



Charlottesville and the alt-right: a turning point?

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that education and exposure are essential tools in the fight against the alt-right movement. While the alt-right has flourished by disguising its core racist ideology, the August 2017 “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville VA revealed the movement’s white supremacist leanings and affiliations. Building on this public unmasking, I outline what I see as the eight central white supremacist concepts that animate alt-right thinking: the Jewish Question, the 14 words, white genocide, white nationalism, identitarianism, race realism, misogyny, and the ethno-state. These concepts connect the alt-right to more traditional white power groups and organizations, and it is essential that educators, parents, students, and administrators understand and publicize those connections. The tragedy and chaos of the Charlottesville rally certainly forced alt-right leaders to make strategic and tactical modifications: public exposure intensified existing schisms and led to doubts about the efficacy of large-scale public rallies. But the central white supremacist tenets that emboldened far-right advocates to march through Charlottesville continue to motivate the movement, and anti-racist activists must understand and fight those ideas in both the real and virtual worlds.

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The latest iteration of American white supremacy stared the world in the face on August 11, 2017. That evening and into the following day, hundreds of self-styled white nationalists joined Klansmen, militia members, and affiliates of various white power organizations in Charlottesville, VA for a so-called Unite the Right Rally. No longer hiding behind internet memes or the cartoonish visage of Pepe the Frog, they ostensibly gathered to protest the removal of a statue commemorating General Robert E. Lee in the city’s recently renamed Emancipation Park. The crowd also reflected the ongoing resonance of Donald Trump’s election campaign, characterized as it was by anti-immigrant rhetoric and ominous allusions to shadowy “globalists” (Desjardins 2017). At the same time, the organizers imagined a defining moment in the alt-right’s transition from cyberspace to the streets. “People will talk about Charlottesville as a turning point,” Vincent Law proclaimed in a statement on altright.com one week before the rally: “will you stand up for your history, your race and your way of life?” Inspired by the hubris that comes from inhabiting an online echo chamber, this “proverbial and literal White Guard” assembled to “defend White heritage” and to demonstrate that the alt-right could “get serious and do something [in real life]” (Law 2017).