction of citizens are eligible to vote at the ballot box, but every consumer votes in the marketplace” and thus, “the inequality socialists complain about is the result of popular mandate” (PragerU 2020). By arguing that ‘if you want fewer billionaires, stop buying their stuff’, D’Souza presupposes not only a perfect responsiveness between consumers and producers under capitalism, but also a market that is equally competitive between firms – something that according to Moraes et al. (2011) extends well beyond the scope of the consumer and requires the intervention

of policy makers (1063). Moreover, the outcome of this type of consumer citizenship is not democracy, but plutocracy. If purchasing power determines one's influence as a voter, it follows that those with more wealth have a greater vote than those who have less – thus preserving unequal social relations. As Scanlon (2001) asserts, “such approaches to consumer power suggest that all market participants are equal and free to choose, but consumer sovereignty is not adequate in ensuring the equality of rights associated with notions of citizenship.” (as cited in Moraes et al. 2011, 1065).

Relying on the logic of consumer voting to dispel socialism's appeal, D'Souza concludes by arguing that “we don't need socialism because we already have something more moral and more democratic. It's called capitalism.”.

Democratic Socialism is Still Socialism

In this video, conservative YouTube personality Steven Crowder attempts to dispel the appeal of democratic socialism, claiming that even if it is put to a vote, ‘socialism is still socialism’ (PragerU 2016). Reiterating D'Souza's (PragerU 2020) above contention concerning the moral ambiguity conferred by a ‘popular mandate’, Crowder argues that “just because we tossed something to a vote doesn't change what that something is, nor does it alter whether that something is inherently good or bad” (PragerU 2016). After citing Hamas and Mugabe as examples of electoral democracy's capacity to produce authoritarian outcomes, Crowder turns his attention to Venezuela.¹⁰

¹⁰ As Spielberg (2018) argues, Venezuela has been used ad nauseum by the right as exemplar of socialism's perils. In 2018, The White House Council of Economic Advisors (CEA) published a report titled “The Opportunity Costs of Socialism” which cites Venezuela 52 times as an example of socialism's unworkability. As Cusack (2018) asserts, “just as capitalism itself was not to blame for the pacted corruption and murderous repression of prior governments that created the popular discontent and personal drive which brought Chavez to power, socialism itself is not to blame for the creeping authoritarianism of a Maduro regime that is now preventing replacement of a failing government and model”. He concludes by stating that, “in many ways, the blame game is a red herring, an exercise in cherry-picking to promote greater state intervention or the “free” market”.

He draws an implicit causal relation between the socialist nature of the Chavez administration and the current economic and political crisis besetting the nation, arguing that “Hugo Chavez [...] was democratically elected as a socialist. Well, how'd that work out for Venezuela? Well, it's now on the brink of collapse, despite it being one of the most resource rich nations in the entire world.” (PragerU 2016).

Crowder then shifts focus to Scandinavia, criticizing their social democracies for “stifling high tax rates” and cherry-picking policies like Denmark’s ‘180% tax new car tax’ as evidence of socialism’s unworkability in the West.

Next, Crowder invokes human nature as evidence of socialism unfeasibility, claiming that “human nature will invariably pull certain people toward individualism and success and others towards laziness and collectivism; [...] the tension between the makers and takers always, always leads to socialism’s inevitable collapse” (PragerU 2016). This draws a *relation of difference* that ties one’s political inclinations to personal attributes: capitalists are portrayed ‘individualistic and successful’ and socialists are ‘collectivist and lazy’. This antagonism is compounded by the visual representation of the ‘makers’ as made up of a doctor and a well-shaved professional in a suit, and the ‘takers’ as beard-ridden hippies in tie-dye.

Crowder argues that socialism is greedy because it seeks to ‘take from someone else something that you haven’t earned’ and thus, “unlike capitalism and free enterprise which can only occur through voluntary transaction, socialism can only occur at gunpoint.” (PragerU, 2016). By claiming that, in the last instance, socialism is about ‘scary men with guns taking you away’, Crowder is portraying socialism as inherently violent and coercive (ibid.). As he goes on to argue: “so long as the people having their stuff taken away at gunpoint are in the minority and the majority feels that they'll get to benefit from more said taking stuff, you'll always be able to

win that decision through a popular vote and claim the moral high ground through democracy” (ibid.).

Crowder concludes by asserting that “Putting the word democratic in front of your socialism doesn't make it any inherently more moral nor less violent. Did you get that American wannabe socialists? Also, get a job. Please, like a real job. You'll probably have to shave first” (PragerU, 2016). In concluding in this way, Crowder reiterates the producerist narratives which saturate the Right's portrayal of socialists as unemployed parasites who do not know what it's like to work a 'real job'.

Is Fascism Right or Left?

In this video, narrated again by Dinesh D'Souza, fascism is reworked to distance it from the Right and attribute it to the political legacies and modern incarnations of socialism.

D'Souza begins by declaring that ‘almost no one knows the philosopher of fascism’ (PragerU, 2017). He claims that “this is not because he doesn't exist, but because historians, most of whom are on the political left, had to erase him from history in order to avoid confronting Fascism's actual beliefs” (ibid.). In framing it this way, D'Souza reinforces the idea that not only is the academy dominated by ‘leftists’, but that said leftists have intentionally conspired to repudiate the true nature of fascism and conceal its socialist underpinnings.

Obscuring important distinctions between fascists and socialists as well as the reality that both viewed the other as their natural enemy, D'Souza cites Giovanni Gentile as the philosophical father of fascism, immediately associating him with Karl Marx and portraying him as a “man of the left” and a “committed socialist” (PragerU 2017). This *relation of equivalence* positions socialism as equivalent to fascism.

Pointing to the word ‘Nazi’ as a contraction of National Socialist to prove fascisms leftist character and negating Hitler’s violent hatred towards communists, D’Souza argues that the philosophy of fascism “closely parallels that of the modern left” (PragerU 2017). He targets “progressives who champion the centralized state” arguing that “state directed capitalism is precisely what German and Italian fascists implemented in the nineteen thirties” (ibid.). This is contrasted with conservatives who want “small government so that individual liberty can flourish” (ibid.). In framing it in this way, D’Souza gives the impression that progressives calling for increased government programs and corporate regulation are, in actuality, calling for the return of the ‘totalitarian state’ described by Mussolini in his *Doctrina del Fascismo*. This creates a *relation of difference* which is demarcated from the above *relation of equivalence* between socialism and Nazism wherein libertarian-minded conservatives are constructed as the only remaining bulwark against the ‘left-fascist’ offensive.

D’Souza closes with the claim that “To acknowledge Gentile, is to acknowledge that fascism bears a deep kinship to the ideology of today's left, so they will keep Gentile where they've got him: dead, buried and forgotten.” (PragerU 2017). The irony here is that this exact argument can be applied to the claims made in this video and the Right’s treatment of fascism more generally; conservatives don’t want to acknowledge that fascism bears a deep kinship to the ideology of today’s Right, ‘so they will keep Gentile where they’ve got him’— firmly placed in the socialist camp. D’Souza concludes with the *cumulative demand* that “we should remember, [that fascism is a phenomenon of the left] or the ghost of fascism will continue to haunt us”.

Why isn’t Communism as Hated as Nazism?

Claiming that communism has generated an “unapparelled amount of human suffering”, in this video, Dennis Prager attempts to portray communism as just as evil as Nazism. (PragerU 2017a). He asks, “why communist is less a term of revulsion than Nazi” and proposes six reasons.

The first reason is a supposed “widespread ignorance of the communist record”. Prager claims that “whereas both right and left loathe Nazism and teach its evil history, the left, and I’m talking about the left, not traditional liberals [...] has never loathed communism. And since the left dominates academia, almost no one teaches communism’s evil history” (PragerU 2017a). This reiterates the oft-repeated claim that higher education is ‘dominated by the left’ and that dishonest leftists who want to insulate communism’s record from scrutiny have intentionally obscured it from view. Also of interest here is the relation of *difference* between ‘leftists’ and ‘traditional liberals’, which draws a concomitant relation of *equivalence* between ‘traditional liberals’ and conservatives in their mutual condemnation of ‘communism’s evil history’ (PragerU 2017a).

The second reason Prager gives is the ‘unprecedented and unparalleled’ uniqueness of the Nazi Holocaust. What is of interest here is the logical inconsistency of the claim that both Nazism and communism are simultaneously ‘unparalleled’ in their evil. To get around this, Prager makes a distinction between breadth and form, arguing that “the communists killed far more people than the Nazis, but never matched the Holocaust in the systematization of genocide” (PragerU 2017a). Borrowing from the logics of the totalitarian paradigm, Prager portrays Nazism and communism as equally unparalleled manifestations of totalitarian evil, thus implying a distinction without difference and further muddying the opposition between them.

The third reason rearticulates Prager's above claim that 'motives matter less than behavior' (PragerU 2021), maintaining that "communism is based on nice sounding theories. Nazism isn't." (PragerU 2017a). Prager contends that the 'leftist intellectuals' who write history "dismiss the evils of communists as perversions of true communism, but they regard Nazi atrocities correctly as the logical and inevitable results of Nazism" (ibid.). In making this claim, Prager not only conceals important distinctions between the ideology of communism and fascism but also portrays 'leftist intellectuals' as intentionally dishonest and seeking to rewrite history to buttress their dogmatic commitment to communism.

Reason number four is that "Germans have thoroughly exposed the evils of Nazism, have taken responsibility for them and have attempted to atone for them, Russians have not done anything similar regarding Lenin's or Stalin's horrors" (PragerU 2017a). Prager says that "until Russia and China and Vietnam and Cuba and North Korea acknowledge the evils their countries committed under communism, communism's evils will remain less known than the evils of the German state under Hitler." (ibid.). In this instance, Prager relies on a *cumulative demand* which portends that if communist countries reckoned with their 'evil' histories, communism would not be perceived as a moral economic system. This contrasts with the reality that these countries *are* portrayed as evil in Western media precisely because they are (or were) communist¹¹. This would suggest that, at least for American audiences, antipathy towards Nazism or communism is less the product of a given country's treatment of its own socialist or fascist past, and more the result of how the West has discursively constructed them as evil.

¹¹ See Gill, T. M. (2018). From Promoting Political Polyarchy to Defeating Participatory Democracy: U.S. Foreign Policy towards the Far Left in Latin America. *Journal of World-Systems Research*, 24(1), 72–95. <https://doi.org/10.5195/jwsr.2018.750>

The fifth reason is that “communists murdered mostly their own people, the Nazis, on the other hand killed very few fellow Germans” and “world opinion, that largely meaningless and amoral term, deems the murder of members of one's own group far less noteworthy than the murder of outsiders” (PragerU, 2017a). Setting aside the strangeness of the claim that ‘world opinion deems violence against insiders as less noteworthy than violence against outsiders’, fascist Germany did in fact maim and kill many of its own – these include not only the hundreds of thousands of German Jews killed in concentration camps, but also political dissidents such as communists or socialists, as well as all those Germans deemed to be “genetically defective”, including “the deaf, the blind, the physically disabled, homosexuals, the mentally ill, and alcoholics” among others (Friedman, 1990).

The last reason Prager gives for why Nazism is regarded with more revulsion than communism is that “in the view of the left, the last good war was World War Two, the war against German Nazism and Japanese fascism” (PragerU, 2017a). Prager argues that wars against communism such as the Korean war and the Vietnam war are ‘either viewed as immoral or simply ignored’ by the left.

Prager concludes by proclaiming that “until the left and all the institutions influenced by the left acknowledge how evil communism has been, we will continue to live in a morally confused world” (PragerU, 2017a). In this *encompassing demand*, until the left abandons its struggle for socialism and acknowledges that communism is as ‘evil’ and ‘immoral’ as Nazism, people will continue to support ‘socialist’ policies which are portrayed by Prager as ‘morally confused’.

What is Identity Socialism?

This video, again narrated by Dinesh D'Souza, attempts to show the relation between Marxism and 'identity politics' by tracing the influence of Frankfurt School theorist Herbert Marcuse's 'great refusal' in America. D'Souza begins by proclaiming:

“there is a new socialism in town, I call it identity socialism. The old socialism, the kind Karl Marx dreamed up, was all about the working class [...] But today's socialists couldn't care less about the guy in the hard hat. [...] Today's socialists are all about race, gender, and transgender rights. Class is an afterthought. To understand this is to understand the left's takeover of the college campus and all the ills that takeover has spawned from #metoo to Black Lives Matter, to girls competing against biological boys.” (PragerU 2021a).

In defining socialism in such terms, D'Souza is reiterating Lind's (2004) above-mentioned contention that the threat of communism has shifted from an economic project to a cultural one. Moreover, he portrays this 'new socialism' as unconcerned with class at all, constructing intersectionality as exclusively focused on identity rather than on the overlapping categories of class, race, gender, and sexuality. D'Souza also portrays anti-racist and anti-sexual assault movements such as BLM and #metoo, as well as the inclusion of transgender athletes in varsity sports, as 'ills' spawned by the 'left's takeover of the college campus' (PragerU 2021a). In this *relation of representation*, the 'ills' of #metoo, BLM, and transgender inclusion are particular elements that symbolize the identarian socialist overhaul.

Claiming that 'campus culture has metastasized into the culture of the whole society', D'Souza explains that “identity socialism is first and foremost about division, not just class division but now race division, gender division, and transgender division” (PragerU 2021a). As he argues, “Blacks and Latinos are in. Whites are out. Women are in. Men are out. Gays, bisexuals, transsexuals, transgenders are in. Heterosexuals are out. Illegals are in. Native born citizens are out” (ibid.). Rather than portraying 'identity socialism' as an ideology or movement which calls for the increased inclusion of marginalized groups into mainstream society, D'Souza

portrays it as a zero-sum game and thus inherently divisive and exclusionary. In this instance, the rights of illegals, BIPOC, gays, and transgender people come at the cost of native born straight white males. As he asserts, “the point for the left is not merely to include, but also to exclude” (PragerU 2021a).

D’Souza blames Frankfurt School theorist Herbert Marcuse for the birth of ‘identity socialism’, explaining that in the context of the civil strife of the 1960s, Marcuse was able to ‘transpose Marxist categories’ from class to race and gender, thus mobilizing “draft-dodging” students, “aggrieved” blacks, and “angry” feminists to support the ‘repudiation and overthrow of free market capitalism’ (PragerU 2021a). Although not explicitly conspiratorial, D’Souza frames the discussion as one where “Marcuse recognized they [students, blacks, feminists] [...] could be *taught* [emphasis added] to see themselves as an oppressed class”, suggesting that the radicalism of the anti-war, anti-racist, and anti-sexist movements had to be ‘taught’ and ‘learnt’ by some external or outside agent, rather than emerging as an authentic expression of legitimate grievances by these groups.

This conspiratorial tone is compounded by D’Souza’s concluding statement which argues that Marcuse’s ‘great refusal’ has now become the norm in America, he states that:

“over time, Marcuse believed the university could produce a new type of culture and that culture would then spill into the larger society to infect primary education, the news media and entertainment. Even big business – the hated capitalist class itself – would succumb. He was right. Identity socialism has arrived.” (PragerU 2021a).

In proclaiming that ‘identity socialism has arrived’ and relating it to Marcuse’s Marxist inclinations, D’Souza implies that the Frankfurt School’s project of ‘repudiating and overthrowing free market capitalism’ has been largely successful and that American culture is now overrun with revolutionary-minded ‘identity socialists’.

Who is Teaching Your Kids?

In this video, psychologist and conservative media personality Jordan Peterson explains that the left is now “indoctrinating young minds throughout the West with their resentment ridden ideology” (PragerU 2018). He argues that “they have made it their life mission to undermine Western civilization itself” and that “if you’re a taxpayer or paying for your kids’ liberal arts degree, you’re underwriting this gang of nihilists” (ibid.) This not only implies that higher education rife with leftist ideologues seeking to ‘indoctrinate young minds’, but it also frames their ideology as inherently destructive – as motivated by a ‘nihilistic’ desire to undermine Western civilization and foment ‘resentment’.

This ‘gang of nihilists’ is what Peterson calls the ‘postmodernist left’. He claims that they are to blame for “the mobs that violently shut down campus speakers, the language police who enshrine into law the use of fabricated gender pronouns, and the deans whose livelihoods depend on madly rooting out discrimination where little or none exists.” (PragerU 2018). This claim not only portrays the ‘postmodern left’ as a ‘mob’ hellbent on the violent suppression of free speech, but it also depicts their grievances as mere “fabrications” – hate speech, transgender pronouns, and discrimination on university campuses are all understood to be constructed fictions the left creates to push their “destructive agenda” (ibid.).

Peterson argues that “their thinking took hold in Western universities in the 60s and 70s, when the true believers of the radical-left became the professors of today” (ibid.). Now dominant in academia, so the story goes, these professors do not teach ‘critical thinking’ but rather seek to propagate the myths of diversity, equity, and inclusion – or what Peterson calls the “unholy trinity” (ibid.). As he argues, “all the classic rights of the West are to be considered secondary to these new values” (ibid.).

Peterson also argues that the postmodernists' reject

“the free market and the very idea that free voluntary trading benefits everyone [...] Those classified as poor in the US and increasingly everywhere else are able to meet their basic needs. Meanwhile in once prosperous Venezuela, until recently the poster child of the campus radicals, the middle-class lines up for toilet paper” (PragerU 2018).

Not only is capitalism defined as ‘benefitting everyone’, but the alternative proposed by the ‘postmodern left’ is that we all ‘line up for toilet paper’.

Peterson then states that postmodernists “don’t believe in individuals. You are an exemplar of your race, sex, or sexual preference. You’re also either a victim or an oppressor.” (PragerU, 2018). In claiming that these “ideas of victimization do nothing but justify the use of power and engender intergroup conflict”, Peterson interprets calls for greater equality between groups as intrinsically political power grabs meant to divide us, rather than as legitimate appeals to reform discriminatory institutional practices and mitigate structural inequalities.

Finally, tracing the ideas of the ‘postmodern left’ to the “murderous notions” of Karl Marx, Peterson argues that “We fought a decades-long Cold War to stop the spread of those murderous notions. But they’re back in the new guise of identity politics.” (PragerU, 2018). He closes with a warning that “unless we stop [underwriting these ideas], postmodernism will do to America and the entire Western world what its already done to its universities” (ibid.).

Turning Point USA

The Deadliest Virus in the World: Communism

In this video, Benny Johnson, chief creative officer of TPUSA, narrates the ‘deadly’ history of communism from a dark lit room. He begins by proclaiming: “You can’t kill an idea, but ideas can kill you. What if I told you that this has all happened before? The riots, the violence, church burnings, attacks on police, destruction of private property. All in the name of

equality.” (TPUSA 2020). Produced in the wake of the murder of George Floyd and the civil demonstrations that followed, Johnson immediately relates BLM protests undertaken ‘in the name of equality’ to ‘ideas that can kill you’.

He continues by asking: “What is the deadliest thing mankind has ever encountered in world history? Is it disease, famine, nuclear weapons? Not even close. By sheer body count it’s an idea. This is the story of the deadliest virus in the world: communism.” (TPUSA 2020). Communism is depicted here as more than just undesirable and dangerous, it is the ‘deadliest thing mankind has ever encountered in world history’ – more so than ‘disease, famine, and nuclear weapons’ (ibid.). It is also defined not as a political movement or ideology but as a ‘virus’, implying that when it is tried it spreads uncontrollably –invading and poisoning the living and using its host to keep itself alive and reproduce itself.

“The year: eighteen forty-eight. Europe is burning, political upheaval leads to mass violent riots in over 50 countries, buildings burn, shops are looted, and national militias are called in to quell the mob. Sound familiar?” (TPUSA 2020). Here Johnson draws a *relation of equivalence* that the political crises which beset nineteenth century Europe are not so dissimilar from current protests against police brutality and systemic racism in America – which are portrayed as a ‘moblike mass of violent rioters’ intent on ‘burning’ and ‘looting’ (ibid.). Neither the ‘upheaval’ of the nineteenth century nor the current demonstrations are expressions of legitimate dissent, but rather violent outbursts that ought to be quelled by force.

Johnson argues that: “This year, an obscure socialist named Karl Marx publishes the Communist Manifesto. The Communist Manifesto outlines how to destroy capitalism and usher in communism through the means of socialism.” (TPUSA 2020). He continues, claiming that:

“identity hatred is the key component that makes communism work [...] Today, we would call this identity politics. The principle is the same: define people by

their groups and pit them against each other with a perceived injustice and then violence. [...] What we are left with after this violent class warfare is a communist state.” (ibid.).

In this instance, Johnson draws another *relation of equivalence* between orthodox Marxism and the ‘identity politics’ of today – wherein both ‘end in violence and the establishment of a communist state’ (ibid.).

The communist state – which Johnson claims involves the same “programs the left is pushing today, nearly 200 years after the writing of the Communist Manifesto” – is described as:

“Complete state ownership of your life, no private property, high taxes, government control of communications and media, government jobs for workers, government income for all workers, mandatory government education and government that supersedes the church in power.” (TPUSA 2020).

In defining communism in this way, Johnson portrays the communist state as a totalitarian regime that suppresses individual liberty and democracy. To Johnson, the communists achieve their goal by “using identity politics and, yes, violence to do it” (TPUSA 2020). As he claims, “this is about power and control” not the ideals of equality or democracy, which are merely a convenient ideological cover for the power-grab of communist elites.

Then, moving to the Bolshevik Revolution, Johnson asserts that “Lenin won using identity politics to pit groups against each other, incite violence, create anarchy” suggesting that the natural outcome of revolution is chaos and ‘anarchy’ (TPUSA 2020). He continues:

“And then the virus took hold. Private property and businesses were immediately dissolved. Freedom of speech eliminated, individual freedoms crushed, economic collapse, famine, starvation, secret police raids, millions of Russians sent to concentration camps. More people were sent to concentration camps in communist Russia than in Nazi Germany.” (TPUSA 2020).

Here, Johnson not only invokes the historicism discussed above by Dean (2012), where instances of famine, secret police raids, and gulags are representative of the essential character of communism, he also portrays communism as worse than Nazism as “more people were sent to

concentration camps in Russia than in Nazi Germany”— thus reiterating the claims of the totalitarian paradigm and its concomitant rehabilitation of fascism.

Johnson then invokes the common refrain of a subversive ‘threat from within’, claiming that:

“this mass death is not caused by foreign forces, but from within. Communism kills in the name of equality. They kill their own people. Communists do not care. They are indifferent to the suffering. Manmade famines and mass starvation in concentration camps are the norm, the cost of social justice” (TPUSA 2020).

Communism is rendered even more pernicious as it does not emerge from a forcible overthrow from without, which can be resisted by the national security apparatus, but from a gradual insurrectionary movement from within. Thus, one should be weary of any claim to equality as it is a precursor to the potential totalitarianism to come – one which is ‘indifferent to human suffering’. As Johnson goes on to argue, ‘the cost of this claim to equality and social justice’ is ‘death’, ‘famine’, and the ‘concentration camp’ (TPUSA 2020).

After citing *The Black Book of Communism* as a source of the 100 million dead as a result of communism, Johnson claims that despite all this death and destruction, “as always with communism, the worst is yet to come” (TPUSA 2020).

Johnson then shifts attention to the present, arguing that “many of the organized leftists torching American cities are Marxists” and points to the declaration of one BLM co-founder that “We are trained Marxists. We are super versed on sort of ideological theories” as evidence of the communist nature of the movement. As Professor of African American Studies at Princeton University, Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor argues, commenting on the above claim that BLM is a Marxist movement: “there are definitely socialists within the movement, as there have been in every single social movement in 20th century American history and today. But that does not make those socialist movements, it makes them mass movements” (as cited in Kertscher 2020).

By isolating one voice and using it as representative of the entire movement, the wide breadth of support for BLM is omitted and supporters are portrayed instead as dogmatic Marxists rather than aggrieved citizens protesting real and perceived injustices. For Johnson, none of this is relevant as, in the last instance, BLM is communist, and communists are only concerned with ‘inciting violence and seizing power and control’ (TPUSA 2020). In this sense, a *relation of representation* is drawn between BLM and communism, wherein the former symbolizes the advance of the latter in contemporary American politics.

Johnson then shifts attention to Antifa arguing that “in nineteen thirty-two, Stalinist backed communists in Germany formed a group to violently clash with police, terrorize the public and physically assault their political enemies in the street. The name of that group Antifasciste-Action – Anitfa.” (TPUSA 2020). By omitting the very reason for the groups founding, namely resistance to the establishment of Nazism, Johnson portrays these groups not as bulwarks against the advance of fascism, but as ‘violent’ mobs seeking to ‘terrorize’ their ‘political enemies’ (ibid). This is compounded by Johnson’s portrayal of Antifasciste-Action as ‘Stalinist’, suggesting that Antifa was not a legitimate domestic resistance group fighting the emergence of fascism in Germany, but was in reality a political tool of Soviet insurrection seeking to establish a totalitarian communist state.

Johnson closes by arguing that “Their tactics have now moved to our streets. So have their motivations. [...] It is always about power and control. What is happening right now in America is not new.” (TPUSA 2020). Relating the current conjuncture to the history of communism, Johnson concludes that:

“The tactics are meant to bewilder you and make you question your institutions. They're meant to divide us and raise what we know is America to the ground. It's a revolution by the deadliest virus known to man: communism. You can't kill an idea, but ideas can kill you.” (ibid.).

This closing remark not only portrays communism as a destructive threat to American values, but as an *existential* one. It is a threat that is both elusive and pervasive – it ‘cannot be killed, but it can kill you’ (TPUSA 2020). Johnson ends with a call to arms for the very survival of the nation: “We must fight this virus to survive.” (ibid.).

Donald Trump Jr.: Why Radical Leftism is the New Fascism

In this video, Donald Trump Jr. attempts to convince the viewer that the “radical-left are the modern-day fascists” (TPUSA 2019). He defines fascism as:

“a form of political rule imposed by force. Fascism gives a central government all authority. It glorifies violence on behalf of radical political positions and despises the individual. Fascists do not believe in natural rights. On the contrary, fascists believe rights are given and could be taken away by big government. This is why fascists hate religion. This is why fascists believe in government-controlled labor instead of private labor.” (ibid.).

In this instance, fascism is defined familiarly as ‘big government’, placing it well within the conventional American conception of the left. In arguing that leftists are the real fascists, modern incarnations of real existing neo-fascism are obscured from view and any attempt by leftists to denounce the re-emergence of fascism is perceived as a purely ideological move.

After arguing that ‘fascists despise democracy’ and employ ‘violence and intimidation to silence their opposition’ Donald Trump Jr. asks “What modern political movement does fascism sound like? If you've been paying attention, you already know the radical-left is on its quest for big government control. [...] This is modern day fascism, what we like to call neo fascism” (TPUSA 2019).

Subsequently, after briefly discussing how President Donald Trump was threatened with violence by both celebrities and the media (and how this is indicative of the violence characteristic of fascism), Donald Trump Jr. asserts: “But honestly, that's not what I'm worried

about. It's the conservative, blue collar, red blooded Americans across this country. The people that my father ran to support and to fight for, you're the ones the neofascist left hates the most.” (TPUSA 2019). In this instance, Donald Trump Jr. moves from an objective recounting of facts to speaking directly to the viewer, shifting the target of the ‘neofascist left’s’ hatred from ‘conservative blue-collar red-blooded Americans’ to a personalized ‘you’.

He then goes on to argue that “the left has turned their fascist rage on everyday teachers, shop owners, journalists and even our own children in our communities” suggesting that no one – not even children – are immune from the violence and indoctrination of the ‘neofascist left’ (TPUSA 2019). This is reiterated later in the video where Trump Jr. begs the question “who is off limits if they're willing to go after children?” (ibid.).

Donald Trump Jr. then recounts the 2017 shooting of a group of conservative congressmen by a supposed leftist: “The leftist shot round after round, attempting to murder an elected official because they were conservative.” (TPUSA 2019). This isolated act of left-inspired terrorism not only paints the left as inherently violent, but also negates the fact that for the last quarter century, the large majority of terrorist attacks in America were from the radical-right, not the left (Economist 2020).

Failing to address the contradiction implicit in the ‘neofascist left’ declaring themselves Anti-fascist, Trump Jr. argues that “Antifa members use violent fascist tactics to terrorize a population and trample people's rights” (TPUSA 2019). He continues by portraying the media as allies of this fascistic violence arguing that “Far too often, the media are complicit in the fascist violence and the destruction of the left. [...] That's because, according to Trump Jr., the “vast majority of the media are also leftist and deem violence acceptable as long as conservatives are

the target” (TPUSA 2019). This depicts the media as coopted not only by liberal progressivism, but by the ‘radical-left’ as well.

Trump Jr. concludes by claiming that “The neo fascist left is using every tool available to them to thwart freedom and to carry out their agenda to destroy the greatest country to ever exist in the history of the world. They are using fascist tactics to do it. Don't let them.” (TPUSA, 2019).

Graham Allen – Our Heroes Didn’t Die for Socialism

In this video, veteran and conservative writer Graham Allen explains that “American heroes didn’t die for socialism, they died for freedom” (TPUSA 2019a). In doing so, he immediately draws a *relation of difference* between socialism and freedom, arguing that “I know the one thing that unites all [...] veterans: not a single one fought for more oppressive government control over their lives. [...] none of those Americans died for socialism” (ibid.). By claiming that ‘soldiers didn’t die for socialism’, Allen not only implies that socialism is increasingly dominant in American society, but that if implemented, the wars Americans have fought and died for would be in vain.

Allen then defines socialism as a “system of equal outcomes, but not equal opportunity” and names Mao, Stalin, and Castro as examples of socialist ‘dictators’ (TPUSA 2019a). This reiterates the oft-repeated argument that socialism is totalitarian and inherently dictatorial.

Allen goes on to argue that socialism “is a system that destroys individual purpose, where everyone, no matter the effort, is rewarded equally.” (TPUSA 2019a). Relying on producerist narratives, Allen portrays socialism as unjust because it supposedly does not compensate those who ‘put in more effort’ than others. Instead, like much of his conservative media peers, he conjures Venezuela as an example of the ‘destruction of individual purpose’: “I mean, I guess if

Venezuela accomplished anything, it would be that they are, in fact, equal, equally poor and equally starving” (TPUSA 2019a).

Employing *The Black Book of Communism* to legitimate America’s Cold War military ventures, Allen claims that “communism has killed over ninety-four million people [and] were it not for America’s military crushing the dictators massacring these people, the number would be so much higher.” (TPUSA 2019a). He then asks: “So if Americans did not die for socialism, what did they die for?” (ibid.)

Allen argues that “Americans fought for self-determination, for the God given right of every man and woman to live free of the jackboot of totalitarians who wish to control us. The American champion system of human rights and human capitalism has now conquered the globe.” (TPUSA, 2019a). In this instance, American values have a unique and singular claim to freedom and socialists are depicted as a ‘jackboot of totalitarians’ intent on ‘control’.

Allen then claims that “Capitalism has plummeted the global poverty rate by 80 percent since the 1970s. Capitalism has led to incredible declines in world hunger and infant mortality and incredible gains in literacy and longevity around the globe.” (TPUSA 2019a). Without providing a citation for these statistics it is impossible to know where Allen gets his figures, but it is likely that they come from Max Roser’s report in *Our World in Data* which claims that poverty rates have decreased dramatically since 1820. This data, as well as poverty statistics published by the World Economic Forum, has been critiqued by academics for its low standard of poverty which omits dramatic increases in those living on less than \$7.40 a day since measurements began in 1981 (Hickel, 2019).

Then, invoking another uncited study, Allen contends that “A study of the effects of American style democracy by Oxford University shows that people living under a free

democratic system are more likely to be richer, healthier, more educated and live longer, happier lives” (TPUSA, 2019a). In this sense, this study is used to create a *relation of super difference* wherein socialism is portrayed as an unfree and undemocratic system and compared to capitalism, makes people poorer, less healthy, less educated, and less happy.

Allen concludes: “Is America perfect? No, but even on our worst day, America is still the greatest country in the world, and only because an estimated one point three million American heroes died for freedom, not for socialism.” (TPUSA, 2019a).

Socialism is the Modern-Day Slavery

In this video, narrated by a series of black conservative voices, “leftist politicians” are portrayed as “the new plantation owners” and “socialism is their slavery”. Employing repetition to drive the point home, the narrators repeat the same refrain over and over again.

Standing at the Lincoln memorial, the narrators argue that “Abraham Lincoln, America's first Republican president, championed freedom for all Americans regardless of their skin color. Lincoln understood that it was morally wrong for a person to work and another person to take the reward for their labor. And this memorial right here, we built this memorial to commemorate the man who had the guts to destroy slavery right here in America.” (TPUSA 2019b).

They go on to argue that: “Many see slavery as a relic of the past, but the chains of slavery are as old as time, and they still exist today. Today we face another system that forces one group of people to work, while another group of people benefit from the rewards of their labor. In modern times is not called slavery, but it's called socialism.” (TPUSA 2019b). The irony of this claim is that the central contradiction of capitalism which socialists oppose is the wage relation, which Marx understood in nearly the exact same terms – as a system which forces one group of people to work (labor) while another group (capitalists) benefit from the rewards of

their labor by usurping ‘surplus value’. Also of interest here is that the legacies of slavery are acknowledged but redirected towards the very progressives who challenge them, belying the real legacies of slavery in the institutions of the criminal justice system, the prison-industrial complex, housing, education and the police.

The narrators define socialism as “an economic system that gives politicians the ability and the authority to forcibly take your rewards and give it to those that didn't earn it. Under socialism, politicians can take your money, your profits, your labor and distribute them how they please to whomever they please.” (TPUSA 2019b). Adopting the oft-repeated libertarian condemnation of taxation and relying on producerist narratives, the usurping of ‘surplus value’ is omitted in favor of taxation as the central mechanism of expropriation wherein ‘rewards are taken and given to those that didn’t earn it’ (ibid.).

The narrators go on to argue that “under socialism politicians live lavish lives. They live like modern plantation owners, profiting off the backs of those who worked and taking their bread.” (TPUSA 2019b). Associating socialism with big government, the narrators do not address that it is capitalism and the corrupt lobbying of special interests that enriches politicians, allowing them to ‘live like modern plantation owners’ – a reality that self-titled democratic socialist Bernie Sanders, as well as progressive Elizabeth Warren, have frequently denounced.

The narrators then recite the frequently repeated slogan that equality under socialism is nothing more than equal levels of immiseration: “But hey, at least everyone is equal. Equally poor, equally hungry, equally oppressed.” (TPUSA 2019b). Socialism is then associated with slavery in a *relation of representation* wherein slavery is symbolic of the oppressive nature of socialism: “Does that sound familiar? Because to me that sounds like slavery.” (ibid.) This is then repeated multiple times – “Does that sound familiar? Sound familiar? Does that sound

familiar? Because to me that sounds like slavery. It sounds like slavery. Because that sounds like slavery to me. That's because it sounds like slavery.” (ibid.).

Before concluding with the repetition of the above refrain, the narrators argue that “Leftists support the tyranny of socialism. Leftists support giving the government full control over our money and our labor. We can agree when someone steals your labor, when someone steals what you worked hard for, that's called slavery. What percentage of stealing your labor is not slavery? 50 percent, 60 percent. At some point, the politician plantation owners will always want more.” (TPUSA, 2019b). Again, in defining socialism as big government, and big government as tyranny, the narrators portray socialism as inherently undemocratic. It is also depicted as unjust because it relies on ‘stealing your labor’ through taxation which is synonymous with slavery.

Freedom Seed: Fascism is here – and it's from the left.

In this video, part of a series of short 1-minute explanatory videos entitled ‘Freedom Seed’, narrator Isabel Brown contends that “fascism is here and its coming from the left” (TPUSA 2021). Citing a 1975 60-Minutes interview with Ronald Reagan who argues that “if fascism ever comes to America it will come in the name of liberalism”, Brown argues that the current conjuncture is marked by ‘people being silenced, conservatives being fired from their jobs or physically threatened, and some have even lost their lives in the name of sharing their political perspective’ (ibid.). In this instance, a first *relation of equivalence* is drawn between liberalism and leftism which is complimented by a second *relation of equivalence* which associates both with fascism. Moreover, conservatives are then constructed in a *relation of difference* wherein they are victims of a culture that has already ceded to the edicts of leftism –

conceived as a form of fascism that violently suppresses the free speech rights of conservative voices.

Brown goes on, proclaiming that “celebrities, brands, books, and more promoting individualism and personal liberty are cancelled, and groupthink has become the norm... Welcome to fascism” (TPUSA 2021). In this rendering, mainstream cultural institutions are captured by leftist ideology which is conceived in a *relation of super-difference* with the principles of ‘individualism and personal liberty’ (ibid).

Citing Merriam Webster Dictionary to define fascism, Brown argues that fascism is “a political philosophy, movement or regime that exalts nation and often race above the individual and that stands for a centralized, autocratic government headed by a dictatorial leader, severe economic and social regimentation and forcible suppression of opposition” (TPUSA 2021). Here, the white supremacy of the fascist state is reworked in a creative transposition wherein the ‘exaltation’ of race is attributed to leftists who view social outcomes as unjustly mediated by one’s membership in a racial grouping. Those condemning white supremacist culture and pointing to the unequal treatment of BIPOC are fascists because they view race as a central component of one’s social positionality. The totalitarian paradigm is also implicitly conjured with leftism being portrayed as inherently ‘centralized’ ‘autocratic’ and ‘dictatorial’. Political correctness, which is attributed to the left, is also equated with the ‘forcible suppression of opposition’ of the fascist state.

Brown concludes by asking the viewer if this ‘sounds familiar?’. She closes by proclaiming that “Fascist tendencies have arrived in the United States and as predicted by President Reagan, they've come from the left who controls nearly every sphere of influence in our culture, academia, pop culture, Hollywood media, corporations and politics.” (TPUSA,

2021). In closing in this way, Brown reiterates the claim that American culture has already capitulated to the influence of the left – which, in forging a *relation of equivalence*, is immediately associated with the totalitarian fascist state.

Freedom Seed: Democratic Socialism Still Sucks

In this video, also part of Isabel Brown’s ‘Freedom Seed’ series, democratic socialism is dispelled as “still socialism... which means complete government control of everything” (TPUSA 2021a). Again, reiterating the totalitarian conception of socialism as inherently authoritarian, Brown suggests that popular mandate or mass support for a given ideology does not make that ideology any more normatively desirable.

Then, citing Venezuela, Brown argues that:

“Venezuela, not too long ago, this beautiful place was one of the richest countries in the world. Now enter Hugo Chavez. After being elected as the democratic socialist president, the government seized private property and destroyed the free market. Today in Venezuela, the only people thriving are the government leaders stealing everyone's money in the form of taxes. Everyone else literally eats trash off the street to survive. People have lost roughly twenty-five pounds per year due to starvation, and millions have fled as refugees.” (TPUSA 2021a).

In this excerpt, Brown suggests that socialism alone has produced the economic crisis which currently besets Venezuela. Moreover, by claiming that ‘the only people thriving are the government leaders stealing everyone's money in the form of taxes’, Brown associates socialism with a deceitful, corrupt, and wealthy political class who enrich themselves through taxation – suggesting that socialism is a mere cover for the power grab of political elites.

Brown concludes by posing the question: “Does it matter if it's democratically elected or forced upon a nation's people?” (TPUSA 2021a). She answers with the refrain that ‘Socialism is still socialism’ – implying that regardless of its popular support, socialism is still undesirable.

Freedom Seed: Socialism = Poverty. Period.

In this episode of ‘Freedom Seed’, narrator Isabel Brown argues that socialism doesn’t cure poverty, but instead, creates it. She proclaims that “I don't care what you've heard on a college campus, on social media or in the news. Socialism doesn't cure poverty.” (TPUSA 2021b).

Then, moving on to cite the Heritage Foundation’s Economic Freedom Index, she argues that “Every year it shows that the most socialist countries have the lowest per capita incomes. That means they're poor. The three countries at the bottom are Cuba, Venezuela, and North Korea. All three are socialist and really poor.” (TPUSA, 2021b). This portrays socialism as inherently poverty-conferring, ignoring social democracies like Switzerland, Denmark, and Iceland which rank high among the nations ranked in the index. Moreover, the index itself measures economic freedom through largely neoliberal metrics such as ‘rule of law’, ‘government size’, ‘regulatory efficiency’, and ‘open markets’ – thus omitting the very metric Brown is attempting to measure, namely poverty.

Brown then goes on to argue that “the highest ranked countries have income levels five times higher than those bottom three. Why? Because of capitalism, not socialism.” (TPUSA, 2021b). In this instance a *relation of super-difference* is drawn between capitalism which is poverty reducing and socialism which is portrayed as poverty begetting.

Brown concludes by arguing that “Capitalism has more prosperity, more innovation, more jobs, more freedom than any other system in history.” (TPUSA, 2021b). This veneration of capitalism as infallible is compounded by the closing statement that “Capitalism wins. If you hate poverty and love capitalism don’t forget to like this episode and share it with others” (ibid.). In this instance, it is not socialism which cures poverty, but capitalism – ‘if you hate poverty, you must love capitalism’ (ibid.).

Discussion

The above analysis points to a general field of anti-communist discourse among PragerU and Turning Point USA YouTube content. But the question remains, how does such anti-communism seek to achieve hegemonic status in the context of neoliberalism's waning legitimacy and rising support for progressive policy? To answer this question, the 'core stratagems' discussed above by Nonhoff (2018) must be re-examined. Next, anti-communist discourse among PragerU and TPUSA YouTube content will be re-examined to tease out the central and recurring themes present within the discourse and conclude on its role in the mainstreaming of radicalism.

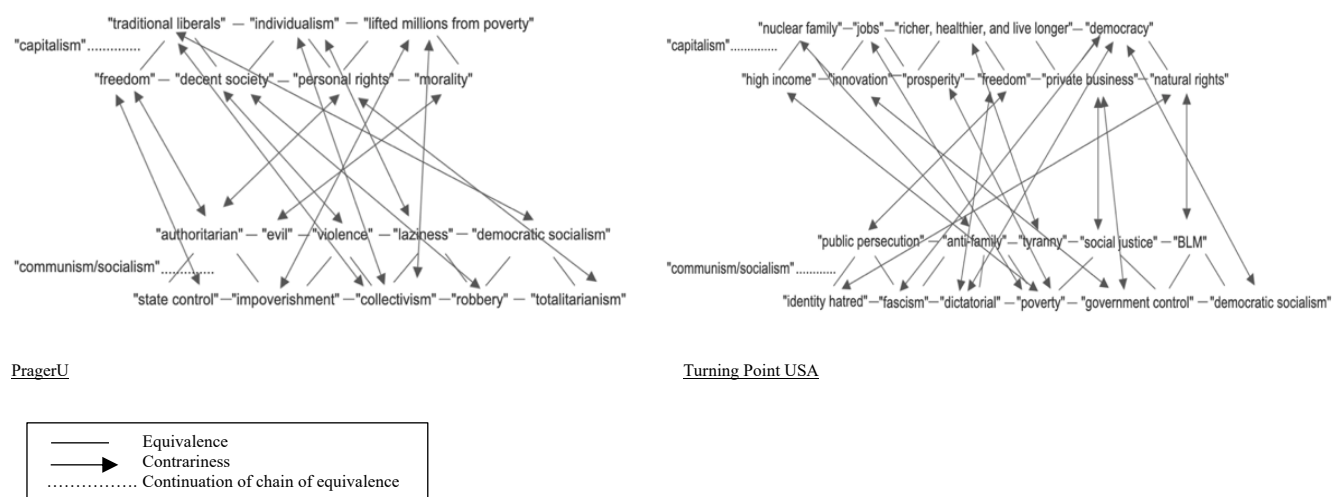


Figure 1 Reconstructing hegemonic stratagems no. I and II (figure adapted from Nonhoff 2018, 90)

Hegemonic 'Core' Stratagems

The first 'core stratagem' – the 'articulation of equivalences between different demands made with regard to the universal' – refers to the articulation of different demands placed within a 'chain of equivalence' wherein discursive elements are different, but equivalent relative to some other element (Nonhoff 2018). In this instance, relations of equivalence are drawn between

different demands that the Right perceives as comprising ‘American values’ which are all tied together in their opposition to communism. In the above discussed PragerU and TPUSA videos, the ‘empty signifiers’ that make up this chain of equivalence – such as ‘freedom’, ‘individualism’, ‘private business’, ‘democracy’, and even ‘morality’ – are all relatively general in their articulation. This accomplishes exactly what Nonhoff (2018) argues the first ‘core stratagem’ is meant to achieve – namely, the creation of a discursive field wherein ‘different demands are perceived by the viewer as synonymous with their own’. A good example of this is the ‘logic of equivalence’ drawn by Prager (PragerU 2017a) between traditional liberals and conservatives in their mutual ‘loathing’ of communism which is placed in opposition to the left who has ‘never loathed communism’. Liberals are different from conservatives, but conservative demands are constructed as ‘synonymous with their own’ with regard to communism (ibid.). By uniting a series of seemingly benign and already common-sense values within the mantle of conservative anti-communism and constructing these elements in opposition to the ‘common enemy’ of the left, PragerU and TPUSA construct themselves as moderate defenders of a ‘decent society’ under attack by what all those who stand for the basic values of ‘freedom’ and ‘democracy’ must regard as their natural enemy – the left.

This brings us to the second ‘core stratagem’: the ‘antagonistic division of discursive space’. As Nonhoff (2018) argues, this ‘stratagem’ is marked by opposing chains of equivalence which demarcate ‘one’s own essential demand with an antagonistic one’. As Golinczak (2019) states: “all those demands that do not correspond with the central hegemonic demand are also discursively knotted together in a chain of equivalence” (102). D’Souza’s (PragerU 2021a) lamenting of the ‘ills’ of ‘identity socialism’ provides a good example. The #metoo movement, BLM, and transgender rights are all particular ‘ills’ that stand in for the negative ‘empty

signifier' of communism, thus demarcating them as part of the 'constitutive outside' of what is politically tolerable. Another noteworthy example of this 'stratagem' is Dennis Prager's concluding statement in the video *Is Communism Moral?* (PragerU 2021) which argues that "those of you who love God must hate evil [...] those of you who love people must hate evil. If you don't hate communism, you don't care about, much less love, people". In this instance, a 'chain of equivalence' is forged between anti-communism and one's love of God and humanity which are tied together in their opposition to communists – who are portrayed as 'evil' atheists who 'don't care about, much less love people'. Thus, communism acts as a 'signifier of exclusion', representing the negative universal – the "core of all evil" (Golinczak 2019, 102). The outcome is an 'antagonistic division of discursive space' and the creation of two opposing 'chains of equivalence' wherein 'individualism' is contrasted with 'collectivism', 'natural rights' with 'identity hatred', and 'private business' with 'state control' and so on (see figures 1 and 2).

The final 'core stratagem', that of 'representation', is meant to denote an element of 'lack' that signifies the 'absent fullness of society' (Laclau 2005a). Since this can never be fully reconciled, anti-communism will continue to perpetuate itself and communism will continue to represent 'pure negativity' or "what has to be negated and excluded in order for reality to signify its limits" (Stavrakakis 1999, 80-81). In the above discourses, communism denotes such a 'lack'. It is a 'signifier of exclusion' which is 'emptied from its concrete content in order to represent a negative universal' (ibid.) This is exemplified in the *encompassing demand* that "until the left and all the institutions influenced by the left acknowledge how evil communism has been, we will continue to live in a morally confused world" (PragerU, 2017a). In other words, until communism is abandoned as a legitimate alternative to neoliberal capitalism, society will fail to be 'fully reconciled' and achieve its 'mythical fullness' (Laclau 2005, 119). Laclau and Mouffe

(2014) distinguish between the ‘logic of equivalence’ and the ‘logic of difference’ arguing that “the logic of equivalence is a logic of the simplification of political space, while the logic of difference is a logic of its expansion and increasing complexity.” (117). In this regard, anti-communism relies on the ‘logic of equivalence’ as it is not possible to take a middle ground wherein the logic of difference demarcates certain tolerable progressive elements from other intolerable ‘radical-left’ or ‘communist’ ones – instead they are lumped together to form an antagonistic whole. Both are perceived as monolithic blocs, with the united, anti-communist, patriotic, and Christian nation on the one side, and an internal enemy of subversives representing the embodiment of evil on the other. Thus, communism represents the ‘negative universal’ which signifies an obstacle that prevents American society “from coinciding with itself, from reaching its own fullness” (Laclau 2000, 142).

Themes

Insulate Capitalism from Criticism

A central component of anti-communism is the insulation of capitalism from criticism and dissent. This is a recurring theme of the anti-communist discourse which animates PragerU and TPUSA YouTube content whereby capitalism’s failures are projected onto the socialist bogeyman. As mentioned above, anti-communism’s principal function (in both intent and effect) is to shift focus away from a structural critique of capitalism by ‘forever equating calls for social justice or redistribution with forced labour camps and famine’ (Ghodsee & Sehon 2020). This manifests as the formation of an ‘antagonistic division of discursive space’ wherein capitalism is portrayed as categorically ‘moral’ and communism is depicted as universally ‘evil’.

Regarding the former, both PragerU and TPUSA construe capitalism as the most legitimate and desirable economic system in modern history. This is exemplified in statements

like: '[capitalism] alone has lifted millions from poverty' (PragerU 2021), "we don't need socialism because we already have something more moral and more democratic. It's called capitalism." (PragerU 2020), 'the free-market benefits everyone' (PragerU 2018), 'capitalism has plummeted the global poverty rate, led to incredible declines in world hunger and infant mortality, literacy, and longevity' (TPUSA 2019a), and 'capitalism has more prosperity, more innovation, more jobs, and more freedom than any other system in history' (TPUSA 2021b). The appraisal of capitalism is complimented by a concomitant delegitimization of Marxism specifically, and communism more generally, as both the central critique of capitalism and its principal alternative.

In this instance, communism is not only constructed through the creation of antagonistic 'chains of equivalence' which associate it with the evils of 'authoritarianism', 'poverty', and 'violence' – it also projects the failures of capitalism onto socialism itself. This is best exemplified in the TPUSA video entitled *Socialism is the Modern-Day Slavery* (2019b). In this video, the central contradiction of capitalism – namely, the wage relation – is reworked in producerist terms and deployed to discredit socialism as a form of government bondage through taxation. This is also compounded by the description of socialism as 'robbery', wherein the 'takers' rob the 'makers' (PragerU 2020; PragerU 2016). In this instance, it is not the capitalists who 'forcibly take your rewards and give it to those that didn't earn it', but 'politicians' who favor progressive taxation models to fund dwindling social services. Moreover, the wealth of the political class is not the result of corrupt campaign finance laws and the institutionalization of special interest lobbying, but socialism itself: "under socialism, politicians live lavish lives. They live like modern plantation owners..." (TPUSA 2019b). By associating socialism with big government, and big government with a wealthy political class, TPUSA claims that it is

socialism which unfairly enriches government representatives rather than the corrupt outcomes of a political system captured by corporate interests.

By portraying capitalism as infallible and socialism as inherently ‘evil’, any and all failures that can be attributed to capitalism are redirected towards the socialist signifier, thus insulating neoliberal capitalism from criticism and delegitimizing any attempted reform that does not heed to the diktats of free-market conservatism. More than a mere polemic against socialism, the Right now projects the crises of capitalism onto socialism itself.

Anti-Intellectualism

Another primary theme that is frequently repeated in the above anti-communist discourse is a general anti-intellectual disposition. This is manifest in both form and content. In terms of form, both PragerU and TPUSA rely on short ‘educational’ videos to dispel the persuasiveness of socialist ideology. Given the short-form nature of these videos, they are inherently limited in scope, relying on cherry-picked policies such as Denmark’s car tax (PragerU 2016) and decontextualized or uncited indices such as the Heritage Foundations’ Economic Freedom Index (TPUSA 2021b) or “a study of American style democracy by Oxford University” (TPUSA 2019a). In their self-portrayal as marginal actors seeking to dispel the myths propagated by the left, PragerU and TPUSA employ ‘common sense’ and the selective use of facts to make their case. In doing so, they purport a level of objectivity which cannot be matched by the scope of their videos. In this sense, less is more. The short-form nature of these videos forces PragerU and TPUSA to moderate the breadth of their content, thus presenting a one-sided image of socialism as authoritarian and omitting any deeper discussion of the history of leftism or the factionalism and diversity of opinion that pervades the left today, instead portraying both the historic and contemporary left as monolithic and inherently totalitarian.

In terms of content, the anti-intellectualism which pervades PragerU and TPUSA videos not only demonizes academics and delegitimizes the central critiques of capitalism as mere leftist academic drivel, but also props up traditional gender, racial, and social hierarchies in the process. Avoiding explicitly racist, sexist, or homophobic language, PragerU and TPUSA do not attack marginalized groups themselves. Instead, they target the anti-racist, feminist, and queer theory academics who study the institutions and structures of capitalism, white supremacy, patriarchy, and heteronormativity, invalidating their critiques by portraying the academy as ‘dominated by the left’ (PragerU 2017a). In doing so, PragerU and TPUSA discredit calls for reform by arguing that said reforms and their proponents have been captured by leftist ideology. This is exemplified by the depiction of ‘the takeover of the college campus’ (PragerU 2021a) by ‘leftist intellectuals’ (PragerU 2017a) who ‘have made it their life mission to undermine Western civilization itself’ (PragerU 2018). Once the academy has been framed as dominated by an inherently dogmatic ‘postmodernist left’, it is easy to claim that ‘systemic racism’ and ‘patriarchy’ are ‘made up evils’ – mere politicized constructions used to justify the socialist overhaul of the university and eventually the whole of American political culture (PragerU, 2021).

This not only functions to delegitimize the pleas of the marginalized and entrench the unfair power and privilege of dominant groups, it also props up conservative voices as the only legitimate source for neutral and propaganda-free educational information. In this sense, anti-communism serves as a litmus test for judging the legitimacy of a given claim as any assertion that does not express contempt for ‘political correctness’ or ‘social justice’ can be dismissed as socialist propaganda, where it is at once swiftly disregarded. The same can be said for PragerU and TPUSA themselves, as any critique levied against them can be constructed as mere socialist subterfuge. In this way, by proclaiming that ‘campus culture has metastasized into the culture of

the whole society’ (PragerU 2021a), conservatives position themselves as the underdogs, as victims of unfair bias against them by the academy and all the institutions it influences. In this modern-day retelling of the tale of David and Goliath, conservatives are portrayed as marginal actors who, castigated by a dominant and pervasive socialist menace, seek to challenge ‘leftist propaganda in the classroom’ which is increasingly ‘infecting’ all of America – from ‘primary education, the news media, entertainment, and even big business’ (ADL 2020; *ibid.*).

The Socialist Personality

A predominant theme that underlies PragerU and TPUSA anti-communist discourse is the polemical construction of personal attributes that are supposedly characteristic of one’s communist sympathies. By relating one’s political position to personal attributes rather than as a reaction to objective political or economic realities, socialism is attributed to personal ineptitude. This manifests in one of two ways.

The first is the construction of a socialist ‘folk devil’ – a violent, dishonest, ideologue who seeks only to destroy and undermine American freedom and enforce a regime of barren totalitarianism. These are the ‘willfully ignorant socialists who either ignore or deny the evil of this ideology’, deceitfully whitewashing the ‘violent’ history of communism to hide their authoritarian ideology behind a veneer of legitimacy (PragerU 2021). They are simultaneously a ‘gang of nihilists’ who lack any moral or religious convictions and dedicated ideologues who do not waver from their dogmatic commitment to the ‘evil’ principles of communism (PragerU 2018). The result of this combination of nihilism and dogmatism is a general disposition of apathetic anti-humanism wherein ‘communists do not care’, ‘they are indifferent to suffering’ and use violent tactics such as ‘manmade famines and concentration camps’ to consolidate their rule which they perceive as the ‘cost of social justice’ (TPUSA 2020). In this construction of the

‘folk devil’, socialists are ‘resentful’ people who, through ‘violence’ and ‘destruction’, seek to acquire complete “power and control” (PragerU 2018; TPUSA 2020). In this rendering, socialists are ‘evil’ subversives to be feared.

This is contrasted with the portrayal of the socialist as a weak, unproductive, freeloader who is selfishly motivated by a desire to ‘take from the makers’. Relying on an invocation of ‘human nature’ to delegitimize the socialist project, the anti-communist discourse which animates PragerU and TPUSA content portrays the division between capitalists and communists as the product of the inherently productive disposition of the former and the parasitic character of the latter. In this producerist narrative, “human nature will invariably pull certain people towards individualism and success and others toward laziness and collectivism” (PragerU 2016). Not only does this delegitimize socialism as a mere projection of the selfish inclinations of its devotees, it also portrays one’s social position as completely endogenous to one’s character, thus obscuring the very structural disparities which prefigure one’s lack of social mobility and legitimating the inequality that is endemic to neoliberal capitalism. The outcome is that socialism is constructed as a political ideology that provides cover for those ‘greedy’, ‘lazy’, ‘unproductive’, and ‘jobless’ socialists who, in their aversion to productivity, ‘want to take from someone else something they haven’t earned’ (PragerU 2016). In this instance, socialists are portrayed as lethargic parasites to be loathed.

Socialism as a Threat to Economic Security

Another oft-repeated theme that pervades the above discourse is the unworkability of socialism as an economic system. This framing foments fears that the implementation of socialism would result in the collapse of the economy and the collective impoverishment of all. Rather than an economic system which seeks to ease the financial burden of the poor, socialism

is conceived as a system which begets poverty. The socialist emphasis on economic equality is reworked to claim that under socialism, ‘everyone is equal – equally poor, equally starving, equally oppressed’ (TPUSA 2019a; TPUSA 2019b). Relying on the selective use of facts and pointing to specific cases to claim that socialism is equals poverty, both PragerU and TPUSA cite Venezuela as an example of socialism’s inhered unworkability as an economic system. By pointing to a defunct economy and arguing the economic crisis which besets it is the product of socialism *tout court*, this suggests that if tried, socialism would result in ‘the middle class lining up for toilet paper’ and the average adult ‘losing twenty-five pounds’ from malnutrition (PragerU 2018; TPUSA 2019a). This is contrasted with the portrayal of capitalism as inherently prosperity conferring and the best system through which poverty is alleviated – evidenced by the claim that ‘if you hate poverty, you love capitalism’ (TPUSA 2021b). By relating capitalism to poverty reduction and economic security and associating socialism with mass destitution and economic collapse, PragerU and TPUSA portray the left as a danger not only to American culture and liberty, but to one’s economic security as well.

Populist Discourse

In their portrayal of the left, PragerU and TPUSA employ a variety of populist friend/enemy dualities to construct the ‘corrupt elite’ as leftist and thus as an enemy of the ‘pure people’. As mentioned above, right-wing populism is defined by the Manichean demarcation of a ‘pure people’, an ‘unpure people’, and a ‘corrupt elite’. In the aforementioned discourse, both PragerU and TPUSA construct the elite (and all the institutions associated with it) as firmly positioned on the left. In this sense, the integration and inclusion of ‘unpure people’ such as BIPOC, immigrants, LGBTQ+, and transgender people, is perceived as a direct attack on the sovereignty of the ‘pure people’ – conceived in white, Christian, and masculinist terms. The

‘elite’ are not contemptible because of their unfair power and privilege alone, but because they are portrayed as utilizing this unfair power and privilege to beget a politics which is incongruent with traditional conservative conceptions of the sovereign. In this populist discourse, progressive elites are the architects of an intentional ‘culture war’ to overhaul American culture and implement the totalitarianism of socialism. In this instance, policy proposals seeking to redress discrimination and inequity among marginalized groups are viewed as direct encroachments on the sovereignty of the ‘pure people’. In adopting such an exclusionary discourse, socialism is not only constructed as a signifier of exclusion which demarcates the tolerable from the intolerable; the construction of the political outgroup also precipitates a concomitant shift in the construction of the ingroup along severely more exclusionary terms. The purity of the sovereign is reconstructed to exclude all those who are perceived as beneficiaries of the progressive agenda – the rights of BIPOC and the condemnation of racism is associated with ‘political correctness’; the influx of immigrants and calls to protect asylum seekers is indicative of the ‘multicultural agenda’; and the accommodation of transgender people and LGBTQ+ communities is an attack on ‘traditional family values’. In this sense, PragerU and TPUSA construct the crisis in populist terms – as one marked by the progressive inclinations of a ‘corrupt elite’ intent on the destruction of a ‘pure people’.

Totalitarianism

The most prevalent and constantly recurring theme in the above discourse is the use of the frame of totalitarianism to delegitimize communism as inherently authoritarian.

Communism is related to totalitarianism through the invocation of history, which as previously mentioned, portrays communism as objectively static and unchangingly oppressive – with Stalinism as its truest form. By gutting the agency of socialism’s ‘militant subjects’ from the

history of real existing socialism and omitting deep internal divisions among leftist factions, the left is portrayed as a monolith concerned only with the dictatorship of the proletariat – understood in totalitarian terms. This is exemplified in both PragerU and TPUSA’s constant citing of *The Black Book of Communism* and an exclusive focus on authoritarian socialist states (the Soviet Union, Venezuela, China, North Korea) as evidence of communism’s anti-democratic character (PragerU 2017a). Because they are always conceived in totalitarian terms, the burden of proof falls on leftists to prove the very existence, let alone feasibility, of an anti-authoritarian left. By focusing exclusively on its authoritarian manifestations, communism is constructed as ‘the deadliest thing mankind has ever encountered in world history’ with violence and oppression as its ultimate end (TPUSA 2020). Dismissing the democratic intentions of socialist-minded theorists by proclaiming that ‘motives are much less important than behavior’ and omitting the history of anti-authoritarian socialist theory and the democratic movements they have inspired, PragerU and TPUSA construct modern day socialism as no different from Bolshevism (PragerU 2021). The identity politics which supposedly pervades the modern left is attributed to the legacies of Lenin and Antifa to Stalin (TPUSA, 2020).

Moreover, this discourse is also marked by an escalation of the totalitarian paradigm beyond a mere equivalency between the ‘twin totalitarianisms’ of communism and fascism, to a complete conflation of the two, wherein the former is not only equivalent, but *identical* to the latter. In this rendering, ‘radical leftism is the new fascism’ (TPUSA 2019) and fascism is reworked as an ‘ideology of the left’ (PragerU 2017). This not only distances the contemporary Right from the legacies of fascism, obscuring real existing expressions of neo-fascism in the current conjuncture, it also positions anti-communist free-market conservatives as the only bulwark against the threat posed by the collectivist and authoritarian ethos of the ‘neofascist left’

(TPUSA 2019). Once communism has been defined as a ‘centralized state’ (PragerU 2017) and ‘big government’ (TPUSA 2019), it is not so difficult to claim that it is inherently fascistic – as “state directed capitalism is precisely what German and Italian fascists implemented in the nineteen thirties” (PragerU 2017). The irony of all of this is that in omitting the rabid anti-communism of fascist movements and instead proclaiming that socialism is itself fascistic, PragerU and TPUSA play into the very anti-communist tropes so prevalent among yesterday’s fascists and today’s neofascists.

Anti-Communism and Political Radicalization

As previously mentioned, radicalization is defined as a “change in beliefs, feeling and behaviors in directions that increasingly justify intergroup violence and demand sacrifice in defense of the ingroup” (McCauley & Moskaleiko 2008, 416). In this sense, anti-communism is one such radicalizing discourse as it foments fears of an internal subversive threat that must be protected against by the ingroup. Referencing Rogin, Cole and Shulman (2019) argue that anti-communism is a radicalizing discourse as “the countersubversive is justified in imitating the practices he attributes to the alien, in the name of protecting the freedom (or “way of life”) of an idealized America; violence is thus rendered not only legitimate but redemptive” (6). The anti-communist discourse which animates PragerU and TPUSA content portrays the left as a threat not only to traditional American culture, but to American liberty and security as well, thus justifying a call to arms and the emboldening of the countersubversion apparatus. Moreover, by constructing communism (and increasingly the tenets of progressivism as well) as inherently ‘totalitarian’, ‘violent’, and even ‘fascist’, the Right has been able to discredit proposed progressive policy, no matter how benign, as ‘radical’. In this sense, any reform or movement which seeks to mitigate systemic racism, address the climate catastrophe, extend social services

for the poor, provide increased access and inclusivity for transgender and non-binary people, or condemn sexual assault is constructed as part of a radical agenda of leftist insurrection that inevitably leads to totalitarianism. In doing so, anti-communist discourse redefines the ingroup in producerist, white, Christian, and masculinist terms, excluding the calls of marginalized and non-conforming groups by portraying their claims as unpatriotic demands which, either intentionally or unintentionally, heed to the diktats of progressivism and thus unfairly condemn ‘greatest country on earth’. Any criticism of the current conjuncture which does not emanate from an anti-communist position is rendered moot and dismissed as mere ‘leftist propaganda’ or ‘political correctness’.

Despite its moderated quality, the anti-communism which pervades PragerU and TPUSA discourse is not so dissimilar from the CMC of the radical and alt-right. In fact, in one video by PragerU (2021b), the purported pervasiveness of ‘identity socialism’ is attributed to Herbert Marcuse himself – reiterating the alt-right contention that not only has socialism been omnipresent in American society for some time, but that it was the Frankfurt School who advanced and cemented this cultural revolution. Abandoning the anti-Semitic tropes which pervade the alt-right’s construction of the CMC, both PragerU and TPUSA portray primary American cultural institutions as already captured by socialist ideology, suggesting that the nation has already been forgone and that the cultural war has already been won by the left. In redefining American politics as wholly captured by the left, and associating leftism with totalitarianism, conservatives position themselves as the only safeguard against rising authoritarianism, thus insulating the neo-conservative position, delegitimizing democratic or progressive-minded reforms and emboldening the defense of traditional cultural values and free market capitalism. Though lacking in explicitly conspiratorial content, PragerU and TPUSA do

employ an implicitly conspiratorial narrative wherein an alliance between deceitful academics, a power-hungry political class, and willfully ignorant socialists seeks to ‘destroy’ America and seize ‘power and control’. This construction of the red menace also attacks the very same targets as the CMC of the alt-right: ‘civil rights agenda, anti-racism, human rights, globalization, ‘corporate capitalism’, ecological ideology, ‘health and safety’, ‘social justice’ and ‘political correctness’ (Lux & Jordan 2019, 7). These phenomena are not rightly associated with liberal reformism but are instead depicted as being directly related to the tenets of socialism – where they can be condemned and swiftly rejected given their proximity to the totalitarianism of communism. Positioned on the border between the alt-right and mainstream conservatism, both PragerU and TPUSA propagate much of the same fear-mongering and conspiratorial posturing that is so common among the radical and alt-right, thus broadening the reach of anti-communism beyond the fringe corridors of alt-right networks and projecting it into the mainstream.

Conclusion

The crisis of hegemony which pervades the current conjuncture has placed American political society in a bind – stuck between the rock of a right-populist challenge to progressive neoliberalism and the hard place of neoliberalism itself. The only way out of this cycle of austerity and revanchist reaction is the creation of an emancipatory political project that can redress the sources of the crises, conflicts, and contradictions which currently beset neoliberal capitalism. However, such a project is currently hamstrung by the anti-communist construction of the left as categorically authoritarian, dangerous, and evil.

This paper has attempted to specify the discursive mechanisms and frames of reference employed by two online conservative organizations in their construction of the left to conclude on how such a construction seeks to acquire ‘discursive predominance’ and propagate radical

ideas among mainstream American society. Both PragerU and TPUSA employ hegemonic discourse to position conservative voices as the only defenders of American values under attack by a subversive leftist insurgency. In doing so, they fulfill all three of Nonhoff's (2018) 'core stratagems', forming chains of equivalence and difference as well as raising communism to the level of a universal negative signifier of exclusion. Given their location on the border between the mainstream and fringe, PragerU and TPUSA are well positioned to propagate the radical idea that proposed progressive and democratic reforms are attacks on American liberty, culture, and security.

The central themes which pervade this discourse include the veneration and insulation of capitalism from criticism; a general anti-intellectual disposition which is manifest in both form and content and serves to undermine the pleas of anti-racists, feminists, and LGBTQ+ activists; an individualization of socialism through the construction of a socialist personality which is to be simultaneously feared and loathed; the portrayal of socialism as a threat to economic security; the use of populist discourse to demarcate a 'pure people' from the 'unpure' beneficiaries of a 'corrupt elite' politics captured by leftist ideology; and a general reading of socialism/communism as inherently totalitarian and equivalent to Naziism or fascism.

In employing an interpretive research design, this project has attempted to provide the descriptive foundation on which future comparative, explanatory, and causal research can build. Although still nascent as a general field of study, this project has demonstrated how anti-communism is an increasingly prevalent force among right-wing actors and media organizations in America – not confined only to the margins of political society. Anti-communism, however, is not limited to the US case, and further attention should be directed towards comparative research which compares the manifestations of anti-communism across different national contexts and

among different conservative groups. Moreover, given that this project was concerned only with how the left is presently constructed by conservative ‘new media’ organizations, another potentially fruitful avenue for future research would be an in-depth historical analysis to compare the current manifestations of anti-communist discourse to its historical predecessors. Finally, the relationship between the marginalization and suppression of legitimate dissent which pervades anti-communist discourse and the rise of authoritarianism in the West also merits further investigation to situate anti-communism within the larger processes of democratic deconsolidation and backsliding.

Though it seems as though anti-communism is here to stay, there is still hope. The increased salience of anti-communist discourse among the Right is likely a response to growing dissent by an increasingly large number of self-identifying socialists who recognize the importance of an emancipatory political project to redress the crises which currently beset American politics. Thus, to counter the discourses of anti-communism which pervade conservative narratives and inspire support for an emancipatory solution to the current crisis, focus should be directed towards dispelling the myths propagated by this discourse and to discussing honestly both the historical failures and momentous achievements of real existing socialist alternatives. For as Gramsci once said, “to tell the truth, to arrive together at the truth, is a communist and revolutionary act” (Gramsci, as cited in Hoare & Nowell-Smith 2014, 68).

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