

Department  
of Political Science

Course of Political Sociology

# Gramscian Web 2.0: How Virtual Communities Fight Hegemony

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## Index

Introduction.....	3
1. Chapter One: Gramscian Theoretical Framework.....	4
1.1 <i>Gramsci and Historical Context</i>	
1.2 <i>The concept of Hegemony</i>	
1.3 <i>Collective Will and Education</i>	
1.4 <i>Intellectuals and the Historical Bloc</i>	
2. Chapter Two: Communitarianism in Web 2.0.....	9
2.1 <i>From Web 1.0 to Web 2.0</i>	
2.2 <i>Building a Virtual Community: Participatory Culture, Affinity Spaces and Education</i>	
2.3 <i>How a Virtual Community Acts: Political Action on Web 2.0</i>	
2.4 <i>Contemporary Virtual Community: Memes and Meme Culture</i>	
3. Chapter Three: The Alt-Right Movement .....	15
3.1 <i>Political Output of Web 2.0</i>	
3.2 <i>History and Identity of the Alt Right</i>	
3.3 <i>Irony and Memes as Counterhegemony</i>	
3.4 <i>God Emperor Trump</i>	
Conclusions.....	20
Bibliography .....	22
Italian Summary – Riassunto in Italiano.....	25

## Introduction

During Donald Trump's campaign in the U.S. presidential election of 2016 it was common to read or hear American traditional media talk about the web, memes and the website 4chan.org. The reason of such connection between Donald Trump and the often misunderstood world of internet memes was a previously unknown political group that was being referred as the "Alt-Right". The cultural identity, political tactics and overall impact on the American public is an undeniable signal that cyberculture weight on society cannot be ignored anymore. Until the 2010s political actors' prospective on the web was of an instrument to gain additional consensus but could not replace traditional means of information and entertainment, namely television. Today we finally reached a point in time where Ted Cruz, American Republican senator and major political figure in American politics, simply cannot ignore all the memes and jokes about him resembling the only sketch of the face of Zodiac Killer, the infamous serial killer that terrorized California during the 60s<sup>1</sup>. However, it does not seem like associating himself with a never caught murderer (and joking about it on Twitter) seems to have drastically hurt his image, on the opposite, many answers below his first tweet<sup>2</sup> acknowledging his resemblance to the Zodiac are laughing and entertained. This is a minor example of how the mass of cyberculture is trampling over real life in all matters, politics included. However 2016 presidential election showed the world and the United States that it is not only about memes and jokes, it is an attack to traditional culture and general opinion, it is history evolving and changing the way we perceive political debate for good.

The aim of this thesis is to link Alt-Right entrance into American politics with both theories of participatory culture in the web and Antonio Gramsci's theories about hegemony and revolution. First, a theoretical framework of Gramscian theories of revolution, including the Gramscian definition of hegemony, the role of education and intellectuals, and the concept of historical bloc, will be provided. Secondly a general framework of cyberculture studies will be provided. Among the topics of the second chapter there are the idea of participatory culture in the web and elements of online participatory culture, some examples of political action in the web and an analysis of the most significant contemporary cultural dimension on the web, that being meme culture and the importance of irony. Finally, the history and identity of the Alt-Right will be studied and put in relation with the 2016 U.S. presidential election and Donald Trump.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/ted-cruz-zodiac-killer>

<sup>2</sup> <https://twitter.com/tedcruz/status/920709146789515272>. Cruz here tweeted the Zodiac Killer cypher without any comment, but the conversation context implies he is in fact joking about the topic.

# 1. Chapter One: Gramscian Theoretical Framework

## 1.1 Gramsci and Historical Context

To discuss and link Gramsci's writings to the contemporary historical context requires a precise analysis of his constantly evolving ideas during the span of his life. Antonio Gramsci's revolutionary thought regarding the domination-hegemony relationship, the role of intellectuals and new counterhegemonic education became, over the course of the 20th century, a pillar of Marxist and non-Marxist scholars who focused their work on political and civil society and the role of culture within changes in political institutions. One of the most interesting features of Gramsci's works was his attention for historical context. By historical context we refer both to the Italian political field during his life and permanence in prison and general historical context. History is for Gramsci an essential element to be considered when dealing with the topic of revolution and culture. As Gramsci states in Notebook Ten:

«Ethical-political history is, therefore, one of those canons of historical interpretation to be always taken into consideration while examining and studying in depth historical development, if the intention is to document history integrally and not partially and in an extrinsic manner» (Gramsci 1975, n. 10, p. 1211). Gramsci's theory of "passive revolution" is a perfect example of the "history-matters approach" over the topic of revolution, concept that especially developed after Mussolini's march over Rome and his consequential rise to absolute power. Gramsci's direct experience of the fascist regime had a massive impact on the Marxist thinker because of the important role that the proletarian class had in support of the fascist party in the overturning of the Italian democratic institutions. Although the fascist regime showed recurring signals of its social structural weakness (probably the most symbolic crisis being the killing of Giacomo Matteotti in 1924), it was able to survive until the very defeat of the Italian Social Republic in 1945. The stabilization and decades-long duration of the fascist regime was inspiring for Gramsci as it aided in the conceptualization of two basic elements of his writings. First of all, the realization that radical change, even when supported by the subaltern social classes, does not imply that the future will be even close to the model of dictatorship of the proletariat. Secondly, to ensure that the proletarian revolution will not bring to a historical stall as the fascist proletarian support did – «The old [world] dies and the new will not rise» (Gramsci 1975, n. 3, p. 311) – it is necessary to accurately plan and not to rush the revolution of political and civil society.

As Adamson writes at the beginning of *Hegemony and Revolution*: «[...]while this reflection remains bound to the problems of his epoch and his people, by the time his work appeared it was appreciated less for its historical value than for the suggestiveness of its categories for the politics of a new post-fascist and "technological" society» (Adamson 1980). Gramsci's reflections on culture and the importance of education in opposing hegemony are relevant to this day. It is not rare to come across elements of his theory of counterhegemonic education that fit perfectly within the Western society of the 21st century, including when discussing new communication technologies. The Prison Notebooks are tremendous theoretical fundamentals for deeper investigations of today's virtual communities and their identity.

## 1.2 The concept of Hegemony

Gramsci's most fundamental idea regards the nature and the structure of hegemony. Although Gramsci does not define the concept of hegemony through a clear, direct definition, it is not difficult to grasp the concept around which most of its ideas revolve. Gramsci's definition of hegemony is different from the classical and medieval use of the term and has a double significance. He prefers to use the term "domination" when referring to the monopoly of power by the state, while hegemony could be considered a similar yet different superstructure. Hegemony is «the consensual basis of an existing political system within civil society» (Adamson 1980, p. 170) and it is in fact a superior way of establishing state control over a population rather than domination. The two concepts are not mutually exclusive, as Gramsci demonstrates when discussing the dominium and establishing of hegemony by other countries in Italy during the sixteenth century (Gramsci 1975, n. 9, p. 1962) or the combination of physical repression and popular consensus in France in the aftermath of the French Revolution (Gramsci 1975, n. 1, p. 58). Gramsci thought that stronger Western countries such as Great Britain had established such a stable hegemony that domination was not required to keep order. In another sense, the concept of hegemony in Antonio Gramsci's work refers specifically to the overcoming of the economic-corporative hegemony, as the historical transformation of a class from an economically defined group of affiliated people to a community of individuals that share a common culture and a common intellectual and moral awareness. Generally the concept of hegemony may be superficially linked to the domination of the ruling class in the capitalist hegemony, but it is rather a condition to be met in any society that reaches a form of common cultural framework among most of its people. Hegemony is eventually the result of any successful revolution, as it represents the formation of a major class (or, hypothetically, only class) that shares the same economic, political and cultural thinking.

Before establishing how the ruling class aims towards maintaining a stable hegemony or a counterhegemonic group tries to overthrow the cultural domination, it is essential to take into consideration Gramsci's relationship between economics and politics. While Marx considered civil society as fully dependant on the economic structure, Gramsci visualized economics and politics as two distinguishable but strongly linked characters of the state. Gramsci believed that political independence had already been noticed by Machiavelli in *The Prince*, and that political activity is independent from economic activity. This intuition origins from a visualization of political actors as independent entities. Those who retain power are however directly influenced by the repercussion of economic actions, since it inevitably has political consequences. In this sense, political activity is connected to the economic moment through different mediations among which there are evolving human nature, moral norms and rules, ideological systems and language, all of which determine cultural totality and, therefore, hegemony. Politics do have an independent logic but are not actually separated from economics (Adamson 1980, p. 205). Nonetheless, Gramsci distances himself from a total economic conceptualization of civil society to express the importance of education to reform the

superstructure and eventually the economic system.

To change institutions, ergo establish a new hegemony, Gramsci reflects upon the constantly mutating historical context and, therefore, the needs and request of the people to institutions:

«History is both freedom and necessity. Institutions, in whose development and activity history is incarnated, are drawn up and maintained because they have a task and a mission to realize. They draw up and develop the determinate objective conditions of the production of material goods and of the spiritual consciousness of men. If these objective conditions change, then the sum of the relations which regulate and inform human society along with the degree of human consciousness changes also. The social pattern is transformed, traditional institutions are impoverished, they are inadequate to their tasks, and they become cumbersome and defunct.» (Gramsci 1971, p. 75).

Gramsci links the functioning and life of institutions to their role in society, their utility to satisfy material and spiritual needs of the populations. When historical context changes, institutions need to adapt if it is desired for them to survive. Hegemony is a constantly mutating element. The role of the ruling class depends on historical context and necessities of the majority. If institutions do not respect such function to an acceptable level, then a singular action of rebellion may change the hegemony. Gramsci also explains that ideological factors lag behind economic factors while, however, having an impact on them. This implies that it is possible through political action to change the basic structure of society, that being the economy, which leads to change in institutions. Gramsci sensed that it is possible to dismantle hegemony and reach the proletarian revolution through exclusively cultural means, rather than a direct action. This is the concept of Passive Revolution, an idea that hypothesizes a long-run revolution through a political initiative that does not rely its initial input on economic factors. For Gramsci, this political initiative starts with the identification of the collective will and his conceptualization of education

### **1.3 Collective Will and Education**

The greatest issue with the formation of counterhegemonic action is the building of a collective will that would push for the necessary ideological change towards the revolution of institutions. The creation of a different, culturally and morally homogenous class that proceeds to become the newest hegemony has been a topic of discussion among Marxists thinkers and philosophers for centuries, including Marx himself, who had doubts himself regarding what he called the “school of labour” and its effectiveness in generating class consciousness (Easton and Guddat 1967, Adamson 1980, p. 4). Gramsci soon realized the need for a significant political response that could counter and study Western contemporary society, an action that could also respond to the role of educational politics against the ruling system. To create such education and political entity the question of political legitimation was the central focus. As Gramsci puts it:

«[...]the “spontaneous” consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group; this consent is 'historically' caused by the prestige (and

consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production.» (Gramsci 1971, p. 12.)

Once the bourgeoisie was able to establish the current capitalist-corporative hegemony and secured institutions able to respond to the essential needs of the general population, its legitimacy was taken as granted by default. «Consent, for Gramsci, involves a complex mental state, a "contradictory consciousness" mixing approbation and apathy, resistance and resignation.» (Lears 1985, p. 570)

Questioning the position of power required the organization of a new education system that could provide the proletariat and subaltern classes with the knowledge to gain class consciousness, join the “War of Position” and eventually the “War of Manœuvre”. The War of Position and Manœuvre are two different phases of class struggle, respectively associated with a slower, hidden cultural antagonism with the hegemonic intellectuals and with the direct clash between revolutionaries and the State. However, both of the two phases of the revolution according to Gramsci required the founding of proper schools, not as physical education institutions but as new means of educating the people. Before Mussolini’s rise to power Gramsci believed that the PSI (Italian Socialist Party) would have been the best mean to organise the collective will, but he later changed his opinion because «the socialists are not the commanders of a proletarian army, they are a part of the proletariat itself. [...] The socialists cannot be placed in a dualism with the proletariat.» (Adamson 1980, p.38). For Gramsci the lack of subordination was an essential element in educating the proletariat, as equality among intellectual leaders and follower was in contrast with the exploit of the proletariat by the fascists’ rise to power in Italy. In 1916 Gramsci wrote an article in *Avanti!* (the Italian Socialist Party newspaper) discussing education, encouraging the idea of a humanist education for the proletariat. Schools had to be free, not based on mechanization and absorption of ideas without questions. Moreover, the importance of present education laid on the idea that the future highly depends on today once again underlying the importance of historical context for Gramsci and, therefore, the necessity to be prepared for the uncertain development of the future.

Those tasked with the job of leading education and the creation of the historical bloc would be intellectuals.

## 1.4 Intellectuals and the Historical Bloc

Depicting education over the limiting idea of school institutions suggests that learning is ultimately constructed by the aggregate cultural output of intellectuals of the hegemony. In other words, those individuals that shape general culture of society are sources to the population's learning, leading to the support or opposition of hegemony. Education is to be pursued through a constant dialectical interaction between intellectuals and the people, an activity that is essentially, as mentioned already, political action. However, before a War of Position can be initiated between organic intellectuals originating in subaltern classes and traditional intellectuals it is required to generate organic intellectuals themselves. In a hypothetical point zero in the temporal dimension, in which the path towards the creation of an opposition to hegemony is not initiated yet, the only kind of intellectuals that exist are traditional intellectuals established by conventions of the current hegemony. Gramsci imagined intellectuals as relatively independent by the ruling class (just as politics is almost independent from economics) and therefore it is possible that the traditional intellectual «experiences through an *'esprit de corps'* their uninterrupted historical continuity and their special qualification» (Gramsci 1975, n. 3, p. 1515) momentarily occupying the role of leadership in the education of the subaltern classes. This denotes an essential character of the evolution of class consciousness: before reaching the stadium of counterhegemony, the dialogue between the intellectuals and mass population will develop an intellectual and moral bloc, but when we look to the larger impact of the bloc we can observe its greater socio-political implications, capable of determining the historical context (Adamson 1980). This status is called historical bloc by Gramsci, and it highlights the need for class alliance for the growth and success of counterhegemony. It is in fact through the alliance of proletariat, intellectuals and all the subaltern classes that capitalist hegemony can be reshaped. The role of the intellectual assumes new light, because it becomes a mediator between the current superstructure and structure. Intellectuals lead towards change.

Nonetheless, the role of traditional intellectuals ends in an advanced stage of the historical bloc through generational change: those part of the proletariat that underwent the education of traditional intellectuals will provide the bloc with organic leadership, raised by workers themselves. This will ensure that the maturation process of the bloc proceeds safely, excluding any sort of elitism that traditional intellectuals may have protected. This aversion towards elitism originates from Gramsci's belief that no revolution would be successful if the actual interests of the subaltern classes would not be pursued. Only through self-education a class may protect its interests in creating a new hegemony: to remain faithful to one's own folklore and ideas leads, eventually, to revolution.



## **2. Chapter Two: Communitarism in Web 2.0**

### **2.1 From Web 1.0 to Web 2.0**

The transition from the so-called web 1.0 to the web 2.0 has radically changed how human interactions work online. Originally, the web was an exclusive dimension, where people who could afford a computer and an internet connection probably did not have the technological skills to contribute actively, for example by building their own personal website. «Web 1.0 was predominantly a system of cognition» and «a tool for thought» (Fuchs 2008, p. 125). However with the beginning of the new millennium, the web changed drastically and became much more populated and user-friendly. The first decade of the 2000s is, after all, the time during which all of the biggest web platforms, such as mainstream social networks, were created. Web 2.0 is a dimension revolving around communication and contact. Finally, the next step in the evolution of the web would be web 3.0, which is not yet mature: the web of cooperation. Interestingly, Christian Fuchs associates web 1.0 to Durkheim's social facts, web 2.0 to Weber's idea of communication and the concept behind web 3.0 to Marx's idea of collective cooperative production and Tönnies' idea of communities. This explains the excitement behind many cultural studies of the web: the internet and new fast communication technologies have been considered since the 90s as possible instruments for the creation of utopia, an invention of unlimited and unpredictable potential. Contemporary cyberculture developed towards different dimensions of participatory culture and suggests that the formation of the historical bloc as theorized by Gramsci may be possible.

### **2.2 Building a Virtual Community: Participatory culture, Affinity Spaces and Education**

Henry Jenkins defines participatory culture as: «a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one's creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices» (Jenkins 2009, p.3). In its transition from web 1.0 to web 2.0 participatory culture has become an essential feature of online communications. The main difference between the web of the first half of the 90s and the beginning of the 2000s is the relationship between the identities of creators and users. In web 1.0 creators and users were linked vertically, with the creators above users, but in the web 2.0 users and creators overlap. This new improved connections between users, mostly merit of easier interface to interact with, has given new energy to the creation of virtual communities and cyberculture. Participatory culture seems to be similar to how Gramsci imagined the school institutions, or at least direct education. When he founded in December 1917 the *Club di vita morale* students were assigned topics to research and in the next lesson confrontation and debate were the means to learn. Jenkins too saw in participatory culture a new and exciting new form of education and listed core media literacy skills that could be learnt on the web, but not in traditional schools. These skills are eleven and are:

- Play — to experiment and solve problem with means and context provided;
- Performance — to adopt alternative identities for the purpose of improvisation and discovery;
- Simulation — to interpret and construct models of real elements and/or event;
- Appropriation — to sample and remix media to create new content;
- Multitasking — to shift focus between different tasks/elements depending on context;
- Distributed Cognition — to interact with tools that expand mental capacities;
- Collective Intelligence — to collect knowledge between different individuals towards a common objective;
- Judgment — to critically evaluate different information sources;
- Transmedia Navigation — to be able to follow the flow of information between different media;
- Networking — to search for, comprehend, synthesize and disseminate information to others;
- Negotiation — to interact with diverse communities, discerning and respecting multiple perspectives, and grasping different visualization of the topic.

All of these skills are not generally taught in schools institutions, but are especially important in the contemporary world because are those perks required to fully grasp the web and a society that is increasingly built on the base of it.

Other than core media literacy skills, Jenkins also provides some general characteristics of participatory culture:

- Relatively low barriers to engage;
- Strong support for creating and sharing with the community;
- What is known by the most experienced is passed along to other members;
- Individuals participating believe that their contribution matters;
- Somewhat relatively explicit feeling of social connection among the members of the community

The nature of participatory culture encourages dialogue between those participating and occasionally establishes strong relationships among members. Moreover, the easy access and exit (which is further facilitated online, especially in communities with relative anonymity) enables participatory culture to respond to inputs and constantly evolve in any context, just as Gramsci imagined hegemonies responding to mutating historical context.

James Paul Gee went further by conceptualizing the synthesis of participatory culture and education: affinity spaces. «An affinity space is a place or set of places where people affiliate with others based primarily on shared activities, interests, and goals, not shared race, class culture, ethnicity, or gender» (Gee 2004, p67). In the context of an affinity space, Gee argues that members are encouraged to seek the resolution or continuing the current experience they are living because they are interested in the topic. Among the most important and curious elements of the conceptualization of affinity spaces, leadership is porous, changeable and a resource for the group. There is no discrimination of any kind among participants, sharing of information and knowledge is encouraged and content is not fixed but in constant transformation through interactions and confrontation.

Artificial affinity spaces are attempted in workplaces and schools, but are often easier to come into realisation online. Through internet it is rather easy to come into contact with individuals of any provenience that share the same interests, and there are many examples of virtual community that reach a goal that seemed improbable without the web.

### **2.3 How a Virtual Community Acts: Political Action on Web 2.0**

Web 2.0 pushed for a significant increase in self-organized, autonomous political action. Some of the most significant initially spontaneous political movements originated from web 2.0, such as the Occupy Wall Street movement in 2011, most of protests during the Arab Spring in the first years of the 2010s and some real life demonstrations promoted by Anonymous during Operation Chanology. One of the causes of this facilitation of self-organized movements is the use that people do of new communication technologies, that being to be informed. Social research by the Office of National Statistics in the United Kingdom<sup>3</sup> found out that in 2013 over 70% of the UK citizens accessed the web every single day, twenty million people more than in 2006, and that over half of the population accessed the internet to read newspapers and magazines. A similar research<sup>4</sup> in 2016 displays the same pattern in the United States, where over 60% of adults got their news from social media at least occasionally. Another discovery was the percentage of each social networking sites users who got their news on the site, which is 70% for Reddit users, 66% for Facebook users and 59% for Twitter users. An important implication of the increasing dependence on the web to increase each user's own cultural baggage is that differently from traditional media people are exposed to opinions quite more often. What Gramsci addressed as the way education pushes towards the historical bloc is in fact happening through new web participatory culture. We see increasing political action taken both online and in real life but originating in discussions on the web, social media, forums and media sharing.

Since users have become media producers in the age of web 2.0 it is necessary to analyse through which means web participants share cultural and socio-political notions and organise political action. Hashtag politics merge both the share of information and the mobilization on the web (Meisel 2012). Hashtags were made popular by Twitter but are now found in most social media and web platforms and consist in a single term (that can also be a composition of more words with no space between them) followed by the symbol “#”. Posts and media that include the same hashtag in their description can be observed in the same page on the website taken into consideration. If, for example, we type “#trump” in the search bar on the Twitter homepage we will be redirected to a page containing exclusively posts and media with the hashtag that we selected, in this case regarding the president of the United States. Furthermore, trending and popular hashtags of the day are usually listed on the homepage of websites that integrated their use. Hashtags are a phenomenal tool to

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<sup>3</sup><https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/householdcharacteristics/homeinternetandsocialmediausage/bulletins/internetaccesshouseholdsandindividuals/2013-08-08>

<sup>4</sup><https://www.journalism.org/2016/05/26/news-use-across-social-media-platforms-2016/>

collect information revolving around current events and draw attention to them, and help define the values associated with a particular political position. Nonetheless:

«to effectively practice hashtag politics, it's important to strategically and proactively define the hashtag you wish to organize the conversation around. If your hashtag is well chosen, you will draw more people to your side of the debate» (Meisel 2012, p. 238).

Web 2.0's easier and faster way of interacting with individuals of the same country or all over the world brought to the rise a new political ideology or way to do politics known as "Populism 2.0". Paolo Gerbaudo describes populism 2.0 as «an ideological orientation that sees social media as means to address "the people", in the sense of the totality or near-totality of the political community» (Gerbaudo 2015, p.67). This could be considered as the effective evolution of mass parties and the use of traditional mainstream media to gain the attention of the majority of the population and median voters. This ideology has grown since the first years of the 2010s and gave birth to movements such as Occupy Wall Street in New York or the Indignados in Spain. However, the greatest successes of populism 2.0 were in countries such as Italy, where parties like the 5 Star Movement scored some significant electoral results. Parties based on populism 2.0 exploit the instruments that social networks provide as a mean of political consultation with their following. Likes, shares, comments and votes in online surveys are all considered legitimate methods to establish a dialogue with the electoral base and pursue the requests made by the people. Gerbaudo writes:

«Contemporary social media activism comes to reflect some rhetorical features traditionally associated with populism, but updated in a way that fits the dynamics proper to the communicative architecture of Web 2.0, with its valuing of interactivity and participation. In this context, traditional features of populism (appeal to unity, anti-establishment and anti-institutional rhetoric, strive for direct democracy, suspicion of intermediaries) come to be matched with a set of tropes that make up what we could call the 'ideology of social media' (inter-activity, openness, directness)». (Gerbaudo 2015, p.68)

Populism 2.0 aims to create a type of online activism improved compared to traditional populism as it bases the decisions of leaders on actual feedback from the people. Emerging movements direct their message to the "generic internet user" to work together against economic and political elites. Although the word populism, Gerbaudo writes, is by many negatively considered because of the current historical context, in the case of "populism 2.0", the significance of the word populism is strictly linked to the original meaning of "politics of the people", and could develop into a very different ideology from traditional populist politics.

## **2.4 Contemporary Virtual Community: Memes and Meme Culture**

The concept of meme was created by Richard Dawkins and shared with the publication of "The Selfish Gene" in 1976. Dawkins visualized culture as a flow of singular replicating units that he called "memes", inspired by the greek word *mimeme*, translatable as "imitation", and the similar sound of the word "gene". Dawkins wrote

that memes were the singular elements that composed cultural concepts and were shared among individuals through any support that linked humans' brains, such as books, music, websites, etc. The theory behind memes is inspired by the replication and evolution of genes through generations. Memes would be transferred and remixed through human interactions and evolve in different cultural concepts (Dawkins 1976).

Although the original conceptualization of memes was created to be applicable to any kind of culture, with the advent of the web 2.0 the term assumed a different popular meaning.

Today the term meme has evolved thanks to the association of Dawkins' original concept to the sharing of media on the web. To be more specific, we could define an internet meme as «viral content that does not aim towards reproduction but to reinvent itself» (Lolli 2017, p.57). Internet memes were already given a definition in their current web 2.0 status in 2009 by Patrick Davidson, who defines an internet meme as «a piece of culture, typically a joke, which gains influence through online transmission» (Davidson 2009, p.122). While it is true that internet memes are mostly of humoristic nature and most of the culture that derives from their success is radically linked to humour and entertainment, Davidson's original definition of the term is too narrow.

«The story of memes is crucial to the understanding of digital culture, and not only as a characteristic of an Internet subculture, but as a cultural artefact that is gaining new meaning and function as it is breaking more and more into the mainstream» (Börzsei 2013, p.2). Contemporary cyberculture is heavily defined by meme culture, to the point that social media profiles of brands, politicians and even state institutions.

Although «Internet meme remains a highly subjective concept» (Börzsei 2013, p.4), and it might remain such for a long time precisely because of this constantly mutating nature, there are some generally recognized elements in a meme. The quintessential feature of contemporary memes is irony.

The usage of irony in memes can be, ironically, explained through a meme: the concept of “layers of irony”. In a four panel comic that became viral in 2015 we can observe the conversation between two somewhat human-like figures<sup>5</sup>. The conversation is the following:

A: «*how many layers of irony are you on*»

B: «*like,, maybe 5, or 6 right now. my dude*»

A: «*you are like a little baby*»

A: «*watch this*»

A: «*SUCC*»

Grammar is deliberately incorrect. This is a typical example of meta-meme. Meme culture has developed to a point where jokes have reflective nature and reference meme culture itself. The apparent lack of significance behind the “layers of irony” meme is rather a collage of different internet references, with shades that may

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<sup>5</sup> <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/layers-of-irony>

quote or not other different memes. One of the many definitions of layers of irony posted on Urban Dictionary (an online wiki for contemporary slang) recites:

«A term used in the current metamodernistic/internet era. Shitposting was originally "posting something bad." Literally a shitty post. Then, people started doing it ironically then, people started doing ironic shitposting ironically, and that's where things start to get weird. You're making fun of something that's making fun of something else, so it gradually became more and more absurd. The idea is it gets more absurd the more "ironic" you get, because if X makes fun of Y in an absurd way, you need to be even more absurd to make fun of X. Hence, tiers.»<sup>6</sup>

Layers of irony represent the development that internet memes went through in the two decades of duration of web 2.0. They are the cultural framework to understand much of the conversation millions of users have daily on message boards and social networks. Irony is finally the shared objective and ideal of the meme community, towards which all members collaborate.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Layers%20of%20Irony>

### **3. Chapter Three: The Alt-Right Movement**

#### **3.1 Political Outputs of Web 2.0**

In the early 2010 cyber-utopianism had its biggest resurgence since the 90s following important online-based political movements such as Occupy Wall Street, Anonymous and the Arab Spring, circumstances linked to the rise of social media and the new function of the web 2.0. Nonetheless, the consequences of these revolutionary products of online communitarianism were disappointing. For example, the Egyptian revolution led the country into chaos and subsequently into a new authoritarian military state. Anonymous, a decentralized online activist movement, grew exponentially, resulting in the loss of shared identity amongst its members, internal divisions and a general loss of prestige.

However, what is probably the most well-known political output of the web 2.0 is the “Alt-Right” movement. The Alt-Right is a broad term that refers to a collection of similar but not identical political orientations that share some basic ideas. The reason behind such a heterogeneous nature is its spontaneous nature, only defined by a general sense of racial unity among white populations (Hawley, 2017). There is no official figure or manifesto that represents the interests of those that define themselves as followers of the Alt-Right, which makes it almost impossible to formulate fixed notions and claims over the matter. Nonetheless, the Alt-Right was able to become a widely known political phenomenon in the United States over the span of two years (between 2015 and 2016), despite its unorganized nature. Before 2015, the term Alt-Right was barely searched online and meant something quite different from its contemporary meaning, but most American population might have heard the term at least once after the 2016 U.S. presidential election.

#### **3.2 History and Identity of the Alt-Right**

The origin of the term Alt-Right, as Alternative Right, is commonly associated with the figure of Richard Spencer, a journalist that is generally and incorrectly referred as the founder of the Alt-Right. Spencer himself confirms to have coined the term, affirming that it was inspired by paleoconservative scholar Paul Gottfried, who already in 2008 suggested that a new form of right-wing politics was rising after the disappearance of the paleoconservative movement. The term was first used during Spencer’s experience in the online journal *Taki’s Magazine*, where he filled the role of managing editor. It was there that the term Alt-Right first appeared, but was still a generic term that simply indicated all of those people belonging to the right side of the political spectrum that were opposed to neoconservatism. In 2009 Spencer left *Taki’s Magazine* and founded a website called *Alternative Right*. In terms of vocabulary, the content published differed substantially in from the Alt-Right that became notorious in 2016: instead of deliberate racism and vulgarity authors had a respectable, almost academic language. After two years Spencer decided to renounce to his position of director of *Alternative Right* and stopped personally working on the websites, which kept going

until 2013 when Spencer shut it down. The transition from the new *Alternative Right* website to the commonly known use of the term was almost incidental. As Hawley puts it:

«Aside from the new Alternative Right website and a few message boards, the term Alt-Right seemed to have fallen out of favor among the racial right on the Internet by 2014. However, no new term ever really arose to take its place. As a new iteration of the radical right began to grow, it needed something to call itself, and “Alt-Right” was available». (Hawley 2017, p.66)

In 2015 the use of the term Alt-Right had a resurgence especially on social media, mostly on 4chan, Reddit and Twitter. However, even though the new Alt-Right had many similarities with its “ancestors”, it appeared very different in both message and delivery. Originally, the platform created by Spencer collected articles and opinions by the right wing of American politics that wished to distance itself from traditional neo-liberal conservatism. From 2014, those participating in the Alt-Right movement were interested in the question of racial identity politics, including white supremacists and white nationalists. Contemporary Alt-Right is, moreover, quite detached from conservatism in different manners. The Alt-Right often mocks traditional conservative values, like indiscriminate support for the army and Christian values. But apart from the antagonism towards traditional American politics and non-white populations the Alt-Right developed a particular hatred towards political correctness. This actually raises the question concerning if this hate for political correctness and liberalism is the actual ideological glue that ties the Alt-Right together.

While the movement grew during the 2016 U.S. presidential election, its already unclear ideology became even foggier. Before the Alt-Right reached its peak during the months preceding the election, the aim of the movement was to propagate its racial philosophy, including ideas such as the “White Genocide”, the disappearance of whites in America caused by immigration and ethnical mixed couples. When the Alt-Right became known to the American public and its influence online reached millions of users around the world, many people viewed it as a right-wing, anti-liberalism and anti-politically correct culture. Although this brought many sympathizers and activists to the Alt-Right, many of its original members think that this shift ruined the purpose of their action. The general identity of the Alt-Right remains that of a mostly online movement that fights against traditional politics with chaotic and destructive methods, but its increased size and numerous inside divisions really question its capability to organize significant political action.

The original contemporary Alt-Right, the part of the movement concerned with the racial issue, coined a term to define the looser and non-deliberately racist side of the movement: “Alt-Light”, «people whose views on immigration and race relations partially overlap with those on the Alt-Right yet do not cross the line into open white nationalism» (Hawley 2017, p.143).

Although some of the most popular voices of the movement, like Milo Yiannopoulos, pushed for a broad definition of “Alt-Right” to include many other right-wing currents into the movement, it appears that most of the movement does not wish to evolve into simply a “edgier version of conservatism”. Anti-politically correct culture could not be the final aim for the Alt-Right because it has been for a long time a shared sentiment among the same American conservative the Alt-Right despises. It is not surprising then that the Alt-Right



often attacked right-wing personalities that are occasionally associated with the movement but in reality are not followers of its racial ideology.

The Alt-Light appears to be similar in some sense to the figure of traditional intellectuals that Gramsci saw as the original educators in the creation of an historical bloc: they are not organic intellectuals, for example none of the major figures among the Alt-Light is an expert on meme culture, but they do attract a lot of people putting them into contact with the actual Alt-Right and influence their political opinion. They act as bridges between liberal-conservatism and white supremacists and white nationalists, growing even more the presence of the Alt-Right both online and in real life.

### 3.3 Irony and Memes as Counterhegemony

Contemporary Alt-Right owes a lot of its identity and tactics to “Chan-Culture”, that being the set of cyber-cultural notions developed in underground meme culture (generally associated with the online dimensions of 4chan and 8chan). The connection between users of the different anonymous image boards on the internet and the Alt-Right are numerous and undeniable, but it is important to underline that the two communities do not overlap. There is a considerable number of users on the web that follows and appreciate memes, as any form of content that is linked to online culture that may not be fully understood by older generations and technologically ignorant people, but this does not imply some connection to the Alt-Right or much of the content posted on the different sections of 4chan. Still, we can observe that many elements that became the Alt-Right cultural identity origin from Chan-culture and meme culture. For example, the importance and usage of irony as a mean of communication was definitely taken from Chan-culture and adopted as an instrument of political action by the Alt-Right, or *Pepe*, the anthropomorphic frog that became a symbol of the Alt-Right and was declared a “General Hate Symbol” by the Anti-Defamation League<sup>7</sup>, was a popular meme much before its association with the political movement. This great knowledge of meme culture and of social media mechanics provided the Alt-Right with the right tools to operate in a dimension yet to be fully comprehended by mainstream media. As Nagle puts it:

«They succeeded largely by bypassing the dying mainstream media and creating an Internet-culture and alternative media of their own from the ground up» (Nagle 2017, p.39). In a pure Gramscian sense, the biggest success of the Alt-Right is to have associated a form of culture dedicated to humour, memes, and gathered a large support from the web users, creating an effective historical bloc to oppose traditional media. The arrogant tactics of the Alt-Right are immune to call-out, because they grow the influence of the movement and members themselves do not seem to care about the nature of publicity gifted to them. As long as the message gets the movement more support and liberals and feminists get *triggered* (infuriated with the mockery and anti-political correct spamming) then it was a success. The Alt-Right aimed first and foremost for a cultural revolution, before physical mobilization.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.adl.org/education/references/hate-symbols/pepe-the-frog>

The first major step of the movement towards the legitimization of their ideas happened in an event known online as “Gamergate”. Even though the event is titled as it happened in a single point in time, describing the elements composing the Gamergate controversy is hard. It is generally described as a harassment campaign towards figures (mostly women) in the videogame industry. The harassment began in 2014 and it sparked because of the general feeling by the gaming community that progressive agenda was being forcefully included in videogame media.

«Gamergate brought gamers, rightist chan culture, anti-feminism and the online far right closer to mainstream discussion and it also politicized a broad group of young people, mostly boys, who organized tactics around the idea of fighting back against the culture war being waged by the cultural left» (Nagle 2017, p.25).

Even though Gamergate was not centred around race issues, the core of the Alt-Right agenda, it still sparked because of topics such as LGBTQI+ rights and women rights, issues that are despised by Alt-Right associates and the far right.

### **3.4 God Emperor Trump**

Donald Trump’s campaign was the platform that gave the Alt-Right the opportunity to enter mainstream media and the lives of most Americans. Trump soon appeared interesting to the Alt-Right because of his critical claims about immigration and the desire to build a wall at the southern border. Although Trump is not a member of neither Alt-Right nor Alt-Light, his figure became increasingly associated with the movement. Hawley argues that:

«Most of the Alt-Right realized from the beginning that Trump was not really one of them, but they still loved him, and not just because of his comments about immigrants and Muslims. Trump changed the tone of American politics. He regularly violated conventions and helped normalize nativist rhetoric. Perhaps most importantly and exciting for those in the Alt-Right, Trump dealt the organized conservative movement a devastating blow, creating an opening for right-wing alternatives» (Hawley 2017, p.116).

Soon the Alt-Right initiated a massive operation of propaganda online to support Donald Trump, depicting him as a “God Emperor”. Trump was chosen by the Alt-Right as their champion for a number of reasons, despite him not being a white supremacist. He was an outsider to the classic figure of the American Republican Party, he brought chaos into traditional politics and mass media and he seemed not to care too much about attacks by others, similarly to the Alt-Right. He gave an opportunity to far-right representatives to get into the Republican Party and to have their voices heard. Trump never directly recognized the support given to him by the Alt-Right. He did interact with some Alt-Right supporters on Twitter and once retweeted a picture of him depicted as *Pepe the Frog*, but it’s unclear if he understood the reference made in the meme. As Trump grew in consensus and adversaries like Hillary Clinton linked his personality to the Alt-Right the reach of the movement grew massively. Trump did not answer to this specific accusation but, to the

disappointment of many members of the Alt-Right, did occasionally condemn more than once those political groups associated to Nazism and white supremacy that gravitate around him.

Nonetheless, Trump kept receiving support from different far-right groups, Alt-Right included, until his victory on 8<sup>th</sup> November 2016. Once Trump became president of the United States, the new Alt-Right aim became to influence in every way possible his politics to get as similar as possible to those of the movement. Even though none of his close advisors is a supporter of Alt-Right's ideology, he definitely is the closest candidate to the movement and the one that won in the end.

It is improbable that Donald Trump won the election thanks to the support of a minor political group that mostly acts online, but that is not the point to make of this event. Despite the attacks from traditional mainstream media and political adversaries, conservatives included, Donald Trump was able to get in the Oval Office while associated to the general public with a group of white supremacists, neo-nazi and toxic meme-spammers. Despite the lack of a real structure and organization, the Alt-Right was able to grow at a rate that was difficult to imagine and to have its movement associated with the president of the United States. The Alt-Right may have not influenced drastically the results of the election, but the election and Donald Trump did give new life to a movement that could have never been considered as important as it is today.

## Conclusions

The scope of this thesis was to link the Alt-Right movement with theories of web participatory culture and Gramsci's theories of revolution. However, during the development of the chapters composing this work, it was intentionally left unclear whether a strong connection was observed or not. The reasons of this decision are of different nature. First and foremost, the central event that brought the Alt-Right to the knowledge of the general public is recent. Various political commentators and writers pronounced themselves over the growth in influence of the Alt-Right movement and cyberculture in the last ten years, but no general shared opinion has yet developed. The Alt-Right is far from its peak in popularity in 2016 but it is not dead, on the opposite, it is still growing. Before the results of the movement influence over Trump's administration are clear it is necessary to keep studying the movement and its actions both online and in real life.

The second reason is that many similarities and connections could be suggested between the Alt-Right movement and the theoretical framework of this thesis, but none of them are obvious nor sufficient. It is clear that the Alt-Right could be considered as a counterhegemonic culture to the world of both traditional American politics and traditional media. Nonetheless the movement is as porous and chaotic as ever and if it was once possible to understand that its final aim was racial distinction and white privilege, after the infiltrations of members not concerned with race issues it is unclear what the Alt-Right could actually be defined as. Moreover another compelling argument in support of the ambiguous connections between the theoretical framework and the Alt-Right is that of all the elements listed at chapter 2.2 that determine a participatory culture none of them is totally recognizable in the Alt-Right. For example, to get in touch with the community is often quite difficult because of the many cultural elements (like a specific terminology) that determines an individual inclusion or exclusion from the movement. There are many shared features but not enough to understand and predict the Alt-Right's actions.

Finally, it is not enough to just pay more attention to both meme culture and the Alt-Right. It is fundamental to research more often in time. Cyberculture evolves rapidly and the web 2.0 is drastically different from its version of ten years ago. Among the sources utilized for this thesis, there is a sentence that perfectly exemplifies why we should think that cyberculture is always evolving:

«Similarly, although there is a connection between the Alt- Right and earlier white-nationalist and white-supremacist groups, and some of those groups and their supporters have engaged in violence and terrorism, I am not implying that the Alt-Right is a terrorist movement. At the time of this writing, I am aware of no acts of physical violence directly connected to the Alt-Right—online harassment is another story, but I believe we should make a distinction between threatening tweets and real-world bombings, assaults, and murders. [...]it is possible that the Alt-Right will morph into something more dangerous and tangible in the real world, and for that reason vigilance is necessary. But for now, the Alt-Right's activities are mostly limited to the Internet» (Hawley 2017, p.12).

This was written in 2017, two years before the Christchurch mosque shooting in New Zealand. This attack

was perpetuated by Brenton Harrison Tarrant, described by the media as a member of the Alt-Right. He live-streamed the first attack in the first mosque on Facebook, once and for all demonstrating that the weight of web culture on society is not limited to funny images on social media.

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[twitter.com](http://twitter.com)



## **Italian Summary – Riassunto in italiano**

Durante la campagna elettorale di Donald Trump per le elezioni presidenziali americane del 2016 le testate e i media tradizionali, televisione in primis, hanno dedicato svariati servizi sul movimento “Alt-Right”. L’Alt-Right è un movimento politico di estrema destra che è stato associato alla figura di Donald Trump e ha portato la cultura del web all’attenzione del grande pubblico americano. I meme, conosciuti generalmente e soprattutto superficialmente dalla maggior parte della popolazione statunitense, sono stati riscoperti e collegati a campagne d’odio online, razzismo e ai suprematisti bianchi.

Lo scopo di questa tesi è di indagare sull’ingresso del movimento Alt-Right nella politica e cultura popolare americana sfruttando le teorie di Antonio Gramsci su egemonia e rivoluzione e diverse teorie sulla cultura partecipativa sul web. Nel primo capitolo del lavoro sarà fornito un quadro teorico delle teorie di rivoluzione di Gramsci, inclusa la definizione di egemonia, il ruolo dell’educazione e degli intellettuali e il concetto di blocco storico. In secondo luogo sarà fornito un diverso quadro teorico sulla cybercultura degli ultimi dieci anni. I temi principali del secondo capitolo sono l’idea di cultura partecipativa nel web e gli elementi base della cultura partecipativa online, alcuni metodi su come viene iniziata e portata avanti l’azione politica online e un’analisi della dimensione culturale contemporanea più significativa sul web, quella della cultura meme e l’importanza dell’ironia in essa. Infine saranno presentate e analizzate la storia e l’identità dell’Alt-Right dalle sue origini nei primi anni 2010, per essere infine inserite nel contesto politico delle elezioni presidenziali americane del 2016 e la campagna elettorale di Donald Trump.

### **Capitolo Uno**

Le opinioni di Gramsci sono cambiate lungo l’arco della sua vita in relazione con le sue esperienze personali, con il contesto politico e sociale globale e soprattutto italiano. L’uso del termine “contesto storico” quando ci si riferisce agli scritti Gramsciani ha duplice significato; indica innanzitutto il contesto storico contemporaneo alla vita e all’incarcerazione di Gramsci, fondamentale come origine e ispirazione delle sue idee, ma porta anche il significato di contesto storico nella concezione più generica possibile nel dibattito sulla rivoluzione. È proprio l’importanza del contesto storico in considerazione che Gramsci intuisce l’importanza di una rivoluzione diversa, quella che lui chiama la “rivoluzione passiva”. L’ascesa fascista ha dimostrato che la rivoluzione necessita un’accurata pianificazione perché non è sufficiente l’azione delle classe più deboli per garantire l’esito ottimale.

La formulazione teorica più importante e famosa di Gramsci riguarda l’egemonia, ma il significato del termine nel contesto Gramsciano differisce dal suo uso classico. Gramsci preferisce usare il

termine “dominio” quando si fa riferimento al monopolio del potere da parte dello Stato. L'egemonia è «la base consensuale di un sistema politico esistente all'interno della società civile» (Adamson 1980). Gramsci riteneva che i paesi occidentali più stabili avessero costruito un'egemonia tale che il dominio non era necessario a mantenere l'ordine. L'egemonia tuttavia è una condizione da soddisfare in qualsiasi società che raggiunga una forma di quadro culturale comune per la maggior parte della sua gente. L'egemonia è alla fine il risultato di qualsiasi rivoluzione riuscita, poiché rappresenta la formazione di una classe unica che condivide lo stesso pensiero economico, politico e culturale.

Gramsci riteneva economia e politica come due caratteri distinti dello stato ma fortemente legati. Gli attori politici, seppur indipendenti, sono influenzati dalle ripercussioni delle azioni economiche, poiché esse hanno inevitabilmente conseguenze politiche. L'attività politica è dunque collegata al momento economico attraverso diverse mediazioni tra le quali vi sono la natura umana in evoluzione, norme e regole morali, sistemi ideologici e linguaggi, che determinano la totalità culturale e, di conseguenza, l'egemonia. Gramsci lega il funzionamento e la vita delle istituzioni al loro ruolo nella società, alla loro utilità per soddisfare i bisogni materiali e spirituali delle popolazioni. Quando il contesto storico cambia, le istituzioni devono adattarsi se si desidera che sopravvivano. Se le istituzioni non rispettano tale funzione a un livello accettabile, una singola azione di ribellione può cambiare l'egemonia. Gramsci spiega anche che i fattori ideologici sono in ritardo rispetto ai fattori economici mentre, tuttavia, hanno un impatto su di essi. Ciò implica che è possibile, attraverso l'azione politica, cambiare la struttura fondamentale della società, che è l'economia, che porta al cambiamento nelle istituzioni. Gramsci intuì che è possibile smantellare l'egemonia e raggiungere la rivoluzione attraverso mezzi esclusivamente culturali, piuttosto che con un'azione diretta. Questo è il concetto di rivoluzione passiva, un'azione a lungo termine attraverso un'iniziativa politica per cambiare la condizione egemonica.

Il problema più grande inerentemente la formazione dell'azione antiegegonica è la costruzione di una volontà collettiva. Gramsci si rese presto conto della necessità di una risposta politica che potesse contrastare e comprendere la società contemporanea occidentale e che potesse sostituire la funzione educativa dell'egemonia per costruire una risposta al sistema dominante. Mettere in discussione la posizione di potere richiedeva l'organizzazione di un nuovo sistema educativo che potesse fornire alle classi subalterne la conoscenza per acquisire la coscienza di classe. Prima dell'ascesa al potere di Mussolini Gramsci credeva che il PSI (Partito socialista italiano) sarebbe stato il mezzo migliore per organizzare la volontà collettiva, ma in seguito cambiò opinione perché «i socialisti non sono i comandanti di un esercito proletario, sono una parte del proletariato stesso. [...] I socialisti non possono essere posti in un dualismo con il proletariato». (Adamson 1980). Per

Gramsci la mancanza di subordinazione era un elemento essenziale nell'educazione del proletariato. Nel 1916 scrisse un articolo sull'*Avanti!* (il quotidiano del Partito Socialista Italiano) discutendo di educazione, incoraggiando l'idea di un'educazione umanista per il proletariato. Le scuole dovevano essere libere, non basate sulla meccanizzazione e l'assorbimento delle idee senza porsi domande. Inoltre, l'importanza dell'educazione presente poggiava sull'idea che il futuro dipende in larga misura dall'oggi. Coloro che hanno il compito di guidare l'istruzione e la creazione del blocco storico sarebbero intellettuali.

Gli individui che danno forma alla cultura generale della società sono le fonti dell'educazione della popolazione, che portano di conseguenza sostegno o contrasto all'egemonia. L'educazione va perseguita attraverso una costante interazione dialettica tra intellettuali e persone, attività che è essenzialmente azione politica. È necessario, prima del conflitto culturale con gli intellettuali tradizionali, la creazione di un corpo di intellettuali organici, facenti parti del blocco controegemonico. In un ipotetico punto zero temporale in cui il percorso verso la creazione di un'opposizione all'egemonia non è ancora iniziato, l'unico tipo di intellettuali esistenti sono gli intellettuali tradizionali stabiliti dalle convenzioni dell'egemonia attuale. Gramsci immaginava gli intellettuali relativamente indipendenti dalla classe dominante (così come la politica è quasi indipendente dall'economia) e quindi è possibile che l'intellettuale tradizionale occupi momentaneamente il ruolo di guida nell'educazione delle classi subalterne. Ciò denota un carattere essenziale dell'evoluzione della coscienza di classe: prima di raggiungere lo stadio della controegemonia, il dialogo tra gli intellettuali e la popolazione di massa svilupperà un blocco intellettuale e morale, ma quando guardiamo all'impatto più ampio del blocco possiamo osservarne le maggiori implicazioni socio-politiche, in grado di determinare il contesto storico (Adamson 1980). Questo status è chiamato blocco storico da Gramsci, e sottolinea la necessità di un'alleanza di classe per la crescita e il successo della controegemonia. È infatti attraverso l'alleanza del proletariato, degli intellettuali e di tutte le classi subalterne che l'egemonia capitalista può essere rimodellata. Il ruolo dell'intellettuale assume una nuova luce, perché diventa mediatore tra la sovrastruttura e la struttura attuali. Gli intellettuali guidano verso il cambiamento.

Tuttavia, il ruolo degli intellettuali tradizionali si conclude in una fase avanzata del blocco storico attraverso il cambio generazionale: quelle parti del proletariato che hanno subito l'educazione degli intellettuali tradizionali forniranno al blocco una leadership organica, allevata dagli stessi lavoratori. Ciò garantirà che il processo di maturazione del blocco proceda in sicurezza.

## **Capitolo Due**

Il passaggio dal cosiddetto web 1.0 al web 2.0 ha cambiato radicalmente il modo in cui funzionano

le interazioni umane online. In origine il web era una dimensione esclusiva, dove le persone che potevano permettersi un computer e una connessione internet probabilmente non avevano le competenze tecnologiche per contribuire attivamente. Tuttavia, con l'inizio del nuovo millennio, il web è cambiato drasticamente ed è diventato molto più popolato e intuitivo. Internet e le nuove tecnologie di comunicazione sono state considerate sin dagli anni '90 come possibili strumenti per la creazione di utopie, un'invenzione dal potenziale illimitato e imprevedibile. La cybercultura contemporanea suggerisce che perfino la formazione del blocco storico teorizzata da Gramsci potrebbe essere una realtà vicina.

Possiamo definire la cultura partecipativa come «una cultura con barriere relativamente basse all'espressione artistica e all'impegno civico, un forte supporto per la creazione e la condivisione delle proprie creazioni e un certo tipo di tutoraggio informale in base al quale ciò che è conosciuto dai più esperti viene trasmesso ai novizi» (Jenkins 2009). Nella sua transizione dal web 1.0 al web 2.0 la cultura partecipativa è diventata una caratteristica essenziale della comunicazione online. La principale differenza tra il web della prima metà degli anni '90 e l'inizio degli anni 2000 è il rapporto tra le identità dei creatori e degli utenti. Nel web 1.0 i creatori e gli utenti erano distinti, ma nel web 2.0 gli utenti e i creatori si sovrappongono. Questo nuova cornice strutturale del web ha dato nuova energia alla creazione di comunità virtuali. La cultura partecipativa sembra essere simile a come Gramsci immaginava le istituzioni scolastiche, o perlomeno l'educazione diretta. Anche Jenkins ha visto nella cultura partecipativa un'entusiasmante nuova forma di istruzione e ha elencato le competenze fondamentali di alfabetizzazione mediatica che potrebbero essere apprese sul web, ma non nelle scuole tradizionali. La natura della cultura partecipativa incoraggia il dialogo tra i partecipanti e crea forti legami relazionali tra i suoi membri. Inoltre il facile accesso e uscita alle community consente alla cultura partecipativa di rispondere agli impulsi e di evolversi costantemente, proprio come Gramsci immaginava che le egemonie rispondessero al mutare contesto storico. James Paul Gee ha sintetizzato la cultura partecipativa e l'educazione con il concetto di spazi di affinità. «Uno spazio di affinità è un luogo o un insieme di luoghi in cui le persone sono affiliate le une con le altre basandosi principalmente su attività, interessi e obiettivi condivisi, non su razza, cultura di classe, etnia o genere condivisi» (Gee 2004). In uno spazio di affinità Gee sostiene che i membri sono incoraggiati a cercare la soluzione a un problema o perpetuare un'esperienza insieme perché interessati tutti allo stesso argomento. La leadership è porosa, mutevole e una risorsa per il gruppo. Non c'è discriminazione di alcun genere tra i partecipanti, si incoraggia la condivisione di informazioni e conoscenze e il contenuto è in continua trasformazione attraverso le interazioni tra i membri.

Il Web 2.0 ha anche facilitato l'azione politica auto-organizzata. Una delle cause principali di

questa spinta per l'azione politica fondata sulle nuove tecnologie di comunicazione è l'aumento dei cittadini che si informano online. Una ricerca sociale condotta dall'*Office of National Statistics* del Regno Unito ha rilevato che nel 2013 oltre il 70% dei cittadini britannici accedeva al web ogni giorno e che oltre la metà della popolazione accedeva a Internet per leggere giornali e riviste. Una ricerca simile nel 2016 mostra la stessa tendenza negli Stati Uniti, dove oltre il 60% degli adulti si è informato tramite i social media almeno occasionalmente. Un'importante implicazione di questo fenomeno è che, diversamente dai media tradizionali, le persone sul web sono costantemente esposte alle opinioni degli altri utenti. Il processo educativo teorizzato da Gramsci sembra essere reale sul web, come dimostra la nascita di sempre più movimenti politici autonomi.

È necessario analizzare attraverso quali mezzi gli utenti condividono cultura e opinioni e organizzano l'azione politica. La politica degli hashtag unisce sia la condivisione di informazioni che la mobilitazione sul web (Meisel 2012). Gli hashtag sono stati resi popolari da Twitter ma ora sono parte integrante nella maggior parte dei social media e delle piattaforme web e consistono in un unico termine (che può anche essere una composizione di più parole senza spazi tra loro) seguito dal simbolo "#". Post e media che includono lo stesso hashtag nella loro descrizione possono essere osservati nella stessa pagina del sito web presa in considerazione. Gli hashtag sono uno strumento fenomenale per raccogliere informazioni attorno agli eventi attuali e attirare l'attenzione su di essi. «Per praticare efficacemente la politica dell'hashtag, è importante definire in modo strategico e proattivo l'hashtag su cui si desidera organizzare la conversazione. Se il tuo hashtag è ben scelto, attirerai più persone dalla tua parte nel dibattito» (Meisel 2012).

Le nuove dinamiche che il web 2.0 offre rispetto ai media ha portato alla nascita di una nuova ideologia politica nota come "populismo 2.0". Paolo Gerbaudo descrive il populismo 2.0 come «un orientamento ideologico che vede i social media come mezzi per rivolgersi al “popolo”, nel senso di totalità o quasi totalità della comunità politica» (Gerbaudo 2015). Il populismo 2.0 potrebbe essere considerato come l'evoluzione dei partiti di massa. I maggiori successi del populismo 2.0 sono stati in paesi come l'Italia, dove partiti come il Movimento 5 Stelle hanno ottenuto alcuni risultati elettorali significativi. I partiti basati sul populismo 2.0 sfruttano gli strumenti che i social network forniscono loro come mezzi di consultazione politica. Mi piace, condivisioni, commenti e sondaggi online sono tutti considerati metodi legittimi per stabilire un dialogo con la base elettorale e perseguire le richieste avanzate dal popolo.

Per comprendere appieno il contesto cyberculturale odierno è necessario capire il veicolo principale con cui si è sviluppato lo scenario odierno: il meme. Il concetto di meme è stato creato da Richard Dawkins nel 1976 e possiamo descriverlo come la singola unità che compone la cultura, che ricomposta di contatto in contatto si evolve. L'idea alla base del meme è ispirata dalla

replica e dall'evoluzione dei geni attraverso le generazioni. I memi si trasferirebbero e ricomporrebbero attraverso le interazioni umane fino a evolversi in diversi concetti culturali (Dawkins 1976). Sebbene il concetto originale dietro al meme è quello dell'unità della cultura, con l'avvento del web 2.0 il termine ha assunto un significato popolare diverso. Oggi potremmo definire un meme di Internet come un «contenuto virale che non mira alla riproduzione ma a reinventarsi» (Lolli 2017). Sebbene «i meme di Internet rimangono un concetto altamente soggettivo» (Börzsei 2013), e potrebbe rimanere tale per molto tempo proprio a causa di questa natura in costante mutamento, ci sono alcuni elementi generalmente riconosciuti in ogni meme. L'elemento più importante dei meme contemporanei è senza dubbio l'ironia, che si è sviluppata a tal punto nelle comunità dedite alla produzione e condivisione di meme che ha raggiunto creazioni difficilmente comprensibili a chi non conosce approfonditamente la comunità e le sue caratteristiche. I meme come i "meta-meme" possono apparire privi di significato, ma spesso celano riferimenti nascosti alla cultura delle comunità o ad altri meme. I diversi livelli che distinguono quanto un meme sia complesso vengono generalmente chiamati "strati di ironia". Una delle tante citazioni sugli strati pubblicata su Urban Dictionary (una wiki online per il gergo contemporaneo) recita: «Un termine usato nell'attuale era metamodernista / Internet. Lo shitposting era originariamente "pubblicare qualcosa di brutto". Letteralmente un post orrendo. Poi, le persone hanno iniziato a farlo in modo ironico, le persone hanno iniziato a fare contenuti ironici ironicamente, ed è qui che le cose iniziano a diventare strane. Si sta prendendo in giro qualcosa che prende in giro qualcos'altro, quindi gradualmente è diventato sempre più assurdo. L'idea dietro al processo è che tutto diventa più assurdo quanto più "ironico" diventi». Gli strati di ironia rappresentano lo sviluppo che i meme di Internet hanno attraversato nei due decenni di durata del web 2.0. Sono la cornice culturale per comprendere gran parte delle conversazioni che milioni di utenti hanno quotidianamente online. L'ironia è l'obiettivo finale e l'ideale condiviso della comunità meme, verso la quale tutti i membri collaborano.

### **Capitolo Tre**

Il fenomeno politico originato dal web più famoso è senza dubbio il movimento "Alt-Right". Alt-Right è un termine generico che si riferisce a una raccolta di orientamenti politici simili ma non identici che condividono alcune idee di base. Il motivo dietro alla natura così eterogenea del movimento è la sua natura spontanea, definita solo da un senso generale di unità razziale tra le popolazioni di etnia bianca (Hawley, 2017). Non esiste una figura chiave o un manifesto ufficiale

che rappresenti gli interessi di coloro che si definiscono seguaci dell'Alt-Right, il che rende quasi impossibile formulare nozioni fisse sull'oggetto. Nonostante ciò l'Alt-Right è riuscito a diventare un fenomeno politico ampiamente noto negli Stati Uniti nell'arco di due anni (tra il 2015 e il 2016) nonostante la sua natura disorganizzata.

L'origine del termine Alt-Right, abbreviazione di *Alternative Right* ovvero “destra alternativa”, è comunemente associata alla figura di Richard Spencer, un giornalista che viene generalmente ma erroneamente indicato come il fondatore del movimento, che ne ha coniato il nome. Il termine è stato utilizzato per la prima volta durante l'esperienza di Spencer nella rivista online *Taki's Magazine*, dove ha ricoperto il ruolo di caporedattore. Il termine al tempo indicava semplicemente tutti coloro che erano parte della destra americana ma non si riconoscevano nel Partito Repubblicano. Fu lì che apparve per la prima volta il termine Alt-Right, ma era ancora un termine generico che indicava semplicemente tutti coloro che si riconoscevano in un tipo di destra diversa da quella più popolare di matrice neo-conservatrice o liberista. Nel 2009 Spencer ha lasciato *Taki's Magazine* e ha fondato un sito web chiamato *Alternative Right*, che dopo quattro anni Spencer decise di chiudere. La transizione dal sito di *Alternative Right* all'uso oggi comunemente noto del termine è stata pressoché casuale. Come afferma Hawley: «[...] il termine Alt-Right sembrava essere caduto in disgrazia tra la destra razziale su Internet fino al 2014. Tuttavia, nessun nuovo termine è mai apparso davvero a prendere il suo posto. Quando una nuova iterazione della destra radicale ha cominciato a crescere, aveva bisogno di un nome, ed era disponibile “Alt-Right”» (Hawley 2017). Nel 2015 l'uso del termine Alt-Right ha avuto una rinascita soprattutto sui social media, su 4chan, Reddit e Twitter. Tuttavia il nuovo Alt-Right appariva molto diverso sia nel messaggio che nella consegna dai suoi predecessori. L'Alt-Right contemporanea è distante dal conservatorismo americano. L'Alt-Right spesso deride i valori tradizionali conservatori, come il sostegno indiscriminato all'esercito o i valori cristiani. Oltre l'antagonismo per la politica americana tradizionale e le popolazioni non bianche, l'Alt-Right sviluppò un odio particolare verso il politicamente corretto, il che solleva una nuova questione, quella sul vero collante ideologico dell'Alt-Right.

Anche se il movimento è cresciuto molto durante le elezioni presidenziali americane nel 2016, la sua ideologia già poco chiara è diventata ancora più nebulosa. Prima che l'Alt-Right raggiungesse il suo apice durante i mesi che precedettero le elezioni, l'obiettivo generale del movimento era quello di propagare la sua filosofia razziale. Quando l'Alt-Right divenne noto al pubblico americano e la sua influenza online crebbe vertiginosamente, molti di coloro che entrarono in contatto col movimento lo ritennero un orientamento affine alla destra più pronunciata, anti-liberalismo e anti-politicamente corretto. Questo ha portato molti simpatizzanti e attivisti all'Alt-

Right, molti dei suoi membri originali pensano che questo nuovo flusso di partecipanti abbia distrutto lo scopo originale del movimento. La sezione dell'Alt-Right interessata alla questione razziale ha coniato un termine per definire il lato meno estremista del movimento: "Alt-Light", ovvero «persone le cui opinioni sull'immigrazione e le relazioni razziali si sovrappongono parzialmente a quelli di Alt-Right ma non oltrepassano la linea del nazionalismo bianco aperto» (Hawkley 2017). Sebbene alcune delle voci più popolari del movimento sostengono una definizione più ampia di "Alt-Right" per includere più correnti possibile, sembra che la maggior parte dei membri non siano d'accordo. L'Alt-Light sembra assomigliare alla figura degli intellettuali tradizionali che Gramsci vedeva come educatori originali per la creazione di un blocco storico. Non sono intellettuali organici come dimostra il fatto che nessuna delle figure principali nell'Alt-Light è un esperto di cultura meme, ma attirano molte persone nel movimento e le mettono in contatto con l'Alt-Right. Essi fungono da ponti tra liberal-conservatorismo e suprematisti bianchi e nazionalisti bianchi, accrescendo ancora di più la presenza dell'Alt-Right sia online che nella vita reale.

L'Alt-Right odierna deve gran parte della sua identità e strategie alla "Chan-Culture", un insieme di nozioni cyber-culturali sviluppate nella cultura dei meme *underground* (generalmente associata alle dimensioni online di 4chan e 8chan). Le somiglianze tra gli utenti di 4chan e 8chan e l'Alt-Right sono numerose ma è importante sottolineare che le due comunità non si sovrappongono. C'è un numero considerevole di utenti sul web che apprezza i meme ma questo non implica alcun collegamento con il movimento Alt-Right. Possiamo tuttavia osservare che molti elementi che hanno costruito l'identità culturale dell'Alt-Right hanno origine dalla Chan-Culture e dalla cultura meme. Tra questi troviamo l'importanza dell'uso dell'ironia come mezzo di azione politica e comunicazione o la figura di *Pepe*, la rana antropomorfa che è diventata un simbolo dell'Alt-Right ed è stata perfino dichiarata un "simbolo di odio generale" dalla *Anti-Defamation League*. Questa conoscenza della cultura meme e delle meccaniche del web ha permesso all'Alt-Right di operare in una dimensione che ancora non è pienamente stata compresa dai media tradizionali. In termini Gramsciani, il grande successo dell'Alt-Right è di aver associato una forma di cultura dedicata all'umorismo e all'intrattenimento e raccolto un ampio supporto dagli utenti del web, creando un blocco storico efficace per opporsi ai media tradizionali. L'Alt-Right mirava prima di tutto a una rivoluzione culturale, prima che alla mobilitazione nel mondo reale.

La campagna di Donald Trump è stata la piattaforma che ha portato l'alt-right all'attenzione dei media tradizionali e del pubblico americano. L'Alt-Right si è presto interessato alla figura di Donald Trump causa delle sue affermazioni critiche sull'immigrazione e il desiderio di costruire un muro al confine meridionale. Sebbene Trump non sia un membro né di Alt-Right né di Alt-Light



la sua figura è progressivamente stata associata sempre più al movimento. Ben presto l'Alt-Right ha avviato una massiccia operazione di propaganda online per sostenere Donald Trump, descrivendolo come un "Dio Imperatore". Trump è stato scelto dall'Alt-Right come loro campione per una serie di motivi, nonostante non fosse un suprematista bianco. Era diverso rispetto al classico rappresentante del Partito Repubblicano, ha portato il caos nella politica americana, nei media e non sembrava preoccuparsi delle opinioni altrui, così come l'Alt-Right. Man mano che Trump cresceva nei sondaggi e gli avversari collegavano la sua figura all'Alt-Right, la portata del movimento crebbe massicciamente. Trump ha continuato a ricevere sostegno da diversi gruppi di estrema destra, Alt-Right incluso, fino alla sua vittoria l'8 novembre 2016, nonostante abbia condannato in più occasioni i suprematisti bianchi. Una volta diventato presidente degli Stati Uniti, il nuovo obiettivo dell'Alt-Right è diventato quello di influenzare in ogni modo possibile le sue decisioni così da spingerle ancora più a destra.

È improbabile che Donald Trump abbia vinto le elezioni grazie al sostegno di un gruppo politico minore che agisce prevalentemente online, ma non è questo il punto. Nonostante gli attacchi dei media tradizionali e degli avversari politici, conservatori inclusi, Donald Trump è riuscito a vincere le elezioni, nonostante fosse costantemente associato a un gruppo di suprematisti bianchi e neonazisti. Nonostante la mancanza di una vera organizzazione, l'Alt-Right è riuscito a crescere esponenzialmente e ad associare la propria figura al presidente degli Stati Uniti. L'Alt-Right potrebbe non aver influenzato drasticamente i risultati delle elezioni, ma le elezioni e Donald Trump hanno dato nuova vita al movimento.

## **Conclusione**

Lo scopo di questa tesi era collegare il movimento Alt-Right con le teorie della cultura partecipativa del web e le teorie della rivoluzione di Gramsci, ma il risultato della ricerca non è definitivo. Innanzitutto, l'evento centrale che ha portato l'Alt-Right alla conoscenza del grande pubblico è recente, per cui non ci sono certezze per quanto riguarda l'effettiva sfera di influenza del movimento sulla società americana dopo l'elezione di Donald Trump.

Sono state individuate molte somiglianze tra il movimento Alt-Right e le teorie prese in considerazione per questa tesi, ma la relazione non è sufficientemente forte. L'Alt-Right potrebbe chiaramente essere considerata una cultura controegemonica, tuttavia il movimento è più poroso e caotico che mai e il suo obiettivo ultimo non è definito. Inoltre entrare in contatto con la comunità che circonda l'Alt-Right è difficile a causa dei molti elementi culturali (come una terminologia specifica) che determinano l'inclusione o l'esclusione dal movimento, contrariamente a l'idea che

una cultura partecipativa sia facilmente accessibile. Ci sono molte caratteristiche riconducibili alle teorie considerate, ma non sono sufficienti per comprendere a pieno e prevedere le azioni future dell'Alt-Right.

Infine è fondamentale studiare il movimento il più frequentemente possibile, perché la cybercultura si evolve rapidamente e il cambiamento drastico del web 2.0 negli ultimi dieci anni ne è la prova.