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What the Alt-Right Really Means By CHRISTOPHER CALDWELL DEC. 2, 2016

Not even those most depressed about Donald J. Trump’s election and what it might portend could have envisioned the scene that took place just before Thanksgiving in a meeting room a few blocks from the White House. The white nationalist Richard B. Spencer was rallying about 200 kindred spirits.

“We are not meant to live in shame and weakness and disgrace,” he said. “We were not meant to beg for moral validation from some of the most despicable creatures to ever populate the planet.” When Mr. Spencer shouted, “Hail, Trump! Hail, our people! Hail, victory!” a scattered half-dozen men stood and raised their arms in Nazi salutes.

Mr. Spencer, however you describe him, calls himself a part of the “alt-right” — a new term for an informal and ill-defined collection of internet-based radicals. As such, he poses a complication for the incoming president. Stephen K. Bannon, the executive chairman of Breitbart News, whom Mr. Trump has picked as his chief White House strategist, [told an interviewer in July](http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2016/08/stephen-bannon-donald-trump-alt-right-breitbart-news) that he considered Breitbart a “platform for the alt-right.”

Perhaps we should not make too much of this. Mr. Bannon may have meant something quite different by the term. Last summer “alt-right,” though it carried overtones of extremism, was not an outright synonym for ideologies like Mr. Spencer’s. But in late August, Hillary Clinton devoted a speech to the alt-right, calling it simply a new label for an old kind of white supremacy that Mr. Trump was shamelessly exploiting.

Groups such as Mr. Spencer’s, which had indeed rallied behind Mr. Trump, were delighted with the attention. Mr. Spencer called the days after the Clinton speech “maybe the greatest week we ever had.” While he does not consider either Mr. Trump or Mr. Bannon alt-right, Mr. Spencer has expressed hope that the press’s describing them as such will help his own group grow.

The alt-right is not a large movement, but the prominence that it is enjoying in the early days of the Trump era may tell us something about the way the country is changing. At least since the end of the Cold War, and certainly since the election of a black president in 2008, America’s shifting identity — political, cultural and racial — has given rise to many questions about who we are as a nation. But one kind of answer was off the table: the suggestion that America’s multicultural present might, in any way, be a comedown from its past had become a taboo. This year a candidate broke it. He promised to “make America great again.” And he won the presidency.

Mr. Trump’s success is bound to embolden other dissenters. This could mean a political climate in which reservations about such multiculturalist policies as affirmative action are voiced more strenuously. It could mean a rise in racial conflict and a platform for alarming movements like Mr. Spencer’s. More likely, it is going to bring a hard-to-interpret mix of those things.

Mr. Spencer, 38, directs the National Policy Institute, which sponsored the Washington meeting. Despite its name, the institute has little to say about policy, although it has called for a 50-year moratorium on immigration. What it mostly does is seek to unite people around the proposition that, as Mr. Spencer put it, “Race is real, race matters, and race is the foundation of identity.”

There are many such groups, varying along a spectrum of couth and intellect. Mr. Spencer, who dropped out of a doctoral program at Duke and worked, briefly, as an editor for The American Conservative, has his own online review, Radix Journal. The eloquent Yale-educated author Jared Taylor, who hosts the American Renaissance website and magazine, was at the conference, too. Kevin MacDonald, a retired psychology professor whose trilogy on Jewish influence is a touchstone for the movement, also came. There were cheers from the crowd at the mention of Andrew Anglin, who runs a neo-Nazi website called The Daily Stormer, but he was not there. Neither was Greg Johnson, whose online review Counter-Currents translates right-wing writings from various European languages. Some of these groups sprouted on the internet. Others have been around since before it existed.

There is no obvious catchall word for them. The word “racist” has been stretched to cover an attitude toward biology, a disposition to hate, and a varying set of policy preferences, from stop-and-frisk policing to repatriating illegal immigrants. While everyone in this set of groups is racist in at least one of these senses, many are not racist in others. Not many of the attendees at the Washington gathering favored the term “white supremacist.” The word implies a claim to superiority — something few insisted on. “White nationalist” is closer to the mark; most people in this part of the alt-right think whites either ought to have a nation or constitute one already. But they feel that almost all words tend to misdescribe or stigmatize them.

Almost all of them are gung-ho for Mr. Trump. That is a surprise. “I’ve been watching these people for 17 years,” said Heidi Beirich, who follows extremist movements for the Southern Poverty Law Center. “It’s the first time I’ve seen them come out for a candidate.”

Mr. Trump disavowed the alt-righters once the excesses of Mr. Spencer’s conference went viral. But as a candidate, Mr. Trump called the government corrupt, assailed the Republican establishment, flouted almost every rule of political etiquette, racial and otherwise, and did so in a way that made the alt-righters trust his instincts. And whether or not he exploited them as shamelessly as Mrs. Clinton alleged, he did little to put the public at ease on the matter — retweeting posts from someone called @WhiteGenocideTM and dawdling before disavowing the endorsement of the former Ku Klux Klan leader David Duke.

“I don’t think that Trump is a rabid white nationalist,” the alt-right blogger Millennial Woes said at a speech in Seattle days after the election. “I think that he just wants to restore America to what he knew as a young man, as a child. And I think he probably does know at some level that the way to do it is to get more white people here and fewer brown people.”

Mr. Spencer speaks of Mr. Trump’s campaign as a “body without a head” and considers many of his policies “half-baked.” But for him, that is not the point. “Donald Trump is the first step towards identity politics for European-Americans in the United States,” he said.

There is no good evidence that Mr. Trump or Mr. Bannon think in terms like these. Not even the former Breitbart editor at large Ben Shapiro, who has become an energetic critic of Mr. Bannon and his agenda, says that Mr. Bannon is himself a racist or an anti-Semite. Mr. Shapiro considers fears that Mr. Bannon will bring white nationalism to the White House “overstated, at the very least.”

To be sure, Mr. Bannon holds right-wing views. He believes that a “global Tea Party movement” is underway, one that would fight crony capitalism and defend Western culture against radical Islam. In a 2014 speech he showed an interest in linking up American activists with certain European populist movements, including opponents of both the European Union and same-sex marriage. But while he recognized that some groups, such as France’s National Front, had “baggage, both ethnically and racially,” he expressed confidence that their intolerance “will all be worked through with time.”

Until Hillary Clinton’s speech last summer, a similarly broad idea prevailed of what the alt-right was. The Southern Poverty Law Center’s webpage on the movement traces some of its roots to libertarian followers of Ron Paul and traditionalist Christians. Neither were in evidence at the National Policy Institute conference in Washington. The adjective “alt-right” has been attached in the past to those, like the undercover documentarian James O’Keefe (known for his secret recordings of Planned Parenthood encounters), whose conservatism is mainstream, even if their tactics are not. Understood this way, the alt-right did look as if it might be a pillar of Mr. Bannon’s world Tea Party.

This was especially so if you worked for one of Mr. Bannon’s enterprises. Last March, Breitbart’s Milo Yiannopoulos, a peroxide-blond gay Trump supporter, critic of feminism and internet “troll” of a particularly aggressive kind, helped write “An Establishment Conservative’s Guide to the Alt-Right,” which painted the movement as “born out of the youthful, subversive, underground edges of the internet,” treating the neo-Nazis in its ranks as unrepresentative.

But since then, and certainly since the National Policy Institute event, alt-right has come more and more to *mean* white nationalist. Mr. Yiannopoulos’s exuberant youths look peripheral to the movement, the extremists central. William Johnson of the American Freedom Party even wrote Mr. Spencer a letter accusing him of squandering what might have been a “start-over moniker” — a gentler term that didn’t invite immediate dismissal — for his fellow white nationalists.

How big is the movement? There is a “hard core” of thousands or tens of thousands who are “taking us seriously on a daily basis,” Mr. Spencer said. But both members and detractors have an incentive to exaggerate the alt-right’s size. The National Policy Institute, at this point, would have trouble holding a serious street rally, let alone turning into a mass political party.

Even so, this more narrowly defined alt-right may be a force. In the internet age, political consciousness can be raised not just through quarterlies, parties and rallies but also through comment boards, console games and music videos. The internet solves the organizing problem of mobs, even as it gives them incentives not to stray from their screens. The adjective “alt-right” does not just denote recycled extremist views — it also reflects the way those views have been pollinated by other internet concerns and updated in the process.

For example, the alt-right has an environmentalist component, centered on a neo-pagan group called the Wolves of Vinland. The Norwegian heavy-metal musician Varg Vikernes, after serving 16 years for murder, has an alt-right blog that contains his musings on everything from Norse mythology to the meaning of the Norwegian mass murderer Anders Breivik. There are sci-fi and video-game enthusiasts, too, including many who participated in the “GamerGate” uproar of 2014, which pitted (as the alt-right sees it) feminist game designers trying to emasculate the gaming world against (as the feminists saw it) a bunch of misogynist losers.

But most of all there is sex. The alt-right has a lot of young men in it, young men whose ideology can be assumed to confront them with obstacles to meeting people and dating. Sex-cynicism and race-pessimism, of course, often travel in tandem. At the National Policy Institute conference, the writer F. Roger Devlin gave a talk on why young Norwegian women in Groruddalen, outside Oslo, preferred dating Somali and Pakistani gang members to ethnic Norwegian boys-next-door. “The female instinct is to mate with socially dominant men,” he explained, “and it does not matter how such dominance is achieved.”

Likewise, the common alt-right slur “cuckservative,” a portmanteau combining cuckold and conservative, is not just a colorful way of saying that establishment conservatives have been unmanly. According to Matthew Tait, a young ex-member of the far-right British National Party, the metaphor has a precise ornithological meaning. Like the reed-warbler hatching eggs that a cuckoo (from which the word “cuckold” comes) has dropped into its nest, cuckservatives are raising the offspring of their foes. One can apply the metaphor equally to progressive ideas or to the children of the foreign-born. Type “reed warbler” into YouTube, and you will find a video with more than a million views, along with a considerable thread of alt-right commentary.

The internet liberates us to be our worst selves. Where other movements have orators and activists, the alt-right also has ruthless trolls and “doxers.” The trolls bombard Twitter and email accounts with slur-filled letters and Photoshopped art. Doxing is the releasing of personal information onto the internet. Last month, several alt-right writers, including Mr. Spencer, had their accounts suspended by Twitter. Mr. Spencer says he appreciates the “frenetic energy” of trolling but doesn’t do it himself.

The alt-right did not invent these tactics. But during this election the trolling reached a sadistic pitch. Journalists who opposed Mr. Trump received photos of themselves — and in some cases their children — dead, or in gas chambers. Jewish and Jewish-surnamed journalists were particular targets, especially those seen to be thwarting Mr. Trump’s rise: Jonah Goldberg, Julia Ioffe and Ben Shapiro, among others. The Daily Stormer has been particularly aggressive in deploying its “troll army” against those with whom it disagrees. A signature punctuation of the alt-right is to mark Jewish names with “echoes,” or triple parentheses, like (((this))).

One got a strange sensation at the National Policy Institute gathering that everyone in the room was either over 60 or under 40. There was a lot of tomorrow-belongs-to-me optimism, as if the attendees felt the ideas being aired there were on the verge of going mainstream. Whether this had anything to do with Mr. Trump’s victory or the effect of alt-right rebranding was hard for a newcomer to say. As Mr. Spencer spoke, a dapper guy named Ryan looked on. Ryan was a 27-year-old who sported the common “fashy” haircut — close-cropped (like a skinhead) on the sides, free-flowing (like a mullet) on the top. Mr. Spencer was lecturing journalists about how it took courage to embrace a movement that was “quite frankly, heretical.”

“For the moment,” Ryan muttered.

Mr. Tait, who hopes to start an alt-right movement in England, said: “What you’re seeing now is young people who have never been affiliated to any kind of politics, ever. They don’t remember what it was like before the war or in the 1960s or even in the 1980s. Their motivation isn’t a sense of loss.” That is what is “alt” about the alt-right. These people are not nostalgic. They may not even be conservatives. For them, multiculturalism is not an affront to traditional notions of society, as it would have been in the Reagan era. It *is* society.

The Vanderbilt University political scientist Carol Swain was among the first to describe the contours of this worldview. In her 2002 book, “The New White Nationalism in America,” she noted that young people were quick to identify double standards, and that they sometimes did so in the name of legitimate policy concerns. “I knew that identity would come next,” she recalled. “It had to come. All they had to do was copy what they were hearing. The multiculturalist arguments you hear on every campus — those work for whites, too.” Mr. Spencer, asked in an interview how he would respond to the accusation that his group was practicing identity politics in the manner of blacks and Hispanics, replied: “I’d say: ‘*Yuh.* You’re right.’ ”

Professor Swain’s analysis does not just pertain to radicals. It is a plausible account of what is happening in the American electoral mainstream. The alt-right is small. It may remain so. And yet, while small, it is part of something this election showed to be much bigger: the emergence of white people, who evidently feel their identity is under attack, as a “minority”-style political bloc.

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Christopher Caldwell, a senior editor at The Weekly Standard, is at work on a book about the rise and fall of the post-1960s political order.

*A version of this op-ed appears in print on December 4, 2016, on Page SR1 of the New York edition with the headline: What the Alt-Right Really Means.* [*Today's Paper*](http://www.nytimes.com/pages/todayspaper/index.html)*|*[*Subscribe*](http://www.nytimes.com/subscriptions/Multiproduct/lp839RF.html?campaignId=48JQY)

<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/02/opinion/sunday/what-the-alt-right-really-means.html>

**Below are a few of the 1545 comments that were submitted before the comments period closed. These are some the NY Times picked as worthwhile (39 from the total).**

### Patrick, New York [December 2, 2016](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/02/opinion/sunday/what-the-alt-right-really-means.html#permid=20675141)

I think we should all agree that it's wrong to demonize and punish white males and whiteness while celebrating other races. 117 Recommend

### Gray Yates, Macon, Georgia [December 2, 2016](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/02/opinion/sunday/what-the-alt-right-really-means.html#permid=20674458)

The sections of the article referring to emasculation and females preferring gangsters as opposed to "the boy next door" are particularly interesting. White males involved in this "alt-right" movement seem to use this way of thinking as an excuse to have the toxic form of manhood where men dominate women and control people of a different class. That is why they cling to these video games (and porn for that matter) which offer them a false sense of reality and control. Now they look to Trump as a hero that is going to save them from their emasculated routine. They are as lazy and entitled as the poor people they claim to despise. So much for the party of personal responsibility. 532 Recommend *NYT Pick*

### Jim Guerin, San Diego [December 2, 2016](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/02/opinion/sunday/what-the-alt-right-really-means.html#permid=20676023)

A year or so before the alt-right became a media tag, we discovered murderous racism in the conduct of police departments nationwide. This was made evident only by the growing use of cellphone cameras, so we know it was going on for years before as well. Another growing trend is the re-segregation of schools nationwide.   
  
What do we think will happen as whites become a demographic minority? We will become potential recruits for a new race-conscious political process. The camel has poked its nose into the White House. Every time an immigrant, black, Latino or Muslim person commits an atrocity, the camel will move further inside. Discussion of the "American way of life" (read white) will become more mainstream, less "out there", and fear will drive "decent" people into its embrace.

The only way to fight the horrible outcome (read: non-stop violence) of our growing racial/ethnic/religious divide is to do two things: 1) stop pretending diversity is a an abstract concept people can identify with--they can't. 2) dialogue endlessly and openly about healing wounds, developing stronger understanding between all groups. Don't be complacent. The alt-right only sounds kooky for the moment. 159 Recommend

### Jeff Guinn, Germany [December 2, 2016](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/02/opinion/sunday/what-the-alt-right-really-means.html#permid=20673539)

Recently there was a white nationalist convention in DC that drew 200 people.  
  
The last Bronycon -- for My Little Pony enthusiasts -- drew more than 30 times as many.  
  
Maybe it isn't time for the NYT to freak out just yet. 280 Recommend