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AGITATORS ONLINE

Introduction to special report:
The internet of the extreme rights

Elsa GIMENEZ*
Olivier VOIROL**

Translated by Cadenza Academic Translations

* University of Lausanne (LACCUS), University Paris 8 Vincennes-Saint-Denis (CEMTI),
elsa.gimenez@unil.ch

** University of Lausanne, Institut für Sozialforschung, Frankfurt, olivier.voirol@unil.ch

This issue aims to shed light on the online presence and activity of individual and groups—collectives, communities, political parties, associations, and news organizations—we can categorize as belonging to the “extreme rights.”¹ Obviously, the parties or movements usually associated with the term “far right” take various forms, both ideologically and organizationally (Perrineau 2002; Camus 2015): they may be groups that aspire to take power democratically; populist, xenophobic movements that attack immigration and “others”; or ones openly hostile to democracy, expressing in everything they do a nostalgia for the historical fascism they promote in our own world (Fielitz and Laloire 2016; Traverso 2017). Despite the difficulty of finding a definition that applies to all these parties and movements, researchers in the social and political sciences agree that, at the heart of all these groups’ discourse and politics, lies a strong affirmation of a self-identity opposed to “others,” whether racial, ethnic, or national. This is accompanied by populism and an authoritarian conception of political life (François and Lebourg 2016). Far from seeking to define this phenomenon afresh, the phrase “extreme right” (*droite extrême*) used in this issue—as opposed to the more common “far right” (*extrême droite*)—promotes a broader view of these movements, one that shifts our focus towards phenomena of *fascization* within the Western public sphere and the traditional conservative right (Camus and Lebourg 2015).

Above all, the present issue explores this process of the fascization of the public sphere through the different ways these ideologies manifest themselves online, without limiting ourselves to established forms of political participation (Greffet et al. 2014). Given their new presence within institutional policy, some researchers have tried to map and diagnose the development of extreme rights in recent years. But it is still rare to find studies that look at less politically formalized, apparently more sporadic events, as the political expressions of actors within these online movements often are (Padis 2015; Bouron

1. The present issue follows from an international workshop organized at the University of Lausanne, November 19-20, 2015, with the title “Les agitateurs de la toile: L’internet des droites extrêmes.”

and Drouard 2014). The small number of articles in the French literature examining these movements' structuring methods and forms of communication online can be broadly classified into two categories. The first is interested in the terms of online practices, looking at groups or events associated with "extreme rights" (Rastier 2006; Matuszak 2007; Boure, Bousquet, and Marchand 2012; Mercier 2014). The second is interested primarily in analyzing political movements on the far right, focusing on their online manifestations and examining the different possible forms these movements' activity takes (Bizeul 2003; Dézé 2011; Cahuzac and François 2013; Bouron 2014). This issue seeks to extend these analyses by situating these phenomena in a context in which traditional media is being transformed and contemporary public sphere is undergoing a profound change. These transformations are particularly clear in the contributions of Christine Servais and Olivier Voirol.

The decision to use the term "extreme rights" (*droites extrêmes*) in this issue reflects a desire to break with the normal categorizations, which raise numerous issues of definition and appropriation. We could, indeed, speak in terms of populism, reactionary ideology, conservatism, nationalism, authoritarianism, or even fascism. These categories are often accompanied by the prefix "neo-," which emphasizes both the contemporaneity of the phenomenon and the ways in which it has been updated. Such categories align with the political use made of them by scholars and in the media. As Stéphanie Dechezelles (2005) points out, if we are to carry out a dynamic analysis sensitive to such uses, we have to think about these political labels—particularly the label "extreme right"—without losing sight of the fact they are "created and reinvented in the framework of contextualized political interactions, and that the categories used by political and scientific actors benefit from being studied both 'in context' or synchronically, and 'remotely' or diachronically" (Dechezelles 2005, 454). This allows us to grasp how these movements position themselves politically and in the media, as well as how they are categorized and understood by the various actors involved, the connections and relationships between them, and their effects on the (de)composition of contemporary public sphere.

We should note here, without whitewashing the term, that while some parties and movements may lay claim to one of the categories mentioned above—nationalism or conservatism, for instance—actors rarely, if ever, use the label "far right" (*extrême droite*) to define themselves. These are exogenous categories, used within disputed spaces; they often serve a rhetorical function, rather than as tools of genuine ideological definition (Godin 2012). The way these categorizations get circulated, assigned, appropriated, and disputed are not

trivial, and can reveal dynamics that characterize the broader public sphere. They are also potentially very helpful for explaining how these groups and movements develop.

EXTREME RIGHTS ONLINE

We have witnessed the emergence over the last decade of a series of movements that fall within the spectrum of “extreme rights.” The ways they are structured and organized owe much to how they use online technologies. One of the first such movements to gain the attention of social and political scientists was the Tea Party in the United States, which appeared on the political scene in the period following the presidential election of 2008, where Barack Obama had inflicted a stinging defeat on conservatives. In its wake, the Tea Party began to organize a defense of “conservative values,” promoting a radicalized conservative identity that relied on conservative media networks, on the existing Republican elite, and, very heavily, on digital technologies (Walsh 2012).

The movement is relatively disparate and, for a long time, it was difficult to estimate its true size. The Tea Party relied on local ultraconservative groups’ activism, which made it difficult to pursue questions about its structure at the national level. Social media, blogs, online discussion platforms, and the many different possibilities offered by digital news media quickly became a major structuring component for these groups’ discourse and activities (Branson 2011). Beginning in scattered discussions between conservative bloggers, the Tea Party rapidly became a force structured by social media, and emerged as a movement heavily organized through online communication. This made it very different from earlier conservative movements (Branson 2011). Analyses of corpora based on the movement’s websites (Stanford 2014) have shown how online exchanges between different local groups functioned as unifying principles, centering particularly around their fierce opposition to Obama, but also around key themes like the defense of “Christian values,” the fight against illegal immigration, and so on.

This use of platforms for “ideological” thematization fit perfectly with a conservative populist rhetoric that presented the Tea Party as representative of the “true people,” in contrast to their enemies, embodied by “others” and by the Washington “elites.” The true voice of the “people” was promoted using digital technologies, with the idea that such media shape political discourse,

enabling an appeal to the “people” as contrasted with the nation’s “enemies.” In spite of its substantial demands, Tyler Branson (2011) has shown that the Tea Party contributed little to a culture of democratic engagement. Its digital platforms were not real tools for discussion. Instead, they served above all as instruments for shaping political discourse. The Tea Party used this technology to revitalize conservatism, while drawing the Republican party further towards the ultra-conservative right. Despite generally unfavorable reactions from the general public and mainstream American media, the Tea Party reopened the white conservative middle class as a political space on the margins of political institutions, offering the grounds for a reconfiguration, which the Republicans’ recent recovery of the White House heavily depended on (Walsh 2012).

In France, protests were organized in 2012 and 2013 under the aegis of the so-called “Manif pour tous” against reforms to the French Civil Code granting marriage to same-sex couples. These demonstrated a conservative mobilization whose anti-liberal struggle played out on the terrain of values, religion, culture, and identity—an inversion of the socio-political values and demands of May ‘68. Against a backdrop of “moral panic,” identity anxiety, loss of economic standing, and revolutions in social communication, and increasingly influenced by digital technologies, this ultraconservative grassroots movement spread using the resources offered by online networks. Such technologies have partially allowed them to break loose from “classical, parochial, political, and associative networks, incorporating newcomers into their demonstrations” (Tartakowsky 2014, 179). Maxime Cervulle and Fred Pailler, who studied online mobilizations centering on a number of hashtags associated with the “Manif pour tous,” have observed that these technologies allowed participants to join a “collective enterprise of constructing and indexing social tensions” (2014, 1). These were manifested within digital networks, particularly through a fierce defense of rigid “gender differences,” a gendered division of roles, and the traditional nuclear family.

In autumn 2014, shortly after this ultraconservative surge in France, Pegida (Patriotischen Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes) appeared in east Germany. A movement of “citizens” hostile to Islam and immigration, Pegida has been structured from the outset by intense activity on social networks, themselves characterized by a large extreme-right presence (Rehberg 2016, 15-24). From its conception, the movement has developed through intensive use of the internet and social media, which offer a crucial space for self-organization and disseminating propaganda (Geiges 2016). Members of

Pegida's organizing team, including its spokesperson, began as members of a Facebook group whose declared goal was to organize an initial demonstration on the streets of Dresden in autumn 2014. The project was discussed and implemented online. The closed circle around the movement's leader largely consisted of a group of friends well-known on the right in different parts of Dresden subculture, including football, motorcycle culture, and nightclubs. Accelerated communication within digital networks enabled the spread of this network of action and communication, which found a breeding ground for its ideas and ideology. This group started from activity online, increasing its power and influence to the point that the movement's Facebook page quickly became its central tool for information and communication. Its rapid progress—thanks in no small part to these tools—has had consequences, with a No-Pegida opposition movement emerging in many German cities (Marg et al. 2016).

These are three recent examples of “extreme rights” movements where digital technologies have played a particularly important role in internal organization, structuring activities, stirring up feelings of indignation, and extending protest. Although their links with traditional far-right movements and parties vary from case to case, they share with them a position within a socio-political and media context that is relatively unsympathetic to their cause. As Caterina Froio points out, these movements' hostility toward democratic institutions and the media means they evolved in a context of “relative media marginality” (Froio 2017). They face rejection by these groups, and sometimes possess only relatively limited discursive resources (Koopmans and Olzak 2004). This encourages them to redouble their efforts to mobilize their troops and gain adherents by disseminating their claims through digital media channels. At the same time, they brandish their exclusion from spaces with large audiences as evidence of the truth of their positions. This argumentative framework allows them to present their own existence both as proof of democratic vitality and as a test of it. In this context, digital networks represent an opportunity to develop a space of political agitation and to give their words and actions visibility (Caiani, Della Porta, and Wagemann 2012).

But we should also note that these movements sometimes rely on journalists, politicians, intellectuals, and others with access to spaces of media and political discourse with large audiences. While some of these individuals openly subscribe to this ideological connection (Aït-Aarab 2015), most do not disseminate extreme right theses and ideas directly. Instead, they help build a future audience. The place of Islamophobic rhetoric in Western public and

media spaces is crucial for understanding the relationships between these different spaces of publicization. In France, diverse Islamophobias have emerged in recent years in texts within the media public sphere (Hajjat and Mohammed 2016). The so-called “Muslim problem” is regularly at the front lines of debate on political and social media. Such debate is not conducted in a way that strictly reflects identitarian positions. But the fact remains that many speakers, in politics and the media, have helped to transmit a rigid and unassailable distinction between “us” and “them,” one constantly promoted by the extreme rights. This phenomenon should not be confused with the dynamics of online extreme rights. Instead, it must be seen in the light of a global political context that offers discursive opportunities to fascist agitation.

A structure of political and media opportunities that are unfavorable to these movements explains in part why groups historically attached to the far right, especially neo-Nazi groups, took to the internet very quickly. Among the established parties, the National Front was the first to build a website and invest in online communication (Dézé 2011). Alexandre Hobeika and Gaël Villeneuve show how the National Front used digital media very early on to circumvent journalistic gatekeeping. It set up its website in 1994, and in 2006 created an office in Second Life, the first virtual office run by a French political party. The same year, it started one of the first Facebook accounts belonging to a French political party. “The website *fn.com* offers a picture that is the inversion of the one offered in the press, on radio, and on television, and acts as a centralizing tool, laying down the line to supporters and activists. The same is true for the party’s official social media accounts, which also offer informational messages. The FN thereby operates like a party of government, including in its visual trappings” (Hobeika and Villeneuve 2017). This ambiguity, between a sleek official presentation which aims for respectability and the mobilization of a historical base with far cruder opinions, feeds “an ambivalent relationship to the media and legitimate rhetoric in the public space, reflected in a similarly complex relationship with social networks” (217). The “a broad collection of Facebook groups” actively supporting the FN form a space which conflicts with the smooth presentation of a political party seeking institutional respectability, often struggling to defeat the inchoate discourse which escapes its control on social networks, where racist speech can circulate freely (Boyadjian 2015).

The first websites belonging to militant organizations more distant from institutional politics and less concerned with respectability appeared in France in 1996, emulating those of the American skinhead movement (LaHorde

2015). At the time, the internet was a very free, only loosely controlled space. Legislators took several years to make decisions about issues of responsibility (Barbry and Olivier 2000). Far-right groups eagerly occupied this space, both in order to reinforce sociabilities within their own movement and to gain visibility in open media spaces, offering a wider audience for violent, provocative discourse that would not have found a place in the public media space—if only for legal reasons. From the beginning of the 2000s, groups like *Unité radicale* theorized the internet as a space favorable to their political activities and worth investing time in. It developed different strategies and tactics of occupation, increasing the number of affiliated spaces like websites and blogs, and occupying open platforms like forums and comment sections in order to gain visibility as a “political community” (Matuszak 2007). Under the influence of the *Nouvelle Droite* school, it developed a fresh style of communication that was deemed to be more appealing (Casajus 2014).² At the same time, an ideological shift occurred within nationalist movements, particularly the nationalist-revolutionary movement, during the Kosovo War in 1999 and the September 2001 attacks. This led to a transition from earlier “duopolies of enemies”—the US and the USSR, or the US and Israel—to new ones, the US and Islam (Lebourg 2010, 232) or “Islamism and Muslim immigration” (Cahuzac and François 2013, 277). This sustained history allows us to understand the current structure of the online landscape of the European extreme rights. Ideological tensions within it connect both to disputes over identifying the “enemy duopoly” and to the normalization strategies of far-right political parties, which range from those with institutional aims to extreme radicalism. These strategies follow the theoretical lines laid down by the *Nouvelle Droite*, a French group whose ideological influence is visible in several right-wing and far-right movements in Europe over recent decades. This was particularly true in Italy in the 1990s with the *Lega Nord*, the *Movimento Sociale Italiano*, and the *Alleanza Nazionale* (Dechezelles 2005), as well as with current groups like *CasaPound*.

We can assume that the rapid and effective spread of extreme rights online owes much to the fact that their activists seized the possibilities offered by digital networks very early on. In their most violent form, like the announcement of an assassination attempt on President Jacques Chirac on the *Unité*

2. “The ‘Nouvelle Droite’ refers to the association between GRECE (European Civilization Research and Study Group) and the Club de l’Horloge. The term appeared in 1979 after a controversy sparked by left-wing journalists who tried to condemn the influence of these groups’ members on right-wing media and political parties” (Lecœur 2007, 228).

radicale website, they have undeniably encouraged an increased judicialization of the internet. Following that group's forced dissolution, activists met instead on identitarian websites. These shifts brought changes in presentation; websites became more professional websites and acquired their own servers.³ This is the context in which far-right groups' online activism shifted towards new media. The website *Novopress* was created in 2005, presenting itself as "an iconoclastic and reactive international press agency." A self-declared "weapon of reinformation," the site aims to defend "alternative and unofficial" information in order to combat "a world of univocal thought and information" (Cahuzac and François 2013; LaHorde 2015). François Desouche's blog, *Fdesouche*, appeared the same year, and quickly became one of the most visited political blogs in France. Thomas Jammot and Diletta Guidi describe how other projects followed these, including *dreuz.info*, *Égalité et Réconciliation* (E&R), and, a few years later, *Riposte Laïque*. Jammot and Guidi focus, in this issue, on the matter of "reinformation." In their eyes, "reinformation" is "a word with a strong normative potential that designates a discourse of opinion unpublicized by the mainstream media... In any case, 'reinformation' today is largely associated with the far right and the circulation of conspiracy theories" (Jammot and Guidi 2017, 255). This "reinformation" strategy is part of an explicit political project of occupying information territories typically reserved for official press agencies. On a different terrain, we encounter the "metapolitical" project developed by the ideologues of the *Nouvelle Droite*. They envisage this as a mode of action involving the feat of diffusing of their reactionary ideology through "avant-garde political strategies" (Bouron 2014, 50). They thereby aim to gain access to the media, in order to reach a wider audience for their conception of the world.

Where does this "metapolitical" project currently stand? The development of extreme rights online is based on arguments found both among descendants of the most radical movements and at the core of the many "reinformation" sites now appearing. Todd Shepard gives an example of the concrete effect of this metapolitical project in his work on the "post-Algerian rapprochement between the extreme right and the right in France." He looks at the conditions under which the figure of the "Arab boy," drawn up by the theorists of the *Nouvelle Droite* in the 1970s, emerged as the incarnation of "animalistic sexual excesses" (2016, 39). Taking advantage of a political and media space

3. For a more detailed account of this acquisition, see "Identitaires, Bloc Identitaire, Jeunesses Identitaires: La soupe aux Vardon," *REFLEXes*, <http://reflexes.samizdat.net/identitaires-bloc-identitaire-jeunesses-identitaires-la-soupe-aux-vardon/> (accessed February 1, 2018).

marked by post-1968 movements, and by “public debates that linked sex, violence, and politics,” publications close to the extreme right like *Minute* and *Rivarol* associated “Algerian men with rape, sexual harassment, and homosexual promiscuity.” They spread the message that “only the French national/nationalist camp embodied a normal and healthy manliness capable of defending the French from their perverted enemies” (Shepard 2016, 40).⁴ This racist depiction of “the Arab man,” partly based on 1920s Orientalist thought, was repeated over and over in the media for years, and has apparently entered common consciousness. It was revealed to be operating in an updated form during the sexual assaults in Cologne on New Year’s Eve, 2016, where largely identical arguments fueled aggressive anti-migrant rhetoric.⁵

Within the broad spectrum of extreme rights, which runs from right-wing populism to neo-Nazism, the question of mass media and the elites has become central to rhetorical and political strategies (Woods 2014). Such media is sometimes presented as an obstacle to democracy, sometimes as an enemy to be condemned in the very harshest terms. This explains in part why the issue of the news is now at the heart of several projects and strategies of the extreme rights. The rejection of “elites” is also found within institutionalized parties like the FN in France or the Swiss People’s Party (Gottraux and Péchu 2011; Meizoz 2012; Dézé 2015). This is in spite of the fact these parties apparently enjoy unrestricted access to political and media spaces with large audiences. Several candidates used the same anti-media and anti-system discourse during the 2017 French presidential election. At the very heart of the highest expression of political institutions, one that supposedly embodies the ideal-typical form of the elite, that object of hatred for the extreme rights, we find discourses that divert and reappropriate basic rhetorical formulas of the paranoid style, positioning themselves as agents unmasking the hidden logic of the “system” (Nicolas 2010).

Analyzing the extreme rights today involves understanding the connections between the major public media sphere and the ways spaces of agitation that exist through digital networks are occupied. Whether or not they were political groups aiming at institutionalization, extreme rights quickly recognized the opportunities for communication and promotion offered by the internet. The early occupation of these spaces we are examining helped define

4. Translated by Cadenza Academic Translations.

5. For these events, see issue 166 of the journal *Migrations Société* (2016), titled “L’Allemagne face au nouveau ‘défi migratoire’: Les réfugiés au cœur des tensions identitaires.”

part—particularly the legislative part—of contemporary connected spaces. As time has passed, these movements have been able to adjust their communication strategies, technically, aesthetically, and rhetorically. The use of a “meta-political” approach shared by groups not necessarily belonging to the same ideological positions necessarily draws attention to extreme rights’ actual use of the internet. This involves studying how they appropriate these tools, the types of ideological diffusion used, and the forms of communication arising from them.

STRATEGIES OF THE EXTREME RIGHTS

Manufacturing the “other”

As we have seen, defining the enemy (or “duopoly of enemies”) is fundamental to the ideologies of extreme rights, since such a definition reflects a logic of exclusion and even dehumanization of “the other.” Doing so, it lays out “battle lines” within a given socio-political and historical context. The definition of this “other” can lead to important differences between different movements within this extreme space of the current political spectrum. But these differences should not obscure the identical, or very similar, logics used by these groups. These consist in identifying an external alterity they attack aggressively (Ferrié 2014). Caterina Froio’s analysis shows that one of the main features of far-right ideologies and extreme rights is this obsessive construction of an “other,” bound up with an unquestionable distinction between a fixed “them” and an equally fixed (and equally vague) “we.” No matter which figure is serving as a foil within a given historical moment—Muslims, Roma, Jews, homosexuals, migrants, elites, and so on—the process of constructing this unified “other” proceeds by homogenization. Tensions and points of difficulty are erased, and differences and dissimilarities within these typified groups are ignored. Of course, the homogenization of the “other” is accompanied by a “positive” homogenization of the reference group, whose tensions and dissimilarities are disguised in order to allow for a mythological construction of the referent—whether the People, the Nation, the race, the culture, or something else. This is the cost of the rigid opposition between in-group and out-group, whose obvious lack of plausibility forces its promoters to invent a battery of arguments to bring it into existence, and to reinforce their justificatory strategies that preach the “vital” importance of holding and preserving these sharp distinctions. Such obsessive arguments occur to varying degrees on the websites Froio examines in her study of the modes of argumentation

by which these “others” are constructed in the nebulous collection of websites associated with the French extreme rights.

Whichever minority group is identified as the origin of the disorder in question or as responsible for the present social malaise, it is systematically portrayed as a power with invasive aims and actions. Jammet and Guidi examine these manipulations, pointing to the gap between the fears stirred up by far-right discourse in Switzerland and the statistical realities (2017, 249). As Christian Ferrié notes, these groups want to “destroy a society that has become multicultural and multireligious by banning or eliminating the minority groups dividing it from within.” Indeed, “the mobilization of identity has a visceral need of enemies: the complete heteronomy of the identitarian principle is shown by this obsessive need, a kind of dependence on the hated other” (2014, 70). This is a fundamental dimension distinctive to the ideologies of the extreme rights, and it allows us to make two observations. Firstly, we can understand these groups’ efforts to offer a double, binary definition that feeds back on itself: defining the “other” is fundamental because such insistent identification implicitly allows a similarly insistent definition of oneself: *I am everything the other is not*. This is the process Samuel Bouron describes in his ethnography of a *Jeunesses identitaires* training camp. Ideological training occurred through an apprenticeship in hating the “other,” connected to a project of self-worship proceeding not so much by conceptual content as by a set of narratives and “mythicized stories” that allowed militants to identify themselves “with or against the groups in question” (Bouron 2017, 199).

Research into extreme rights has also emphasized the need to draw a distinction within these groups’ internal logics of communication, whose content is “radical” in terms of the hatred they seek to provoke. While the rhetoric of otherness constantly recurs, it seems nonetheless that the exercise of self-definition by positive values—not at all limited to the negative reflection described above—takes place within spaces reserved exclusively for members of these groups. Bouron shows that online spaces arise as extensions of a “self-presentation constructed higher up in the organization” (190). By gaining access behind the scenes, to the deliberate production of identity within training camps, Bouron can identify the movement between reality and narrative visible in “publicity” clips showing militants practicing martial arts in a “natural, authentic, and spontaneous way” (209).

Self-definition is a crucial part of outward-facing communication, whose manifestations include the publicization of controversies, clashes, and

condemnations. Occupying online spaces is essential for this, because it is difficult, or at least organizationally expensive, for militant groups to clearly distinguish member from non-member spaces, particularly for those where online activity plays a major role. These spaces—websites, social media, and so on—are often dedicated to internal political activity, while also serving as showcases for both positive and negative definitions (Gimenez and Schwarz 2016).

Setting oneself in opposition to the values or practices of the “other” by attacking it allows one to avoid defining the values and referents that ultimately make up one’s political project. As Leo Löwenthal and Norbert Guterman show (1949, 169), this category must be sufficiently omnipresent, vague, and general if it is to be populated with an endless host of beings falling under it. For example, Christine Servais shows that readers of Ivan Rioufol, an ultraconservative columnist whose blog is hosted on *Le Figaro*’s website, are always able to position themselves within a collective formed by their opposition to “others.” In a commentary addressed to “those who think that free care for illegal immigrants is unjustified” (2015, 139), the implicitly mobilized figure of the “we” is left sufficiently undetermined that everyone can find their own inverted reflection in the personification of a rights-holder they hold to be illegitimate within their own experience of life. This enunciative device feeds a social malaise by personifying its object, without offering the possibility of talking to or asking questions of the rights-bearers themselves.

Personalizing social problems

Another dimension partly connected to what we have just described permits us a second observation about extreme-right groups. Löwenthal and Guterman capture this perfectly. When we press the person agitating about the causes of social suffering they do not avoid giving an answer. Instead, they respond with another question, substituting the “what” for a “who.” This dimension is essential, because it allows us to identify two dynamics at work. The first involves simplifying the social world and its issues. By identifying, not social and political causes—capitalism, for example—but rather individuals who embody them, it becomes “logical” to believe that making the problematic agents disappear will lead to the disappearance of the evils they cause.

This process enters into dialogue with conspiracy theories. On the one hand, it takes up the idea that social processes that supposedly “cause worldwide

misery and human suffering are necessarily explained by manipulation by hidden groups secretly pursuing malicious plans, programs, and projects” (Taguieff 2006, 62). On the other, the process differs from conspiratorial thinking because it offers a list of names, which supposedly issue from a serious investigation. This shuts down doubt and presents itself as a firm response, even when it does not answer the question originally posed. A study by Arnaud Mercier (2014) of tweets by French municipal election campaigns described of this mechanism, including innumerable insults and *ad hominem* attacks. Mercier notes the existence of a large number of accounts associated with the “fachosphère” (Albertini and Doucet 2016). Twitter is appropriated “as a technology of self-assertion and social mobilization... and a means of personally attacking political opponents, voicing indignation, and denouncing supposed conspiracies” (Mercier 2014, 147). We might ask, then, if the spaces for speech the web offers reinforce these logics of the personalization of social and political problems—precisely the same logics that enable fascist agitation.

The “depluralization” of individuals and the world

Another element of the discourse and actions of extreme rights online is what we could call the “depluralization” of contemporary subjects, identities, principles of action, and realities. Major sociological work in recent decades has presented contemporary societies as plural ones, whose features—identities, normative references, ways of life, and moral principles of action—are highly diverse (Honneth 1995, 2006). Many authors have emphasized that these societies are inhabited by distinct logics of action, corresponding to different spheres of action. These involve identificatory logics or “commitment regimes” that cannot be reduced to a single model (Thévenot 2007). The contemporary individual subject sometimes finds it difficult to make these spheres of action cohere with each other without problems of practice and identity arising. In his analysis of the modalities of action and identity, for example, Bernard Lahire described the contemporary “plural actor’s” plurality of modes of action; their own distinctive mode of action is to pass constantly from one identity or form of action to another (Lahire 2011). The “plural actor” must move unceasingly between different logics of action, making their multiple commitments cohere wherever they can. We can also point here to the work of Ulrich Beck, for whom contemporary societies are plural and, above all, “cosmopolitan” (Beck 2014)—cosmopolitanism being a concrete phenomenon engendered by the globalization of economic, cultural, and

political exchanges. Everyday life is a mix of cultures, like the world of work or interpersonal relations within “cosmopolitan” societies, and these take on different aspects that involve different forms of interdependence. Beck argues that this is not a choice. Rather, it is a condition of contemporaneity, one it would better to accept and work with. Those who fail to do so risk becoming maladjusted.

Movements of the “extreme rights” actively work against this plurality by promoting a unique identity drawing on national, ethnic, and cultural references and, as we have seen, by playing on a rigid opposition between “us” and “them.” Since this social and cultural plurality is not a choice but a reality in advanced modern societies, the process they seek to impose implies a “depluralization.” As Samuel Bouron shows, these groups’ political projects aim at this depluralization (Bouron 2017). By analyzing the processes by which people enter the *Jeunesses identitaires* movement, he shows how this process takes place through a biographical reconstruction of the person. This involves a genuine conversion: it is a matter of finding one’s “roots,” anchored in a mythological link to one’s “ancestors” and to the land. As Frédéric Neyrat (2014) argues, identity discourse conceives of the global, the individual’s relationship with the globalized world, on the basis of local units like regions or nations that are supposedly “impervious to any external influence.” The individual is inscribed within a singularizing definition, open to cultural specificities and yet the fruit of an extraordinary simplification. The “unification” of the person performed in the militant context of the *identitaires* Bouron describes involves decomplexifying individual identity. The more complex, plural individual is “displaced” in favor of themes rooting them in a tradition, ethnic group, territory, nation, and so on. Such simplification is hardly alien to the classic forms of fascist agitation Löwenthal and Guterman discussed in their study of the United States in the 1940s (Löwenthal and Guterman 1949). Löwenthal and Guterman emphasized that the techniques used by such agitation stir up “the deepest layers of the individual psyche,” disregarding socio-economic and political questions to focus exclusively on the nation and the “race.”

With “Pizzagate,” discussed by Franck Rebillard (2017), we see this process of “depluralization” on the level of cognition, rather than identity. Like the processes of conspiracy theory, images play the role of veridical “evidence” for the actors in this “conspiratorial rumor,” supposedly proving a plot these vigilantes pursued ferociously—in this case, child trafficking by pedophiles supposedly gathering in the basement of a Washington pizzeria.

This authenticating use of images “guides the user’s gaze towards the ‘sound’ of the photo rather than the photographer’s overall intention” (299), focusing on details without taking into account the photograph’s more general purpose. The video and the commentary on it are meant to draw internet users’ attention to aspects that allegedly provide indisputable proof—for example, the supposedly bound hands of a girl (297). By doing so, the conspirators favor one option among several possible ones, decomplexifying the image before them in order to give an unambiguous reading of it. By depluralizing the image used, they leave no room for “a second-degree reading of these remarks and this image, documents that were initially located on Instagram, a space conducive to exchanges like these jokes between friends” (300). As Aurélie Ledoux points out in her work on the documentary series *Loose Change*, which challenges the official account of September 11, 2001, this reliance on images is based on “the certainty that an image can speak by itself, and ultimately a belief in the univocity of the visible” (2009, 103). Christine Servais raises the same point about the videos posted on the Facebook page of “Français de souche,” which claim an unmediated factuality for themselves, leaving no room for debate about what is actually shown (Servais 2017).

Denials of reality

The question of facts and their reality is a crucial part of these practices of “reinformation.” Recent political developments in the United States, which supposedly mark our entrance into a “realm of alternative facts,”⁶ make this question crucially important. Researchers, journalists, artists, teachers, and of course activists are worried by the spread of “conspiracy theories” online. Some observers offer a moral response, using rhetorical tools to discredit these “theses”—including labeling them as “conspiracies.” Others take it upon themselves to respond to these arguments factually, deconstructing the assertions of these so-called “alternative facts” point by point.

This type of reasoning contrasts with research into different ways of investigating the real, which allows us to view factuality as the referent of a collective inquiry involving different actors, and most directly those in the media. Such a point of view allows us to look at the effects of such statements on the content of the public sphere and the possibilities offered to its individual participants.

6. See the March 2017 issue of *Esprit*.

As Olivier Voirol argues, this is essential because “fascism develops, among other things, in the collective renunciation of thoughtful investigation into the outlines of social existence within a public space deploying practical reason” (2017, 147). Referring to Charles Sanders Peirce, Voirol argues that public sphere is where inquiries take place, which allow us to grasp the facts as they emerge in their problematic character. This requires us to identify their characteristics and outlines, and to take the measure of the reality they manifest (Peirce [1877] 1984). In this sense, public sphere is the site of a collective uptake of factual reality and an adopted definition of its outlines, and the site where what is to be done about them politically gets defined.

But conspiratorial thinking has a completely different way of relating to facts and reality, even if it also tries to produce evidence and verify the realities it relentlessly attacks. In a sense, such thinking seems to begin with inquiry. It sets out from an enigmatic situation, which it reconstitutes step by step by developing an interpretive scheme. As several authors note, we might be tempted to think of conspiratorial reasoning as a mode of inquiry (Bronner 2015). After all, it deploys an arsenal of questions and mechanisms that seem to share certain characteristics with inquiry: it starts from an enigmatic situation whose official explanation seems flawed because it goes against empirical observation; conspiracy theorists play at being investigators, gathering clues, collecting “evidence,” and checking facts; and it takes it on itself to denounce authorities it considers blind to the facts, supposedly bound to deny them because of their secret relationships and hidden interests. But Gérald Bronner argues instead that these actors diverge in every respect from practices of reasoned inquiry: at any moment in the investigation, “conspiracy professionals” use the same preexisting explanatory theory, projecting it onto the “facts” without those facts ever being able to influence their original framework (Bronner 2015, 22).

Reasoned inquiry is the precise opposite of such dogmatic processes, presupposing as it does the practical possibility of resolving difficulties and reestablishing a stabilized factual “reality.” It aims to gradually elucidate the enigmatic situation and overcome any obstacles. By contrast, conspiratorial thinking deploys a whole bundle of different clues in a single moment. These supposedly support the existence of the enigma in question; if it puts forward elements that might help to resolve the enigma, it does not do so as through practical resolution, but by pointing fingers at groups of individuals or prominent figures who supposedly lie at the only root of the problem. Modern conspiratorial thinking can resemble a “dilettante practice,” where

accumulated clues and “proofs” show the flaws in the official account of a practical enigma.

These two forms of questioning only imitate procedures of reasoned inquiry. Bronner describes a specific form of inquiry he calls “Fortean,” referring to Charles Fort, who set out to develop improbable theses about the strangest subjects. As Bronner shows, the method consists in “constructing argumentative ‘millefeuilles.’ Each of the levels making up the demonstration might be very fragile... but the building is so high that it still gives an impression of truth. The conclusion is that ‘it can’t all be wrong’” (Bronner 2015, 23). “Fortenary” inquiry uses a cumulative approach, where clues and evidence mount up; these reveal anomalies, while suggesting that they could or should ultimately lead to an investigation. The ultimate goal is to nourish doubt, to define a relationship with the world that actors of the extreme right believe possesses a subversive aim, and to clear the way for a dissident form of politics. An inquiry conducted using such conspiratorial reasoning accumulates clues. When these are stacked up, they instill doubt about official accounts. This is the operational basis for regular attacks on journalists and the “media system” by conspiracy theorists.

As Voirol shows, Peirce views the purpose of investigation as the precise opposite of this circular logic. It aims to dissolve an initial doubt by temporarily strengthening one’s relationship with the world on the basis of common-sense “beliefs” that are objectively established by their relevance to the real. We might think that, since conspiratorial thinking is driven by doubt, nothing stops it from seeking clues and accumulating “evidence” in a methodical inquiry that tries to dissolve its doubt. Conspiratorial thinking shares its initial moment, doubt, with reasoned inquiry; so why doesn’t the conspiratorial project give way to reasoned inquiry? Instead, conspiratorial thinking displaces inquiry, revealing an unwillingness or inability to elucidate the difficulty or resolve the enigma. It is not conducting an inquiry in order to undo disorders and dissolve doubts; rather, it aims to exacerbate disorder, nourishing it with an expertly composed set of suspicious elements. These are essential ingredients in a relationship with a world haunted by malaise. They recall the metaphor used by Löwenthal and Guterman, who compare agitators to a doctor who encourage their sick patients to scratch at their itching sores (1949, 16; below, 182). The limits of conspiratorial thinking lie in a displacement: disorder and doubt are made a permanent way of experiencing the world, one they set out to replenish unceasingly. This propensity to revel in the unease disorder creates is the first obstacle in conspiratorial thought to reasoned inquiry.

The authoritarian address

Another aspect of the conspiratorial process is the cumulative practice such reasoning is based on. As Rebillard remarks about Pizzagate, this cumulative activity takes a “collaborative” form, founded on mechanisms of online exchange and sharing. A multitude of sporadic contributions from different investigators accumulate, revealing new aspects of the disorder, new arguments, and new visual aids like photos, images, and videos, which supposedly provide more evidence and increase the weight of suspicion. Moreover, as Ledoux points out, these “theories” are characterized by the “Saint Thomas Syndrome” (2009, 101), where the absence of images is treated as proof of the presence of deceit or manipulation.

The process of verifying “what happened” implies a dynamic that cannot be reduced to individual contributions. In this sense, it is above all a social process. While some of these elements have already been highlighted by the sociology of rumors (Morin 1971; Campion-Vincent and Renard 1990; Kapferer 2010), online deployments of these conspiratorial processes more than ever bring out the “collaborative” dimension of the process of constructing “reality.” The question of what kind of collective process we are dealing with in such conspiratorial logic remains unresolved—except of course for the fact, mentioned already, that it borrows from a binary logic that contrasts “us” and “them.” Christine Servais however, gives a number of extremely useful indications of the shape an answer might take. Her study of the comments sections of identitarian websites shows how the register of the videos posted by “Français de souche” prevents the formation of a reflective collective. The apparatus used by the videos prevents its recipients from “coming into contact with each other, leading instead to a violent affirmation of the self” (2017, 116). The mobilized “we” is, above all, a logic of resentment.

Servais’s approach belongs within the logic of extension mentioned at the beginning of this introduction. It is based on analyzing digital apparatuses by examining their modes of address and how, through their modes of enunciation, they presuppose specific types of response that implicitly invoke a conception of the collective (Servais 2013, 2015; Voirol 2011). This analysis begins by examining the public sphere—not so much the discourses and texts within it as the *responses* that discursive addresses give rise to. Servais relies on Derrida, who emphasized that “every address is a call for a response,” that the answer is primary, and therefore that to enunciate something is to *respond*.

If it is the other who speaks in an address, it is up to each person not to transmit statements, but to answer them (89). By constituting a “call to answer,” the address mobilizes a present or future collective. Doing so, it raises the question of knowing in the name of what, of who, of which “you,” of which “one,” or of which “we” the enunciator responds to what he says (89).

There are modes of address that respond to what they enunciate by opening up a democratic collective where those the address is aimed at can respond in their turn, within a collective investigation into the contours of the real and the possible horizon this developing collective grants itself. Discourses of resentment produce quite a different type of collective. They dissolve the very possibility of response because they do not themselves respond to what they enunciate. The reality shown within such a collective appears as fixed, with the only option being to accept it as it stands, taking the “real” at face value. Such a statement of “what is” simultaneously carries out a “denial of reality”: the real is not an object tested and investigated in collective inquiry, but the thing that asserts itself in an authoritarian manner, outside any test that passes through a collectivity of inquiry. As Voirol shows (2017), the collective these authoritarian addresses institute lacks any tools that would allow it to use practical reason to investigate the contours of the real. This investigation allows us to redefine its “claims to reality,” in the sense that Peirce understands processes of inquiry to establish the content of factuality by “fixing beliefs” within a “community of inquiry” (Voirol, 150). This is precisely the opposite of the democratic collectivity envisaged in the idea of a political public sphere where practical reason develops through a process of inquiry, and where the characteristics of a collective, self-determined political will are formulated through being challenged.

CONCLUSION

The questions raised here about the construction of the “other,” the personalization of social ills, the “depluralization” of the world, the denial of reality, and authoritarian address are some of the features of extreme rights online. There is nothing fundamentally new about the traditional ideologies of extreme rights. Digital networks, however, seem to offer new ways to develop and structure such ideologies. These networks offer a space for ideological development, taking advantage of expressive scenes of indignation driven by a logic of resentment, itself taken up by “the internet of the extreme rights.”

The space appropriated by digital networks is one of expression and interactivity, which can liberate “profane” speech by encouraging the “liberation of subjectivities” (Jammet and Guidi 2017) and facilitating the circulation of opinions. Does this tend towards a “fachosphère,” occupied by antidemocratic groups who hijack the internet’s civic, participatory virtues to drive citizens towards hatred? While the space remains highly contested, one thing is certain: these statements are circulating and available on the internet, and digital networks and their data are now an important source for studying such discourses, which are “less likely to be contradicted or morally condemned” (Froio) and where extreme rights can express themselves undisguisedly. It is also, therefore, a place for examining such discourse, and deconstructing its principles. This has become particularly necessary in the age of the “internet of the extreme rights,” and we hope the research will deepen methodical and critical investigations of these phenomena. It is not just a matter of safeguarding the internet’s democratic vitality and defending its participative logic. It is a matter of the democratic imperative to “take care of the public sphere” (Voiron) by defending and extending the logic of reasoned inquiry and collective self-investigation that lies at the heart of the modern, emancipatory project of practical reason.

ABSTRACT

After distinguishing between *droites extrêmes* and *extrêmes droites*, the article analyzes the fascization of public spheres and reviews these trends’ various manifestations online over the past decade. It highlights how different movements like the Tea Party, the “Manif pour tous,” and Pegida use the Web. The main features of “extreme rights” (*droites extrêmes*) are identified as their tendency towards “othering,” the personalization of social malaise, the “depluralization” of the world, the “denial of reality,” and the “authoritarian address.”

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