# Bringing Politics Into It: Organizing at the Intersection of Videogames and Academia

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A Thesis
In the Humanities Program
Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies in Society and Culture

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy (Humanities) at
Concordia University
Montreal, Quebec, Canada

January 2020

CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY
SCHOOL OF GRADUATE STUDIES

This is to certify that the thesis prepared

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Entitled: Bringing Politics Into It: Organizing at the Intersection of Videogames and Academia

and submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

**Doctor of Philosophy** (Humanities)

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ABSTRACT

**Bringing Politics Into It: Organizing at the Intersection of Videogames and Academia**

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**Concordia University, 2020**

This dissertation explores the structural and ideological roots of GamerGate and the Alt-Right within the game industry and academia. The analysis draws on the author's personal experiences engaging in feminist community organizing, an examination of online materials associated with GamerGate, as well as various strands of critical theory, to interrogate the material reproduction of liberal ideology and meritocracy within neoliberal capitalism. Using the recent "culture wars" in videogames and academia as an example, the author argues that liberal capitalist institutions pave the way, both materially and ideologically, for the rise of fascist movements during periods of capitalist crisis, creating a social context that is oriented towards scapegoating oppressed people and reinforcing existing hierarchies. While the specific targets, symbols, and strategies used by fascist movements may change to reflect the changing circumstances, there are also many similarities that can be found between early 20th-century fascism, and contemporary neo-fascist movements like the Alt-Right.

The problems marginalized people encounter in both games and academia are a product of capitalism and its historical development, including the international division of labour created by imperialism and patriarchy. Whether we're talking about targeted harassment, the emergence of reactionary movements like GamerGate, institutionalized discrimination, exclusionary and constrained definitions of play and games, or the culture of overwork, capitalism and the drive for profit lies at the root. Previous attempts to address these issues through corporate diversity initiatives, indie game entrepreneurialism, consumer activism, and merit-based selection processes are limited by the fact that they do not directly challenge capitalist social relations. In order to both expose those limits and move past them, feminist organizers need an anti-capitalist political strategy that leverages the latent power of the international working class to challenge imperialism, colonialism, and patriarchy.

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to my parents, Cathy and Michael Jong, for supporting me through this entire process. Without their tireless efforts and enduring love, none of this would have been possible. Thanks also to my partner and co-organizer, Joachim, for always believing in me, helping me to develop and refine my theoretical perspective, and standing alongside me through thick and thin. It is in large part because of him that I found the strength and conviction to carry through to the end.

I also owe a great deal to the large community of students, organizers, workers, collaborators, friends, and researchers that surround me, including past and current members of the Mount Royal Game Society, Game Curious Montreal, the Tree House, Game Workers Unite, QPIRG-Concordia, Food Against Fascism, the Industrial Workers of the World, and the many other organizations and collectives I have participated in or interacted with throughout the years. Not only have they provided invaluable feedback as I worked through the various drafts of my dissertation, but many have been there organizing alongside me, providing support, encouragement, and advice, and helping me to grow as a person and an organizer. Everything I know I have learned from other people, and this dissertation exists thanks to their collective efforts. It is as much theirs as it is mine.

Thanks also to the many workers at Concordia, in Montreal, and around the world. It is the labour of the working class that sustains all academic research, and it is thanks to these workers that I was able to pursue a doctoral degree and devote so much time to reading and writing in the first place. Whether it took the form of scholarships distributed by the publicly-funded Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, the administrative aid provided by workers at Concordia, or the labour that went into creating the laptops I used to conduct my research and write this dissertation, I have benefited in countless ways from the efforts of others. At base it is not the institutions, or the individual authors, but the workers who build and sustain them that deserve the credit. Labour is entitled to all it creates.

Finally, I want to give thanks and recognition to the Indigenous caretakers of the land, the Kanien’kehá:ka Nation, whose unceded territory I currently occupy. This island, known as Tiohtià:ke in the language of the Kanien’kehá:ka, has long been a gathering site for many Indigenous peoples, including the Anishinaabe, Huron/Wendat, and Abénaki nations. I also owe a great deal to the Innu and Inuit of Labrador, my birthplace, for caring for the land and waters and developing many of the technologies that settlers living in that area continue to rely on to this day. The history and struggles of Indigenous peoples is an ongoing source of inspiration for me, and I expect will remain so for as long as I live.

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# Introduction: The View from the Intersection

*"Over the last two decades, women have organized against the almost routine violence that shapes their lives. Drawing from the strength of shared experience, women have recognized that the political demands of millions speak more powerfully than the pleas of a few isolated voices. This politicization in turn has transformed the way we understand violence against women. For example, battering and rape, once seen as private (family matters) and aberrational (errant sexual aggression), are now largely recognized as part of a broad-scale system of domination that affects women as a class. This process of recognizing as social and systemic what was formerly perceived as isolated and individual has also characterized the identity politics of people of color and gays and lesbians, among others. For all these groups, identity-based politics has been a source of strength, community, and intellectual development."*[1]
(Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins")

*"People who inhabit these sites produced through multiple relations of ruling, are at present the most active in this quest for an identity and a politics based on it. They are, to borrow a phrase of Eric Wolf, People Without History, and thus people without names of their own choosing."*[2]
(Himani Banerji, "The Passion of Naming")

Every identity has a history. When I call myself a videogame player, a hobbyist game developer, a student, an artist, a researcher, a feminist, a teacher, a community organizer,[3] or a mixed-race woman, I invoke my own stories, but also the stories of many others. The intersections where our paths, stories, and identities connect become points of contact, points of commonality and sharing, but also points of contention. Who gets to call themselves by these names? What work are we doing when we self-identify in this way? How are we being identified, in turn? What problems arise when our own sense of identity conflicts with the way other people see us?

Much of the history of feminism and identity politics more generally involves the process of making the personal political, or to put it more accurately, "recognizing as social and systemic what was formerly perceived as isolated and individual."[4] Personal experiences have always been political, but it's only when they're framed as such that they provide an avenue for collective action. This may be why the first battle is usually over who and what we call "political," and why anti-feminists so often blame feminists for "bringing politics into it." To paraphrase Sara

Ahmed, when something “becomes political” it becomes a problem, which means you, as the person who pointed it out, will be seen as the origin of the problem. You become the problem, because making you the problem is easier than dealing with the problem you exposed.[5]

As videogames have become an increasingly bigger part of my life, I’ve learned to recognize and name many different problems. The problem of targeted violence against women, queer, and transgender people, Indigenous people and people of colour, disabled people, and other oppressed groups. The problem of being erased, marginalized, or misrepresented. The problem of being exploited and used by people with more power and money. These problems aren’t unique to games, but it was through games that I first learned how to think about them, speak about them, and act strategically in response to them. Although the videogame industry often presents games as if they existed in a separate realm disconnected from “serious” political matters,[6] they can also be the route through which people find and develop their political voice. By examining some of the political conflicts that I’ve encountered at the intersection of games and academia, and drawing attention to their social, historical, and economic roots using various strains of critical theory, my hope is that this text can serve as a travel companion for other feminist organizers, workers, and students who are facing some of the same struggles.

Although my writing is largely theoretical, the arguments I put forward are a reflection of my experiences navigating the game industry and academia while engaging in anti-oppressive community organizing. This type of work has no neat beginning or end, but is part of an ongoing process which stretches back at least six years, to around 2013, when I first became involved in the Mount Royal Game Society (MRGS). MRGS is a feminist non-profit based in Tiohtià:ke (otherwise known as Montreal, Quebec), the unceded traditional territory of the Kanien’kehá:ka. In 2014, roughly a year after I started organizing with MRGS, many of my friends, colleagues, and acquaintances, most of whom were critical of the game industry and mainstream gaming culture, became targets of a mass harassment campaign loosely organized under the banner of GamerGate.[7] It was this event, combined with a series of other incidents that pushed me to shift the focus of my academic research and direct my energies towards trying to better understand why GamerGate occurred when and where it did, and how it relates to other political movements. My experiences working to build safer spaces in games also led me to get more involved in other grassroots organizing efforts, where I connected with people engaged in labour struggles, immigrant and migrant rights work, prison abolition, and anti-fascist organizing. All of this took place against a backdrop of rising political unrest and polarization that emerged in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, and has continued ever since.

In putting together this dissertation, I was guided by a core set of questions: How are games and academia interconnected, and why have they both played such an important role in the most recent round of the so-called “culture wars”; specifically in the clash between anti-oppressive movements and the Alt-Right—a far-right, white nationalist movement that operates mainly online? What theoretical insights are important for feminist community organizers working in these spaces? What do we need to know to act strategically in response to the rise of fascism and other threats facing our communities?

**Why Games and Academia?**

There are a number of reasons why I think it’s important to focus on both the game industry and the academic establishment, apart from the fact that they are the two areas with which I am most familiar. First of all, structurally speaking they share many features in common. They both rely heavily on what has variably been called immaterial labour, cognitive labour, or intellectual/creative labour.[8] Although manual labour does play a crucial role, it is generally rendered invisible and devalued. In both fields, intellectual property is one of the primary commodities being produced, whether it takes the form of journal articles, patents, or videogames. On a global scale, game studios and high-ranking universities tend to be largely concentrated in rich, industrialized, imperialist countries, and have also traditionally been dominated by white, middle class, cisgender men.[9] These spaces are often hostile to marginalized people, prompting at least some members of these communities to organize and fight back against structural exclusion, harassment, assault, and other forms of targeted violence and discrimination. Overwork is also a common problem in both fields, as managers and owners take advantage of workers’ “passion” in order to drastically increase the rate of exploitation.[10]

Secondly, I believe it’s important to trace the links between private industries and the public institutions that support them. Videogames were first developed in universities using equipment paid for by the publicly-funded US military-industrial complex.[11] Aside from providing much of the basic technological infrastructure required for the emergence of the modern videogame industry, universities and colleges also appear to be playing an increasingly large role in training workers.[12] Many of the values and norms that are so prevalent in the game industry, including an attachment to the concepts of individual merit and meritocracy, the belief that competition is both natural and desirable, and the normalization of “crunch” (slang for the long periods of overtime that are common in the game industry) are transmitted and reinforced through the education system, and in particular, practices like grading and “merit-based”

awards. By analyzing these links we can not only develop a better understanding of the game industry and academia, but also of the capitalist world system as a whole.[13]

**The personal is political**

Academics have long had a habit of writing about other communities and cultures as if we were somehow separate from the political issues faced by those communities, ignoring the ways that we are complicit in intersecting patterns of oppression and exploitation. As Kim Tallbear observes in "Standing With and Speaking as Faith: A Feminist-Indigenous Approach to Inquiry":

> The binary between researcher and researched—between knowing inquirer and who or what are considered to be the resources or grounds for knowledge production[...]is a fundamental condition of our academic body politic that has only recently been pathologized, and still not by everyone. If what we want is democratic knowledge production that serves not only those who inquire and their institutions, but also those who are inquired upon (and appeals to "knowledge for the good of all" do not cut it), we must soften that boundary erected long ago between those who know versus those from whom the raw materials of knowledge production are extracted.[14]

Academia is as much a part of society as any other major institution. We are no more objective than the people we study, and it's essential that we learn to recognize both where our interests are aligned, and where they diverge, if we want our research to remain critical and relevant to communities outside the university.

One useful tool for thinking through these complex relationships is intersectionality. The term, which was first coined by activist and scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, is typically used to describe the ways that different identities and forms of structural oppression, such as patriarchy and white supremacy, overlap and interact with one another.[15] However, over the course of the past few decades, the concept has been depoliticized and transformed into a buzzword, especially in academic circles, where it can be used to shut down discussion of specific oppressions. For example, Sirma Birge points to the "whitening of intersectionality," which erases or decentres the foundational contributions of women and queers of colour to intersectional theory, excluding them from the discussion and playing into the idea that we live in a "postracial" society.[16] By separating the word itself from histories of struggle, intersectionality is reframed and cut off from its ability to act as a tool for anti-oppressive movement-building.

Despite the way that the term has been co-opted, however, I still find the metaphor useful, both because it reveals something about the complexity of identity, and because it avoids naturalizing that identity. Intersectionality evokes an image of overlapping roads, and roads aren't just travelled, they're built. Roads have a history, which is intimately tied up with empire, trade, domination, and exploitation. By directing the flow of people and resources, roads help give shape to our society and relations of power, while also being shaped by them. They both enable and constrain, in ways that are often invisible to those of us with more privilege and mobility. But here the metaphor starts to fall apart, because we are never travelling just one road at a time, but many interweaving roads that culminate in what sociologists might call our "social position."[17] We are always at an intersection.

This is true for me as well. The intersections I occupy matter, because they shape my view of the world, my material interests, and the types of experiences I have to draw on. As a graduate student with a strong interest in videogames, I'm subject to a variety of conflicting forces and tensions. Coming from an upper-middle class family has provided me with access to the halls of higher education, as well as the financial security required to devote a substantial amount of time to reading, writing, thinking, volunteering, and making and playing games. Although as a mixed-race, cisgender woman I'm more likely to be discriminated against than the white cis men who dominate both academic institutions and the videogame industry, I'm also an educated citizen and settler in the imperialist core, putting me in a position of immense privilege relative to most other people on the planet, which will necessarily affect and limit my perspective.

As a result of my status and position in the university, I'm also subject to the same pressures and pitfalls that all academics face. There is always the risk that instead of using my privilege to help the communities I'm a part of, I will end up appropriating the work of more marginalized people, excluding or silencing critical voices, and profiting from it on a personal level. While there are ways that I can try and hold myself accountable, the potential for exploitation is always there, and I feel it's better to acknowledge this fact than to pretend that those structural differences in power and privilege don't exist. Academic institutions, following the general logic of capitalism, encourage opportunism and the pursuit of individual gain through a system of punishments and rewards. It's easy to lose sight of what the real work is when you're caught in that web, which is why I feel it is so important to remain involved and active in grassroots feminist communities, and to continue investing time and energy in the social bonds that have made it possible for me to write this text in the first place.

As Eve Tuck argues in “Breaking Up with Deleuze: desire and valuing the irreconcilable,” there is a tendency for academics to engage in “damage-centered research” which aims to “prove” that certain communities are damaged in order to then petition the institutions that have caused the harm for reparations in the form of money, resources, or other benefits. While this might come from good intentions, Tuck points out that,

> damage-centered research is balanced upon a problematic theory of change…The theory of change is flawed because it assumes that it is outsiders, not communities, who hold the power to make changes. Further, it assumes that those outsider power people behave as a judge or jury behaves, and can be convinced by strong arguments and evidence to give up power or resources.[18]

I take from this several practical lessons. One is to write for the community I am a part of; not for outsiders, not for people in positions of power, not in the hope of charity or even with the expectation that institutions will take responsibility for the damage they’ve done. Second, is that my research should focus less on documenting damage, since those of us who were there know perfectly well what damage has occurred. Instead I will be using the theoretical and historical knowledge I have to try to explain, as best I can, how and why it happened, to situate it, and dig down to the root of the problem, so that we can find ways to prevent this damage from reproducing itself, and affecting other people.

As Yasmin Jiwani observes in *Discourses of Denial: Mediations of Race, Gender, and Violence*,

> A crucial way in which power is naturalized and communicated is through structures of dominance. These structures are grounded in predominant “ways of seeing,” to borrow a phrase from John Berger (1972). The latter derive from and reinforce the dominant common-sense stock of knowledge – that which is taken for granted, assumed, and reproduced over time.[19]

The goal here is to deconstruct the “common sense” that dominates the game industry and academia—focusing in on the notion of merit and its ideological and structural underpinnings—while showing how it contributes to targeted violence and exploitation and erodes solidarity.

**Structure**

Although there is a lot of specialized knowledge involved in navigating both games and academia, I’ve tried to make this text as accessible as possible. The writing is divided into three interconnected “layers”:

1) Blog posts: The first layer is composed of a selection of short blog posts, most of which were created for a non-academic audience. While the blog posts have already been published online on my personal blog, I believe there is value in revisiting this work as part of my doctoral dissertation in order to make a statement about what can and cannot be considered "scholarly research," and what our current standards and expectations say about the role that academia plays in our society. These posts, which can be found in the appendix, were written for friends, peers, and fellow organizers over the course of 3 years, from 2014 to 2017, and reflect some of the major concerns and conflicts that came up during that time.

2) Main text: The middle layer ties the various blog posts together and attempts to map out the big picture. Whereas the blog posts are focused on specific topics, the second layer points to the broader context, explaining why I chose to write about these topics when I did, and how they connect to larger systemic and structural issues. This section will gesture towards the theoretical work that has influenced me and shaped my perception of events, touching on the concepts that I will discuss in more detail in the third layer.

3) Key Concepts: The third layer dives more deeply into the academic literature and attempts to explain major concepts and theoretical positions that appear throughout the main text, while remaining as accessible as possible. This layer is for readers who might be interested in having more in-depth discussions about fundamental concepts such as class, fascism, liberalism, capitalism, imperialism, etc., and are looking for a place to start. This layer is intended largely to serve as a convenient reference or starting point for further research, rather than an authoritative take on each of these subjects.

The main text is divided into four chapters. I begin by providing a quick overview of the two "industries" I work within—videogames and academia—and the current economic crisis, to provide some context for the analysis that follows. In this chapter I also discuss some of the realities and limitations of community-building under capitalism, including the limits of "indie games" and corporate approaches to diversity. The second chapter is a critique of liberal ideology and meritocracy within games and academia, as well as idealism and individualism more generally. The third chapter examines the pushback against feminism and identity politics, GamerGate, and the rise of neo-fascism, and draws connections between these phenomena and broader social structures, such as imperialism and capitalism. The fourth chapter speaks more directly to my experiences as a community organizer pushing for safer spaces and workplace democracy, some of the lessons I've learned in the process, and the principles that guide my organizing efforts today.

Each of these chapters deals, in their own way, with the internal contradictions of capitalism. These contradictions manifest themselves in many different ways, expressed through the conflicts between workers and bosses, creativity and profit, the political Left and the political Right. Conflict, or struggle, is therefore a central part of the theoretical frame that I'm using to analyze my experiences and draw conclusions from them. The questions I seek to answer, ultimately, are about what kinds of conflicts happen in games and academia, how they happen, and why. What are the material interests and structural forces that drive these conflicts, and how can this understanding inform our organizing efforts?

The main point I want to make is that the problems marginalized people encounter in both games and academia are a product of capitalism and its historical development. Whether we're talking about targeted harassment, the emergence of reactionary movements like GamerGate, institutionalized discrimination, exclusionary and constrained definitions of play and games, or the culture of overwork, capitalism and the drive for profit lies at the root. As I'll point out, previous attempts to address these issues, such as corporate diversity initiatives, indie game entrepreneurialism, and merit-based selection processes, have their limits. In order to both expose those limits and move past them we will need an anti-capitalist political strategy that leverages the latent power of the international working class to challenge imperialism, colonialism, and patriarchy.

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[1] Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241-1242.

[2] Himani Banerji, "The Passion of Naming: Identity, Difference and Politics of Class," in *Thinking through Essays on Feminism: Essays on Feminism, Marxism and Anti-racism* (Toronto, ON, CAN: Canadian Scholars' Press and Women's Press, 1995), 20.

[3] To be clear, when I use the term "community organizer" I am referring to everyone who participates in organizing other people, regardless of whether they occupy a "leadership" position or not. In my view organizers are those who do the work of pulling people together, whether that's through conversations, meetings, public events, direct action, or other collective activities. I prefer this over related terms like activist, which implies a certain kind of political activity and often involves a high degree of visibility. Community organizers are not necessarily connected to an officially recognized organization, such as an NGO (non-governmental organization), but they *are* affiliated with (or else help to create) some kind of collective identity or group, even if that group is fluid and membership is not always clearly defined.

[4] Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins," 1241-1242.

[5] Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 37.

[6] Josh Tucker, "No shit, video games are political. They're conservative," *The Outline,* August 14, 2019, https://theoutline.com/post/7803/are-video-games-political-conservative-liberal/.

[7] Torill Elvira Mortensen, "Anger, Fear, and Games: The Long Event of #GamerGate," *Games and Culture* 13, no. 8 (December 2018), doi:10.1177/1555412016640408; Shira Chess & Adrienne Shaw, "A Conspiracy of Fishes, or, How We Learned to Stop Worrying About #GamerGate and Embrace Hegemonic Masculinity," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 59, no. 1 (2015), doi:10.1080/08838151.2014.999917.

[8] Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter, *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2009); David Harvey and Massimo De Angelis, "'Cognitive

Capitalism' and the Rat-Race: How Capital Measures Immaterial Labour in British Universities," *Historical Materialism* 17, no. 3 (2009): 3-30.

[9] Nina B. Huntemann & Ben Aslinger, *Gaming Globally: Production, Play, and Place* (New York: Palgrave McMillan, 2013); Heike Jöns & Michael Hoyler, "Global geographies of higher education: The perspective of world university rankings," *Geoforum* 46 (2013): 45–59, doi:10.1016/j.geoforum.2012.12.014.

[10] Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, *Games of Empire*; Grace Krause, "We must confront the culture of overwork to tackle academia's mental health crisis," *Times Higher Education*, June 14, 2018 https://www.timeshighereducation.com/blog/we-must-confront-culture-overwork-tackle-academias-mental-health-crisis; Ian Williams, "'You Can Sleep Here All Night': Video Games and Labor," *Jacobin*, November 8, 2013, https://www.jacobinmag.com/2013/11/video-game-industry/.

[11] Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, *Games of Empire;* Patrick Crogan, *Gameplay Mode: War, Simulation, and Technoculture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

[12] Harvey, Alison. "Becoming Gamesworkers: Diversity, Higher Education, and the Future of the Game Industry," *Television & New Media* (May 2019). doi:10.1177/1527476419851080.

[13] Sheila Slaughter and Gary Rhoades, *Academic Capitalism and the New Economy: Markets, State and Higher Education* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2010); Garry Hall, *The Uberfication of the University* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2016).

[14] Kim TallBear, "Standing with and speaking as faith: A feminist-indigenous approach to inquiry [Research note]," *Journal of Research Practice* 10, no. 2 (2014). http://jrp.icaap.org/index.php/jrp/article/view/405/371.

[15] Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241-1242.

[16] Sirma Bilge, "Intersectionality Undone: Saving Intersectionality from Feminist Intersectionality Studies," *Du Bois Review* 10, no. 2 (2013).

[17] Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste,* trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).

[18] Eve Tuck, "Breaking Up with Deleuze: desire and valuing the irreconcilable," *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 23, no. 5 (2010): 638, doi:10.1080/09518398.2010.500633.

[19] Yasmin Jiwani, *Discourses of Denial: Mediations of Race, Gender, and Violence* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2006).

# Chapter 1 - Two Industries and a Crisis

*"This is a time of great upheavals, momentous changes, and uncertain outcomes; fraught with dangers, including the very real possibility of collapse as well as the growing threat of repressive social control systems that serve to contain the explosive contradictions of a global capitalism in crisis. Certainly the stakes bound up in the raging conflicts of our day are too high for the usual academic complacency. I believe that the most urgent task of any intellectual who considers him or herself organic or politically engaged is to address this crisis."*[1] (William Robinson, *Global Capitalism and the Crisis of Humanity)*

*"I'm going to get right to it: any critique or reporting on games that doesn't include an intersectional perspective on the presence of capitalism in games is incomplete. There's little else more avoided than the topics of anti-capitalism and class politics in games press and conferences outside of the usual fetishized rags to riches fables. Having money to start with is already a large part of this, but how our societies are organized by valuing people and things by their monetary value above all else structures how we talk about games. It says who gets listened to, who gets noticed, and who is valued."*[2] (Mattie Brice, "Our Flappy Dystopia")

Both universities and the videogame industry have taken centre-stage in the most recent round of the "culture war" between, on one side, leftists and liberals advocating for new social norms and policies to combat systemic racism, sexism, homophobia, ableism, and other forms of oppression, and on the other, those who claim that these measures go too far, are ineffective, or undermine "free speech."[3] While this war has a variety of fronts, there are two aspects in particular that I want to focus on: GamerGate, an ongoing harassment campaign which began in 2014 and has largely targeted outspoken feminists and marginalized[4] people working in or around the game industry, and the renewed right-wing backlash against "political correctness,"[5] safer spaces, and identity politics on university campuses, particularly in Canada and the United States. Uniting the two is the growth of the Alt-Right, a loose coalition of far-right groups, websites, think tanks, anonymous trolls, and media personalities that operates mainly online, and has helped push fascist views and talking points into the mainstream.[6]

As I will argue throughout this dissertation, it's no accident that the Alt-Right has focused so heavily on both university campuses and videogames as potential recruiting grounds and political battlefields. This apparent coincidence is rooted in the structural connections and

similarities between games and academia, including their status as bastions of the middle class, their investment in white supremacy and patriarchy, the core role played by liberal ideology and meritocracy, and their deep ties to the military industrial complex. All of this is, in turn, connected to the international division of labour created by capitalism, which has historically reserved higher-paying and more prestigious forms of "knowledge work" for upper-middle-class, white, cisgender[7] men.[8]

What this demographic finds attractive in the Alt-Right isn't so much a set of ideas but the promise that they will continue to have privileged access to better jobs and cheap consumer goods. As competition for resources intensifies and precarious labour becomes more and more normalized, that promise becomes all the more compelling, despite the fact that such privileges are built on the ongoing exclusion and exploitation of marginalized people.[9] Rather than taking on the more difficult job of fighting for a more just distribution of wealth, or overthrowing the capitalist system altogether, the Alt-Right and other neo-fascist movements appear to offer an easy way out: preserve the status quo by escalating the violence directed against marginalized people, including immigrants, Muslims, Jews, and transgender people, to name just a few of the groups that have been targeted so far. It's this struggle over access to wealth and power that is at the heart of the conflict between the Alt-Right and the anti-racists, feminists, and other leftists they oppose.

**Capitalist Crisis**

Though typically referred to as a clash of values or ideas,[10] the growing conflict between Left and Right is a symptom of a broader social and economic crisis. Capitalism is a deeply unstable and unsustainable system that is dependent on both inequality and infinite growth, and while crises are a recurring feature, some are starting to wonder how much more capitalism can expand within the limits of our finite world.[11] At the very least, we are heading towards a period of instability with which the existing liberal establishment seems poorly equipped to deal with.[12] As faith in the status quo and liberal institutions declines,[13] and more and more people begin to search for alternatives, there is an opportunity for both the Left and the Right to gain influence and power. However, the playing ground is far from even, as the Left not only has to contend with the growth of neo-fascist movements and state violence, but also the horrific effects of late capitalism on oppressed and working-class people.[14]

In the wake of the crisis, governments in wealthy, white-majority countries are now deploying many of the same austerity measures that were forced on countries in the Global South[15] by neoliberal institutions like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World

Bank.[16] These measures include privatizing public assets, cutting social services, and eliminating environmental regulations, workers' rights, and other barriers to "free trade" (a euphemism for the domination of giant multinational corporations and conglomerates). Meanwhile, climate change and other ecological disasters are rapidly approaching a point of no return, as capital relentlessly seeks out new sites of investment in the form of ever-more dangerous and destructive resource extraction schemes such as fracking or deepwater drilling. Precarity is also on the rise,[17] while consumer and student debt levels are reaching record highs.[18] All of this is inflating the pockets of the super-rich at the expense of everyone else, a situation that was put into stark relief by a 2017 Oxfam report stating that the eight richest men now own as much wealth as the poorest half of the world's population.[19]

While this level of inequality may be unprecedented, many of the underlying structures which produced this situation have been a part of capitalism from the very beginning. As Marxists have long argued, the current crisis isn't the result of a "corrupted" capitalism, which, with a few tweaks, can be restored to its former glory, but the product of a system based on private ownership of the means of production, the division and exploitation of the working class, and the endless accumulation of wealth.[20] "Crony capitalism" is simply the most recent manifestation of processes that have been underway since the transition from feudalism, which began with the enclosure of the commons, the mass displacement and disenfranchisement of peasants, and the incredible violence of European colonialism and imperialist expansion.[21]

**Capitalism and Academia**

The fact that so many people are unaware of capitalism's bloody past is not an accident. Public schools often teach a heavily whitewashed version of history, while in higher education Black studies, Marxist feminism, Indigenous studies, and other academic fields that encourage a more critical approach to capitalism tend to be marginalized and underfunded.[22] Universities have often cultivated the appearance of being disconnected from the base concerns of capitalism, represented most famously by the image of the ivory tower. But while publicly-funded universities may not always be *directly* beholden to shareholders or corporate profits, they still play an important role in propping up the global economic system.

By partnering with private interests, universities in the US and Canada contribute to funneling large amounts of public money into private hands. A 2017 report prepared by Universities Canada states that "Universities are a key partner in industrial R&D by conducting over $1 billion in research for business annually."[23] One of the examples cited in the report is the Consortium for Research and Innovation in Aerospace (CRIAQ), a non-profit organization

based in Québec, which includes 21 universities and research institutes and 57 companies. According to the authors, “The organization estimates that businesses see a one dollar return on every 25 cents invested, and industrial partners receive an exclusive worldwide royalty-free license for aerospace applications.”[24] As Sheila Slaughter and Gary Rhoades note in *Academic Capitalism and the New Economy: Markets, State, and Higher Education,* when “taxpayers pay for the federal research that professors perform in universities, they effectively subsidize the corporations that partner with universities to develop technologies based on [that] research.”[25] In fact the Internet, the global positioning system (GPS), touch screens, and other innovations that form the backbone of the Silicon Valley tech boom were developed with the help of public funding and university resources, contributing to the vast, multi-billion dollar fortunes of tech entrepreneurs and shareholders like Jeff Bezos, Elon Musk, and Mark Zuckerberg.[26] The romantic image of the university as an institution dedicated to the “public good” must be put in tension with the acknowledgement that academia has always functioned, at least in part, as a means of advancing private and state interests, and cannot be disconnected from the mechanisms of power that operate elsewhere.

This tendency is only becoming more pronounced as universities are consumed by the same neoliberal logics that increasingly govern the rest of society. The result is a system that prioritizes “public-private partnerships” over work that lacks clear commercial implications, as demonstrated by the mass defunding of arts and humanities programs.[27] This shift has coincided with rising tuition rates, increasing levels of student debt, and the creation of a large, precarious underclass of graduate students and adjuncts that are taking on the work of full-time professors, but without the job security afforded by tenure.[28] As Terri Ginsberg notes, “under such conditions, better positioned senior faculty — also facing pressure — increasingly conform to administrative interests, especially anti-unionism, in lieu of, and sometimes in exchange for rarified opportunities to advance their own scholarly productivity and status within the tenure(-track) system.”[29]

The way that certain types of work are valued or encouraged in academia, while others are devalued, also plays a role in reinforcing existing hierarchies. The norms of the institution often insist on a standard set of research methods, writing styles, citations, and publication formats on the one hand, while at the same time preaching interdisciplinarity and boundary-breaking on the other. For all the talk about innovation, the publish or perish model adopted by neoliberal universities often works to limit how much time or freedom academics have to experiment.[30] This system punishes people who decide to pursue “extracurricular activities” such as volunteer work, popular education, and grassroots community organizing, rather than

spending those hours attending expensive conferences, applying for grants, or publishing in established, peer-reviewed journals. In other words, it encourages scholars to make the bulk of their work inaccessible to the general public and avoid directly participating in grassroots struggles, while doing everything they can to please their higher-ups.

This doesn't mean, however, that the institution doesn't also benefit from the efforts of "rogue" students and community partners, which it regularly co-opts in order to help boost its public image and maintain the impression that the university is indeed a force for positive social change. In fact, from what I've seen, the progressive image of the university is upheld in large part by the same types of unpaid labour that are systematically discouraged and devalued.[31]

**Game Studies**

As the power of corporations and investors grows, and the power of university faculty, workers, and students shrinks, universities are more inclined to direct their resources primarily towards booming industries that "contribute to the national economy."[32] The emergence of game studies in the early 2000s and the appearance of countless new game development and design programs in Canada, the United States, and elsewhere parallels the rapid growth of the game industry over the same period.[33] Major research funding bodies such as the Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) have contributed to this trend by encouraging research on "emerging technologies." For example, one of the six "future challenge areas" promoted on the SSHRC website is "How can emerging technologies be leveraged to benefit Canadians?"[34] The question that is rarely asked is which Canadians benefit, how, and at whose expense?

While the economic significance of games is well-established at this point, the cultural value of games is still contested. In an effort to establish games as a "serious" site of study, game studies scholars have often ended out celebrating and re-entrenching some of the most the toxic elements of both videogame culture *and* academia. This includes centring and naturalizing the perspectives of middle-class white cis men, while erasing or downplaying structural violence.[35] While there is a growing body of work in game studies exploring feminist approaches to games[36] and covering issues related to race,[37] gender,[38] sexuality,[39] ability,[40] and other intersecting identities,[41] particularly in recent years, women remain under-represented in major game studies journals,[42] to say nothing of other marginalized groups.

This bias has a direct impact on the marginalized people who attempt to enter the field. As is the case in many other academic fields and industries, marginalized people are often

forced to develop back-channels in order to warn each other about predators, and share their experiences with different programs and institutions. As Emma Vossen notes,

> While you learn about the cultural inaccessibility of game studies through these stories, ironically, knowing about it also makes games studies more culturally inaccessible as you become more aware of the drawbacks of doing this research. This became more and more clear to me over the years as women I knew would either leave game studies or drop out of their PhDs entirely not because they couldn't do the work, but because of issues in the culture of their game studies networks and programs.[43]

Vossen goes on to observe that many of these stories remain undocumented and unreported, in large part because the abuse, and the power relations that enable it, have a silencing effect that prevents survivors from speaking up. It is up to the people within the whisper networks, and the survivors themselves, to bear the weight of these experiences and the emotional scars they leave behind. Add to this the constant threat of harassment from those outside the academy, financial barriers, and other institutionalized forms of discrimination, and it's no surprise so many marginalized people end up leaving game studies or dropping out.

This state of affairs also shows through in the research and writing produced by academics in the field. Despite the frequent claims that games are a unique and groundbreaking medium worthy of investigation, game studies scholars have routinely avoided topics that have obvious social importance, such as the environmental impacts of gaming, the effects of industry lobbying, changes in intellectual property law, imperialism, colonialism, or labour issues within the industry.[44] Although this too has been changing in recent years, coinciding with what Thomas Apperley and Darshana Jayemane call "game studies' material turn,"[45] Marxist, anti-colonial, and anti-imperialist perspectives remain relatively marginal.[46] This is likely a reflection of institutional pressure to produce something that is valued and recognized by the industry (which is only really interested in figuring out how to sell more games), combined with the fact that many academics are dependent on the good graces of company executives in order to gain access to worksites and proprietary data,[47] as well as the public-private partnerships that are increasingly prioritized by funding agencies in both Canada and the United States.[48] In other words, researchers are incentivized *not* to produce research that is critical of the industry or capitalism if they hope to survive in an increasingly competitive environment.

**Killing Machines**

Videogames, as we know them today, were born from a collaboration between two important pillars of the capitalist state: the education system and the military.[49] The first

videogames were created in research facilities at Stanford University, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), and other universities using equipment paid for by the United States Department of Defense during the Cold War. As Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter observe, the same machines that gave rise to early games like *Spacewar* (1962) were also being used to calculate missile trajectories and the probability of nuclear war with the Soviet Union.[50] In *Gameplay Mode: War Simulation and Technoculture*, Patrick Crogan remarks that;

> The birth of the modern digital electronic computer is attributed to efforts directed toward two major military goals during World War II: breaking enemy codes, and improving the performance of artillery through more rapid and accurate ballistic trajectory calculation. They exemplify the activity that came to be known as technoscience, a new regime of research and technological innovation that arose in the belligerent countries out of the total mobilization of scientific research toward military goals such as these.[51]

Not only was the military heavily involved in the development of the computer, it also provided the funding and motivating force behind the development of many other computational, visualization, and communication technologies that formed the technological basis for the emergence of the game industry, such as the graphical user interface and the Internet.[52] The collaboration between the military, universities, and the private sector continues to this day, with the US Department of Defence commissioning games such as *America's Army* to serve as training and recruitment tools, using game controllers to pilot robots and unmanned drones, and funding advancements in computer software and hardware that then form the basis of new games, consoles, and peripherals, as well as military equipment.[53] Journalist Simon Parker notes that many game companies also partner directly with arms manufacturers, modeling in-game weapons after real guns in order to lend a sheen of "authenticity" to their games, while at the same time providing arms manufactures with an attractive way to market their products to players, including children.[54] In some cases these licensing deals allow arms manufacturers to dictate how their guns can be portrayed; for example, by insisting they are shown in a positive light and that they are never used by "enemies " of the United States.

The connection between games and the military extend in other directions as well. The US military, and its allies, play a key role in reinforcing the global division of labour that makes it possible for consumers in the Global North to have access to cheap computers, gaming hardware, and peripherals.[55] Without the massive inequalities created by American imperialism, it's likely that many of the features we associate with the modern videogame industry—such as the dominance of monopolistic corporations like Nintendo, Sony, and Microsoft, which rely

heavily on outsourced labour and third-party manufacturing, or the cultivation of the “console wars,” which encourages consumers to buy multiple consoles and swap out old models for new ones in order to access new games— would either not exist, or would have taken on a very different form.[56] As John Smith remarks, this unequal world system is legitimized by popular media and mainstream academic theories of development, which attribute the concentration of wealth in the Global North to internal processes while presenting imperialism as a progressive force that will eventually allow poor countries in the Global South to “catch up” to the rest of us.[57] These dominant narratives have tended to drown out more critical voices and anti-imperialist perspectives, especially those emerging from the Global South.[58]

Given their historical roots, it’s unsurprising that militarism and imperialism remain an important part of many mainstream videogames, from the popular *Call of Duty* series to Sid Meier’s *Civilization*.[59] These games often place the player in the position of an imperialist power, warrior, or military commander bent on expanding their territory, acquiring new resources, and destroying anyone or anything that gets in their way. Despite their focus on virtual bloodbaths, most games end up whitewashing, glorifying, or decontextualizing this violence, obscuring the structural roots and motivations underlying the real-world conflicts that many of the games are modeled on. For example, in his analysis of military shooters set in the Middle East, Johan Höglund notes that:

> for the most part the only interaction possible between the soldier of the gamer and the computer generated people of the Middle East is that of military violence. The gamer has the option of either shooting the approaching enemy or ceasing to play. For this necessary conflict to be realized within the game, and in order to avoid the moral issues tied to urban warfare, the Middle Eastern city must be transformed from a teeming habitat into a childless and (often) womanless territory occupied primarily by terrorist guerrillas. Having thus skirted one of the crucial questions of modern warfare—collateral damage—the gamer need not hold his fire, but can engage in never-ending warfare.[60]

The removal of women from these worlds helps to reinforce long-standing links between war and masculinity, while also playing into the mythology of imperialism. Not only are the repercussions of war—such as the high levels of civilian casualties caused by America and their allies in the Middle East—taken out of the picture, but war is frequently represented as natural and inevitable, something carried out for the common good of all rather than for the profits of a few. As a form of imperialist propaganda, these videogames play a role in the reproduction of the very Empire that produced them in the first place.[61]

**Play is Work, Work is Play**

In their book *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Videogames*, Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter argue that "video games are a paradigmatic media of Empire — planetary, militarized hypercapitalism— and of some of the forces presently challenging it."[62] Noting the massive scale of the global game industry, its close connections to the military industrial complex (particularly in the United States), and the capacity of games to serve as testing grounds for new technologies of social control and resistance, the authors provide an overview of the many ways that games, war, and global capital are intertwined. Unfortunately, *Games of Empire* remains one of the few books that takes a critical, birds-eye view of the industry as a whole, and attempts to understand it through the lens of Marxist political economy, connecting economics to the political and cultural fabric of the industry.[63] As the capitalist crisis deepens, however, and efforts to unionize the game industry start to take hold, we may be witnessing a sea change, as both scholars and critics begin to pay more attention to the economic structure of the industry and the growing conflict between workers and capitalists.

Although games as a whole have existed since long before the emergence of capitalism, the commercial videogame industry came into its own at roughly the same time as neoliberalism began its ascent into the mainstream. Neoliberalism, a set of economic policies and ideological norms that advocates for deregulation and privatization, cuts to social spending, the replacement of stable, permanent jobs by temporary contracts, and other measures that empower the economic elite at the expense of workers, began to take hold in the late 70s and early 80s.[64] The first commercial home video game console, the Magnavox Odyssey, was released in 1972, the same year as Atari's *Pong*, an arcade game that went on to attain massive popularity. *Pong* has been credited with helping to launch the "golden age" of the videogame industry, which spanned from 1972 to the industry crash of 1983, and saw a massive expansion in the number of games and consoles being produced, resulting in annual sales as high as $3 billion.[65] As products of their time, videogames tend to prioritize skills and values that mirror the requirements of neoliberal capitalism, such as maximizing productivity, competing with others, expanding your empire, and pursuing individual wealth and power.[66] As I'll discuss in more detail in the next chapter, games are shaped by the economic and social structures that produce them, and in turn work to shape and reproduce those structures.

As capitalist enterprises, most game studios and publishers are organized around one central goal: the maximization of profit. As with any industry, this goal is often in conflict with the needs and overall well-being of the people who work in games, whether their job is assembling consoles, testing games for quality assurance, developing the art style, writing code, cleaning

the office, processing e-waste, or marketing games at conventions. Game industry horror stories are relatively common, providing some insight into the systemic issues that plague the industry, including long working hours, relatively low pay, a lack of job security, the absence of adequate health benefits, vacation time, parental leave, or sick days, and targeted harassment both in the workplace and online.[67] In general working conditions are so bad that many developers appear to be burning out and leaving the industry after only a few years.[68]

Despite these harsh realities, people continue to flock to the game industry, attracted by an unvarnished love for the medium and a desire to participate in the "magic" of bringing virtual worlds to life. Game developers tend to skew young, and companies often take advantage of this to enforce long periods of extreme overtime, which the industry has dubbed "crunch."[69] Workers are encouraged to put up with these gruelling conditions through regular appeals to "passion," which is more or less treated as a job requirement for those working in game development. As Ian Williams remarks,

> Already subject to lower wages when compared to the broader tech sector, video game studios' management maintain the status quo by consciously manipulating the desires of writers, artists, and coders hoping to break into a creative field…Translated, 'passion' means someone willing to buy into the dream of becoming a video game developer so much that sane hours and adequate compensation are willingly turned away. Constant harping on video game workers' passion becomes the means by which management implicitly justifies extreme worker abuse.[70]

For Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, videogames are indicative of broader shifts in the way work and society are organized. Using terms like "immaterial labour" and "cognitive capital," they point to the increasing role that information and communication appear to play in the development of contemporary capitalism, from the rise of just-in-time production techniques that depend on advanced logistics and communication technologies, to the growing importance of intellectual property and financialization. Technologies like the internet and cell phones have made it possible for work to happen remotely, while also ensuring that workers are always within reach of their employers. Whether we're answering emails on our daily commute or feeding data about our consumption patterns to advertisers on social media, work can happen anywhere and everywhere. Combined with the rise of the "do what you love" mantra, which argues that workers should pursue jobs that they find personally fulfilling, this has served to blur the lines between labour and leisure.[71]

While this pattern is particularly evident in the game industry where work and play are so closely intertwined—to the point that many players also end up participating in the work of game

development through beta testing, modding (i.e. the modification of existing videogames), or other forms of voluntary, unpaid labour—it also applies to many other fields and industries, including academia. As the authors note, however, the "concept of 'immaterial labor' was widely criticized for emphasizing the importance of information work at the expense of older—but still alive-and-well—forms of drudgery and exploitation: what about all those factories in China, those mines in Africa?"[72]

Industrial manufacturing and resource extraction, rather than disappearing altogether, have instead become concentrated in relatively poor areas in the Global South, where wages are typically lower and working conditions are significantly worse. In the game industry console and hardware production has largely taken place in China, India, and Taiwan, while game development studios, training programs, and markets are concentrated in North America, Europe, and Japan. The major players in the industry, which include corporate giants like Microsoft and Sony, often outsource the labour of gathering the raw materials, fabricating the parts, and assembling the consoles to other companies. According to Randy Nichols,

> This has provided a number of benefits. First, it reduces the cost of labor while making round-the-clock production possible. Second, it has allowed the industry to seek regions with less stringent environmental regulations. Microchip production involves highly toxic procedures, and the impacts of their production on workers and the environment can be severe. Moreover, the threat of unionization can be minimized by contracting production in nations unfriendly to unions or in need of new employment opportunities.[73]

As developers in the Global North move towards unionization, solidarity with workers in the Global South will be absolutely crucial as a means of avoiding the inevitable threat of outsourcing and relocation. Outsourcing and relocation are only economically viable as long as working conditions remain substantially worse in the Global South. A global labour movement, however, could improve conditions for everyone by challenging the power of transnational corporations and restricting the ability of imperialist states to intervene in the affairs of other countries.

Building such a movement will be challenging, to say the least. As I'll explain in the following chapters, the racism and chauvinism already evident in the culture surrounding games and academia—which has been leveraged and fostered by the Alt-Right—is connected to the global division of labour. The violent backlash directed at marginalized people in games, academia, and elsewhere can be understood as an attempt to protect the exploitative and unequal world system created by capitalism in the face of growing resistance from oppressed populations around the globe. The question that remains to be seen is whether workers in more

privileged positions will stand in solidarity with oppressed groups, or fall victim to the age-old tactic of divide and conquer.[74]

**Body Politics**

Like Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, I take issue with the idea that economies based on information or thought are somehow "immaterial." The global networks that connect capital and labour together are, like everything else, physical in nature, involving cables, minerals, cell towers, ships, roads, and countless other physical objects, as well human bodies. Not to mention that the structure of these networks is maintained, in part, through the use (or threat) of violent force. Behind terms like cognitive capital and immaterial labour is an unspoken desire to transcend or deny the realm of material things—of bodies—and all the messy complications they bring about. Given that the politics of an institution or an industry are often made clear by which bodies are included or accepted as the norm, and which bodies are treated as trespassers, this drive to leave the material world behind can be viewed as an attempt to depoliticize social spaces.[75]

The feminist impulse to recentre bodies helps to bring politics back into the picture. While much of the work carried out in games and in universities may fall under the umbrella of "knowledge work" or "immaterial labour," that doesn't mean that the experience of working in those spaces is any less embodied or material. If certain kinds of bodies are being punished, exploited, or otherwise harmed, then we should be asking why, how, and for whose benefit? Why is it that people who originate from areas that have historically been invaded and colonized by European nations are also the ones subject to discrimination and violent attacks? Is this a byproduct of history, which will eventually fade away, an unchangeable facet of human nature, or are these behaviours being reproduced because they benefit people who are still alive today? Why are women so often subject to negative stereotypes and treated as if they were inherently less capable or intelligent than men? Is it a hangover from less civilized times, or a way to reserve the best-paying and most comfortable positions in society for a certain class of people? These kinds of questions lead us directly from individual bodies and their identifying features, to the structural and historical features of society as a whole.

In "The Hegemony of Play," Janine Fron, Tracy Fullerton, Jacquelyn Ford Morie, and Celia Pierce argue that,

> The power elite of the game industry is a predominately white, and secondarily Asian, male-dominated corporate and creative elite that represents a select group of large, global publishing companies in conjunction with a handful of massive chain retail

> distributors. This hegemonic elite determines which technologies will be deployed, and which will not; which games will be made, and by which designers; which players are important to design for, and which play styles will be supported. The hegemony operates on both monetary and cultural levels. It works in concert with game developers and self-selected hardcore "gamers," who have systematically developed a rhetoric of play that is exclusionary, if not entirely alienating to "minority" players (who, in numerical terms, actually constitute a majority) such as most women and girls, males of many ages, and people of different racial and cultural backgrounds. It is aided and abetted by a publication and advertising infrastructure, characterized by game review magazines, television programming and advertising that valorizes certain types of games, while it marginalizes those that do not fit the "hardcore gamer" demographic.[76]

This description points to the ways that capitalism is interwoven with different forms of oppression, impacting the day-to-day lives of marginalized people who work, play, study, or organize with or around videogames. As the authors note, it's not just the game industry proper but also many other industries and institutions that work to create and reinforce a social pecking order in which some views, tastes, and bodies are prioritized over others.

Over the course of six years I've seen many examples of marginalized people being pushed out of academic and game-related circles because their politics, their outspokenness, or their very existence caused "problems" for people in positions of power. This was often carried out through repeated acts of violence, by which I mean both the subtle ways that people are informed that they don't belong or that they are worth less, as well as more direct forms of exploitation and aggression. These acts include everything from off-hand sexist remarks to sexual assault, doxxing (publishing someone's private information online), stalking, surveillance, online/offline harassment, death threats, withheld wages, forced overtime, and jobs that simply don't pay enough to cover the costs of staying alive. When carried out by and against certain groups of people, they form a pattern that reproduces oppression and marginalization.[77]

At the same time, the push for more feminist scholarship and spaces, both in games and in the university, has helped bring these dynamics to the surface, and created at least some room for feminist communities to form in the cracks of the institution and in the peripheral spaces surrounding the game industry. These communities are not without their own limitations however, either due to a lack of material support, or because even the most radical spaces are not immune to the effects of systemic oppression. In the next section I'll briefly outline my own experiences with community groups in games and academia, as well as questioning what community means in the era of neoliberal capitalism.

**Community Under Capitalism**

*"The power of these primordial communities had to be broken, and it was broken. But it was broken by influences which from the outset appear to us as a degradation, a fall from the simple moral grandeur of the ancient gentile society. The lowest interests — base greed, brutal sensuality, sordid avarice, selfish plunder of common possessions — usher in the new, civilised society, class society; the most outrageous means — theft, rape, deceit and treachery — undermine and topple the old, classless, gentile society. And the new society, during all the 2500 years of its existence, has never been anything but the development of the small minority at the expense of the exploited and oppressed great majority; and it is so today more than ever before."*[78] (Friedrich Engels, *The Origin of the Family*)

*"How else can we appeal for or to others if we do not do so in the name of community? To ask such questions at this present moment is to make clear that the word 'community' does not itself secure a common ground, for such questions suggest, by their very nature as questions, that community itself is 'in question', as a question mark, as well as a mark of questioning. It is uncertain what the word 'community' does, or what it might do, in the different contexts in which it is named. For some, community might be a word that embodies the promise of a universal togetherness that resists either liberal individualism or defensive nationalism – as a 'we' that remains open to others who are not of my kind or 'who have nothing in common' with me. For others, community might remain premised on ideas of commonality – either expressed in the language of kinship and blood relations or in a shared allegiance to systems of belief. Or community might be the promise of living together without 'being as one', as a community in which 'otherness' or 'difference' can be a bond rather than a division. And, for others still, community might represent a failed promise insofar as the appeal to community assumes a way of relating to others that violates rather than supports the ethical principle of alterity; that is others matter only if they are either 'with me' or 'like me'. Community enters into the debate about how to live with others and seems to be crucial as a name for what we already do (or do not do); what we must do (or not do); or what we must retain (or give up)."*[79] (Sara Ahmed and Anne-Marie Fortier, "Re-imagining communities")

I use the word community, not because I think it's an accurate description of what currently exists, but as a hopeful gesture towards a potential future. Saying community is a way

of making community, of calling it into existence. If community is a set of social relations marked by interdependence, collective responsibility, and mutual aid, something which is created through organization and everyday acts of solidarity, then capitalism works to destroy community, and remake it in its own image, because it's only as isolated individuals deprived of all other means of subsistence that we can be pushed to sell our labour on the market for a wage. As long as we're part of a community that can support itself through the use of a shared commons, there's no need to subject ourselves to the demands of the market. Unsustainable, fractured, and exploitative communities become the norm because this is what capitalism requires.[80]

Of course, communities can look very different depending on where you stand within them. My position within the local games community in Montreal has been shaped in large part through my participation in two organizations: first as a student at the Technoculture, Art, and Games Research Centre (TAG) at Concordia University, and later as a volunteer for the Mount Royal Game Society (MRGS). It's because of my involvement with these two organizations and the communities that surround them that I found my way to feminism, and through that, to critiques of capitalism. To explain how, and why, I'll first have to explain something about the organizations that helped to bring me here.

As the name suggests, TAG's mission is to produce research about games, technoculture, and art. What kind of research mostly goes unsaid, to the benefit of the university which values the centre primarily for its ability to attract new students and bolster the reputation of its host institution. The vagueness of the centre's mission signals the absence of a specific political stance or set of values, allowing it to appeal to the broadest possible market, even as it masks the divisions that grow within it. Like the rest of the university, the centre is run in a hierarchical fashion with professors near the top acting as middle managers, and students and staff at the bottom providing the majority of the labour. While TAG has afforded an entry point and gathering place for myself and many others who came to the university with an interest in studying or making games, it has also been a site of conflict and struggle, particularly over issues of accountability, gendered violence, and the exploitation of students and staff.[81] Based on private conversations I have had with students and staff at other universities and research centres, anonymous testimonials posted on sites like *Academia Is Killing My Friends,*[82] and the extensive literature on the neoliberal university,[83] these conflicts do not appear to be unique to TAG, but reflect broader systemic issues with the university structure writ large.

While TAG is firmly rooted in the values and structures of the university, it also maintains connections to organizations outside academia. It was through TAG that I first got involved with

the Mount Royal Game Society (MRGS). MRGS started as an informal meetup for game-makers organized by a handful of friends, but later developed into a small, volunteer-run non-profit with a mission to promote the interests of marginalized people in games, support non-commercial game development, and generally provide a counterpoint to mainstream gaming culture and the game industry. The organization was officially incorporated as a non-profit in 2013, and was active until its final meeting in January 2018. The organization closed in large part because many of the organizers had either burned out or moved on to other projects, having come up against some of the limits that I will describe in the following sections.

MRGS' role in the local game ecosystem has been defined by a number of contradictions. Through organizing events, it has helped further the growth of the industry by creating spaces where developers can network, learn new skills, showcase their games, and find jobs. Many local game companies were launched by people who met through MRGS events, presented early versions of their games to the community, or were regular attendees, including KO_OP (makers of Gnog), Kitfox Games (Moon Hunters, Boyfriend Dungeon), Artifact 5 (Anamorphine), Sauropod Studio (Castle Story), Cleaver Endeavor Games (Ultimate Chicken Horse), and Thunder Lotus Games (Jotun). At the same time, organizers have worked hard to prevent the organization from being co-opted by those who would prefer that MRGS align itself more directly with business interests. For example, rather than focus on mainstream, commercial titles, MRGS organizers have made repeated efforts to showcase the work of underrepresented and hobbyist game-makers, while also laying down rules to prevent its social gatherings or online spaces from being primarily used as marketing or recruitment platforms.[84] The organization has also played a significant role in promoting the use of safer space policies that prioritize the needs and experiences of marginalized people—a position that has put it at odds with the dominant culture in games, and led to a number of conflicts both within and outside the organization.

**The Limits of "Indie Games"**

Although most of MRGS' organizers were marginalized in some way, and its politics were implicitly if not always explicitly feminist, the organization's association with "indie games" often made it difficult to attract an audience outside the dominant demographic of straight white middle-class cis men. While indie games have frequently been represented as an alternative to the mainstream industry, which is ruled by multinational, "AAA" (triple A) companies like Ubisoft and Electronic Arts (EA), the bulk of the indie scene has never managed to make the leap from a vague desire for creative freedom, to an anti-capitalist political strategy that would extend this

dream beyond the limited pool of people who are either independently wealthy, or can scrape up the venture capitalist funding required to quit their day jobs. Indie games emerged as a response to the crushing realities of factory-style game production, but just like other independent movements before it in film or music, it wasn't long before the focus shifted from economics to aesthetics, and indie games were smoothly incorporated back into the capitalist machine as just another genre of commercially-produced games.[85]

The apparent opposition between indie and AAA game production is just one manifestation of the ongoing tension between games as commodities, and games as a form of creative expression. In order to create games that will sell at a profit, studios are often forced to put limits on creative experimentation, either through overwork or more direct forms of top-down control, since games that are more experimental in nature and don't appeal to established norms, genres, and conventions risk commercial failure. Game developers, insofar as they actually get to choose, are often forced to decide between making the game they "want," and making a game that will sell.[86]

Although indie games were initially presented as a solution to this contradiction, it has since become clear that, far from being a solution, indie games are part of the problem. The fantasy of "going indie" provides an outlet for workers who are fed up with long hours and a lack of creative control, offering an alternative to unionization or other forms of collective struggle that would put them in direct conflict with their bosses.[87] Instead of organizing with other employees to fight for better conditions, the more privileged and experienced developers leave to create their own startups, beginning the cycle of exploitation all over again. While startups may initially allow for more creative autonomy for workers, this often seems to come at the cost of longer hours, lower wages, no benefits, and less job security—conditions which tend to exclude people who lack the privileges necessary to take these kinds of risks.[88]

Many of those who *can* dedicate long hours to their work are only able to do so thanks to the unpaid domestic labour of family members or partners, who are often women. The public names and faces associated with indie games remain very white, very male, and very middle-class in part because other groups are systematically excluded, in the same way that they are excluded from the rest of the industry.[89] Whatever the internal culture of the company, startups must still compete with larger game companies on the market, meaning that those that fail to reproduce the exploitative conditions, economies of scale, and top-down management styles designed to maximize profits are at a disadvantage. Even when small studios manage to succeed, despite the odds, the ownership structure of a startup means that the benefits will tend to flow to the founders/owners, not the employees.[90]

**Corporate Diversity**

One of the reasons MRGS supported non-commercial game development as part of its broader focus on diversity is because the dynamics of commercial game studios, whether indie or AAA, tend to result in the same kinds of games being made by the same kinds of people. This link between the content of games, who makes them, and the conditions of their production is crucial. Recognizing this link, however, is one thing—actively bringing about change and building solidarity in an industry where workers and studios are desperately competing for jobs and sales is another.

"Capitalism, games, and diversity work," is the transcript of a short talk I presented at a social event organized by a volunteer-run, women-in-games non-profit called Pixelles.[91] Inspired by the work of Mattie Brice, a game developer, teacher, and critic, the piece speaks to the constraints that capitalism imposes on our efforts to call out or address injustices by creating a situation where our livelihoods depend on "not burning bridges" with gatekeepers who determine whether or not we have access to necessary resources. As marginalized people fighting for inclusion, we're encouraged to dehumanize ourselves in order to appeal to bosses and investors. When we sell diversity using terms like "untapped markets," "increased productivity," and "good PR," we become just another asset companies can add to their portfolios, supporting the assumption that diversity only matters as long as it helps companies make more money.

This corporate approach to diversity also emphasizes putting women or other marginalized people in positions of power, without challenging the exploitation of poor women and people of colour both here and in the Global South. Large parts of the game industry and the people who power it are routinely ignored, from factory workers in Foxconn's manufacturing plants, to miners in the Congo, to cleaning staff and "booth babes." As Nina Huntemann points out, a large proportion of these workers are women, reflecting a gendered division of labour:

> Men hold higher-skilled and higher-paying game development and programming positions, while women occupy the majority of lower skilled and lower-paying manufacturing positions. Women workers are often preferred for low-skilled manufacturing jobs because factory managers see women as more docile, dexterous, obedient, and tolerant of repetitive work than male employees.[92]

While these discriminatory practices could serve as a basis for solidarity, uniting women, non-binary people, and other marginalized genders around the globe, corporate "women in games" initiatives rarely even acknowledge the existence of women who do not fit the mould of the

aspiring creative, entrepreneur, or CEO. By failing to account for the crucial role that these low-income workers play in creating the devices and performing the labour that allow game development jobs to exist in the first place, the possibility of a truly liberating politics that spans across global divides is foreclosed, and the feminist movement as a whole is weakened.[93]

If anti-oppressive projects are going to be successful, they not only need to include and support workers around the world, but also those who perform the unpaid labour that is absolutely essential to our collective survival, such as unemployed or retired workers, housewives, students, and prisoners. As Angela Davis, Silvia Federici, Mariarosa Dalla Costa, Selma James, and many other materialist feminists have pointed out, unpaid labour is typically devalued or ignored because it does not *directly* produce profits for capitalists (although it does do so indirectly).[94] It's no accident that much of this unpaid labour—including housework, child-rearing, emotional support, and other forms of caretaking—has traditionally been performed by women, as well people of other genders who are perceived as women under patriarchy. For those who are working class, this often represents an additional burden on top of their normal work responsibilities.

Despite carrying a double load, however, feminized people are generally seen as less qualified or capable than men, a sentiment which is also projected onto any field or activity associated with femininity.[95] For example, the devaluation of casual games—which are typically less complex, require less specialized hardware, and can be played for shorter periods of time than so-called "hardcore games," making them more accessible to groups with less free time and disposable income—is tied up with the fact that these games are predominantly played by women.[96] But while the massive growth in the casual game market has pushed at least some parts of the industry to pay attention to women and other marginalized genders as a potential target audience, inclusion in this case does not mean equality, as the many derisive comments about "stupid casuals" reveal.[97] A liberal feminist approach which views consumption and promotion within the existing system as the road to empowerment will routinely fall short of its goals if it does not address the ways that class and capitalism are intertwined with patriarchy and white supremacy.[98] As I'll discuss further in the following section, much of the harassment and discrimination that women and other marginalized people face in the game industry, and elsewhere, is closely linked to the capitalist mode of production.

**Markets, Alienation, and Harassment**

Under capitalism most transactions are mediated through the global market, which reduces social relations to a relation between objects or commodities, such as money.[99] This

has the effect of isolating workers and ensuring that we rarely have a personal relationship with the people who make the things we consume on a daily basis. When I buy a videogame, I don't have to know who made the game or why, what their names are, or what conditions they had to endure to produce it; all I see is the end product. While I am only able to make this exchange thanks to a complex web of social relations, my immediate perception is limited to two objects: the money and the game, one of which is being traded for another. The same process applies to any commodity that is exchanged through the market. Given that the market has infiltrated and reorganized almost all aspects of our lives, from food production to education to health care to our daily forms of communication, it's perhaps no wonder that many people feel alienated from other human beings and their struggles or concerns. Instead of forming connections directly with other people, we are instead driven to form connections with things.[100]

This is not just a subjective experience, but an objective reality. [101] The lack of understanding and uncaring attitude that many gamers seem to have towards the developers who make the games they love is a reflection of the distance imposed by the market, which ultimately affects all workers by eroding solidarity and undermining community. Without the support of other workers, including people we don't work with directly, fighting for better conditions becomes much more difficult. Individual workers do not have much leverage when negotiating with their bosses, particularly if they work in a competitive field like game development. Even as workplaces bring us together and create shared concerns that then become the basis for collective action, other aspects of the capitalist system, including the competition for jobs and status, work to push us apart.

The isolating impact of the market might help to explain why developers in general, and marginalized developers in particular, are often subject to harassment at the hands of fans. Although harassment has been an issue in games for decades, and has been the subject of countless news reports,[102] articles,[103] films,[104] and books,[105] especially in the wake of GamerGate, few if any of these analyze in any detail what impact capitalism has had on gaming culture and how it might be enabling harassment and discrimination. Instead, the phenomenon is attributed to a few "bad apples,"[106] blamed on technological factors, viewed as a byproduct of the cultural biases that surround games, tech, and entertainment more generally, or more often some combination of the three.[107] While there is some truth to all these explanations, in that the people who engage in harassment seem to be a small minority, often use social media, and are informed by the broader culture, none of them accounts for the fact that the relation between workers/consumers is mediated by the global market.

This is somewhat surprising given that the gamer identity is itself a product of capitalism, and serves to drive consumption while also suppressing critical voices that might represent a threat to the industry's profits (a topic which I'll explore in more detail in chapter three). As Lana Polansky points out, "angry gamers can easily be understood as a pool of reactionary scabs that serve as a resource for videogame companies that prefer it when its workforce is afraid, quiet, and deprived of the leverage it needs."[108] This same logic may be applied to marginalized players and critics, particularly those that are organizing to put pressure on companies to adopt diversity measures that will potentially cost money to implement (such as hiring diversity consultants, or setting up mandatory anti-harassment training). Like other types of labour reforms, these policies will ultimately impact the company's bottom line. As far as industry executives and investors are concerned then, a toxic gaming culture is preferable because it is profitable.

**From Feminism to Anti-Capitalism**

The sexist culture that persists to this day is more than just a reflection of bad attitudes or a hangover from a "less civilized" pre-capitalist era, it is the result of a gendered division of labour that benefits cis men at the expense of women and other marginalized genders, and breaks up the working class into tiers so that they can be more easily exploited by capital. In a similar way, racialized divisions of labour, which are connected to the history of slavery, colonialism, and imperialism, and reinforced by capitalist institutions, lie at the root of racist attitudes. These biases are perpetuated in large part because workers at the top of the hierarchy benefit from having access to better, higher paid jobs and cheap consumer goods, while the worst, most degrading forms of labour are reserved for poor, racialized people.[109]

Capitalism requires these divisions and exclusions in order to function. This is why "diversity work," when carried to its logical conclusion, forces us to confront the capitalist system and build solidarity with all members of the working class. Class oppression is not separate from oppression based on race, gender, ability, sexuality, and so on, but something which is created and maintained through these other forms of oppression. Recognizing how these forms of oppression work is crucial to understanding the system as a whole, something which is impossible if we try to either ignore class (as some liberal feminists do), or reduce everything to one type of social relation that neglects many aspects of people's lived experiences (as happens when Marxists fall into the trap of class reductionism).[110] Systemic oppression ultimately hurts everyone, apart from the most privileged members of the capitalist class, by preventing workers from joining together to build a better society.

As the Mount Royal Game Society neared its 8th year of existence, it became increasingly clear that the organization could not carry on existing in its current form, due both to organizer burnout as well as external political change. Between GamerGate, the rise of Trump, the climate crisis, and the growth of fascist movements across Canada, the urgency and scale of the battles marginalized people were facing, both in and outside the game industry, seemed too large for the relatively mild approach taken by MRGS. I began to feel more and more constrained by the expectations that had been built up around the organization, the association with indie games, and the constant efforts to use MRGS as a tool for commercial growth and profit. Gradually the core team of organizers started spending less time on MRGS, and instead investing more effort in other initiatives. In 2016 I helped start a collective called Game Curious Montreal--originally based on the Game Curious program organized by the Hand Eye Society in Toronto--that aims to connect games and social justice struggles through events and outreach to existing organizations. I was also involved in the founding of Game Workers Unite in 2018, a global movement that is organizing workers and pushing for unionization in the game industry.

**Conclusion**

"Demystifying Activism: A 101 Guide to Getting Involved" is a blog post I wrote shortly after the election of Donald Trump in 2016, which offers advice on starting or joining political organizations.[111] It sums up my views on community-building and anti-oppressive organizing by outlining some of the key lessons I've learned in the last few years of political engagement. I argue that we need to pay attention to the power dynamics that exist within and around an organization. Who is making the decisions, and how? What external forces might be shaping the decision-making process? What are the interests of the people involved? How is the labour distributed? These kinds of questions are crucial and we shouldn't stop asking them simply because the organization we've joined or created is left-leaning.

While I have a lot of hope in the utopian possibilities of community, I also feel it's important to point out the many ways that people are divided, bonds are broken, and collective responsibility is disavowed *even in spaces that present themselves as alternatives to the status quo*. While the organizations I've worked with may help create a sense of togetherness for some of the people working in and around games, they can also play a role in reinforcing the divisions produced by systemic oppression. In order to recognize the patterns, we need to move beyond the individualistic definitions of classism, racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, and ableism favoured by liberals, and push for a historical materialist analysis that addresses the structural roots of these different forms of oppression. The next chapter will attempt to unpack some of the

key aspects of liberal ideology that I believe are the most harmful to anti-oppressive organizing, including an uncritical attachment to the idea of individual agency or free will, as well as the emphasis on meritocracy and merit, with a particular focus on how these ideas are reinforced through academic institutions and the game industry.

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[1] William Robinson, *Global Capitalism and the Crisis of Humanity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 1.

[2] Mattie Brice, "Our Flappy Dystopia," *Alternate Ending* (blog)*,* February 10, 2014, http://www.mattiebrice.com/our-flappy-dystopia/.

[3] Philip Bump, "The new culture war targeting American universities appears to be working," *The Washington Post,* July 10, 2017*,* https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/politics/wp/2017/07/10/the-new-culture-war-targeting-american-universities-appears-to-be-working/*;* Megan Farokhmanesh, "GamerGate Comes to the Classroom," *The Verge,* August 21, 2019. https://www.theverge.com/2019/8/21/20812153/youtube-gamergate-education-classroom-teachers-misinformation-reddit-twitter-online-harassment; Katy Steinmetz, "The Fight Over Free Speech on Campus Isn't Just About Free Speech," *TIME Magazine*, October 12, 2017, https://time.com/4979235/the-campus-culture-wars/; Cherie Todd, "COMMENTARY: GamerGate and resistance to the diversification of gaming culture," *Women's Studies Journal* 29, no. 1 (August 2015): 64-67.

[4] Marginalization refers to the process of pushing people towards the edges of a society or group and away from centres of power. Marginalized groups often have limited access to resources, and little or no political representation or power. The terms marginalized and oppressed are sometimes used interchangeably, although they have slightly different connotations. Marginalization can also be understood as one facet of oppression, which also involves exploitation and dehumanization.

[5] The Right has used the term "political correctness" to label and discredit their political opponents for several decades now. Norman Fairclough writes that the popularization of the term coincided with the rise of neoliberalism, the spread of New Right think tanks such as the Adam Smith Institute, and the promotion of a neoliberal discourse and political agenda centred on deregulation and privatization. Focusing in on the Left's efforts to shift language and culture helped to disguise the Right's efforts to do the same. Norman Fairclough, "'Political correctness': the politics of culture and language," *Discourse & Society* 14, no. 1 (2003): 17-28, doi:10.1177/0957926503014001927.

[6] Josephine Armistead, "The Silicon Ideology," *The Internet Archive* (May 2016), 10-12. https://archive.org/details/the-silicon-ideology; Josephine Armistead, "The Silicon Ideology Revisited," *The Internet Archive* (November 2017), 10-12. https://archive.org/details/tsi-revisited; Matthew N. Lyons, "Ctrl-Alt-Delete: The Origins and Ideology of the Alternative Right," *Political Research Associates,* January 20, 2017, https://www.politicalresearch.org/2017/01/20/ctrl-alt-delete-report-on-the-alternative-right/; Jesse Daniels, "The Algorithmic Rise of the 'Alt-Right,'" *Contexts* 17, no. 1 (February 2018). doi:10.1177/1536504218766547.

[7] A cisgender or cis person is someone whose gender identity and presentation corresponds with the sex assigned to them at birth. In other words, they perform the gender identity and role that society considers "appropriate" for someone of their sex.

[8] Syed Farid Alatas, "Academic Dependency and the Global Division of Labour in the Social Sciences," *Current Sociology* 51, no. 6 (November 2003): 599–613. doi:0011–3921(200311)51:6;599–613;036272; Zak Cope, *Divided World, Divided Class: Global Political Economy and the Stratification of Labour under Capitalism* (Montreal: Kersplebedeb, 2015); Mia Gray, Tomoko Kurihara, Leif Hommen, and Jonathan Feldman, "Networks of exclusion: job segmentation and social networks in the knowledge economy," *Equal Opportunities International* 26, no. 2 (2007): 144-161, doi:10.1108/02610150710732212.

[9] Cope, *Divided World, Divided Class*.

[10] William G. Jacoby, "Is There a Culture War? Conflicting Value Structures in American Public Opinion," *American Political Science Review* 108, no. 4 (November 2014): 754-771, doi:10.1017/S0003055414000380.

[11] Robinson, *Global Capitalism and the Crisis of Humanity*; John Smith, *Imperialism in the 21st Century: Globalization, Super-Exploitation, and Capitalism's Final Crisis* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2016).

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[14] Robinson, *Global Capitalism*; John Smith, *Imperialism in the 21st Century: Globalization, Super-Exploitation, and Capitalism’s Final Crisis* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2016).
[15] The term Global South is typically used to refer to poorer countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America which are exploited by countries in the Global North, including wealthy areas of Europe and North America. Global South is often used as a replacement for older terms like “Third World” or “developing countries,” but can also be used to refer to north-south divisions within wealthier countries.
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[18] The credit reporting firm Experian estimates that overall consumer debt reached $13.3 trillion in the United States in the last quarter of 2018. This included all-time highs for student loan debt, credit card debt, auto loan balances, and mortgage debt. Matt Tatham, “Consumer Debt Reaches $13 Trillion in Q4 2018,” *Experian*, March 26, 2019, https://www.experian.com/blogs/ask-experian/research/consumer-debt-study/.
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[79] Sara Ahmed and Anne-Marie Fortier, "Re-Imagining Communities," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 6, no. 3 (2003): 251-52.
[80] Silvia Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2012).
[81] Exploitation, which is the process of extracting surplus value from the labour of workers, is inherent to the wage relation under capitalism and is the source of all profits. In many Canadian and American universities, staff and students are hired on a short-term contract basis, with many working as teaching assistants, research assistants, lab coordinators, or part-time instructors during their studies in order to cover their living expenses. While the mechanisms of surplus value extraction are more convoluted in university settings, the long history of unions within universities suggests that exploitation remains an ongoing issue. For more on wage relations and exploitation, see the "Key Concepts" sections on capitalism and imperialism.
[82] *Academia is Killing My Friends* (blog), February 5, 2016, https://academiaiskillingmyfriends.tumblr.com/.
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[84] See the "MRGS Community Guidelines" in the Appendix.

[85] Nadav Lipkin, "Examining Indie's Independence: The Meaning of "Indie" Games, the Politics of Production, and Mainstream Co-optation," *Loading… The Journal of the Canadian Game Studies Association* 7, no. 11 (2013): 8-24; Paolo Ruffino, "Narratives of Independent Production in Video Game Culture," *Loading...Journal of the Canadian Game Studies Association* 7, no. 11 (2013): 106–121.

[86] This tension between games as expression and games as commodities is just one manifestation of the general contradiction or antagonism between use-value and exchange-value. In Marxist theory, use-value refers to the unique properties of a commodity that allow it to fulfill some human need or desire, while exchange-value refers to how a commodity compares with other commodities on the market, usually expressed in terms of how much money it can be exchanged for. Use-value is qualitative, while exchange-value is quantitative (it can be counted). All commodities have both use-value and exchange-value. Games can only be sold as commodities because they are valuable to people in the sense that they fulfill certain needs or desires, however the process of creating games for exchange on the market means that use-value is generally neglected in favour of exchange-value. A simpler way to put this is that from a business owner's perspective, what matters isn't how "good" a game is, or even what type of game it is, but how much it can be sold for. Many business owners may not even be aware of what commodities their companies are creating and selling; all they see are the profits produced at the end of the day. Karl Marx, "Chapter 1: Commodities," in *Capital Volume 1: The Process of Capitalist Production*, ed. Friedrich Engels, trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling, (Moscow: Progress Publishers 1887 [1867]).

This contradiction extends to many other areas as well. Under capitalism, our ability to perform labour (i.e. labour-power) is also treated as a commodity, meaning it's sold on the market in exchange for money. As a result, human labour also exhibits this tension between use-value and exchange-value. For a capitalist, the only thing that matters is how much labour-power they're getting for how much money, but as the people performing that labour, the conditions in which we work and the specific type of work we're doing directly affect our well-being. The capitalist is removed from the actual, concrete realities of work—they only see labour in the abstract, as a quantifiable "cost" that must be reduced as much as possible, whereas workers don't have that luxury. These different relationships to labour are contradictory, meaning they conflict with one another. The capitalists want to reduce costs and maximize profits by cutting wages, reducing health and safety measures, eliminating benefits, and so on, while workers want to increase costs and reduce profits, thus increasing the share of wealth that goes to them and improving their quality of life. Karl Marx, "Chapter 6: The Buying and Selling of Labour Power," *Capital Volume 1: The Process of Capitalist Production*, ed. Friedrich Engels, trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling, (Moscow: Progress Publishers 1887 [1867]).

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# Chapter 2 - Git Gud: Liberalism and Meritocracy

**The End of Ideology?**

In his 2015 article "The Discourse on Media Is Dominated by Reactionary Cant," Toby Miller argues that "the dominant discourse on the media industries in the United States and across the angloparlante [English-speaking] world is profoundly conservative."[1] Among other things, this discourse promotes the idea that "consumers are sovereign and can transcend class and other categories."[2] The image of the empowered, rebellious consumer/co-creator who is free to remake, remix, and reinterpret media in order to fit their own individual tastes and desires is a powerful one.[3] However this image doesn't always line up neatly with reality, particularly in a world where media conglomerates and quasi-monopolies like Disney, Facebook, and Google dominate the media landscape. While it's true that companies are increasingly offloading the work of producing and curating content onto consumers, that doesn't necessarily mean that consumers are automatically free from all forms of social constraint or control. Mass surveillance, targeted harassment, content filtering, draconian intellectual property laws, exploitation, and unequal access to new media technologies and platforms are just some of the pressing issues that risk being pushed aside by celebratory narratives about participatory culture and "co-creation."[4] The empowered consumer is at best a half-truth, one that only reflects the reality of a small minority of privileged people living predominantly in the Global North.

The figure of the empowered consumer has been popularized not so much because it accurately sums up important changes in our media landscape, but because it serves a useful purpose for those who want to argue that capitalism has made the world a better place. It is just one piece in a broader picture of progress painted by everyone from billionaires like Bill Gates, to neoliberal financial institutions like the World Bank, to liberal intellectuals like Steven Pinker.[5] Within this framework, ideology, like history, is presumed dead, buried by the triumph of neoliberal capitalism and the downfall of the Soviet Union. But with the resurgence of capitalist crisis and political polarization, this argument is becoming less and less convincing. If ideology is dead, then why are fascist movements gaining so much ground? If media messaging can't be used to shape individual behaviours, then why do companies continue to invest enormous amounts of money in marketing? If there is no more ideology, then why do certain lines of argument get repeated over and over again in the mainstream press, in ways that often line up with powerful interests? Maybe the "end of ideology" is itself a kind of ideological trap, one

designed to prevent us from asking crucial questions about how our thoughts, actions, and desires are shaped by the society in which we live?

**Liberal Ideology**

In the first chapter I argued that it's very difficult to unpack what is going on in the game industry or in academia without talking about capitalism. As Mattie Brice notes in "Our Flappy Dystopia," capitalism shapes "who gets listened to, who gets noticed, and who is valued."[6] The simple truism that money makes the world go round points to a global system organized around market exchange. Yet as Brice observes, we are often reluctant to admit this basic fact: "There is something unspoken, that of COURSE we're all run by money. But to say it outloud is taboo, and it's seen as rudely airing someone's dirty laundry."[7] This taboo, which prevents us from speaking openly and critically about money, capitalism, and class, is one of the basic components of liberal ideology.

As an ideology, liberalism often works to isolate events and experiences, stripping them of their political and historical context, universalizing or individualizing them, and downplaying the role of class conflict.[8] This makes it much more difficult to see when and where exploitation is happening. Liberalism is the dominant ideology of capitalism, meaning it emerges organically from the way capitalist society is organized, and is embedded in all our major institutions, including the criminal justice system, the education system, the electoral system, health care institutions, the immigration system, the military, and the market. Although liberalism generally works in favour of the ruling class by disguising class conflict, it's perhaps more accurate to think of it as a kind of compromise, one that adapts over time to reflect changes in the balance of power and the shifting interests of the various groups that make up our society.[9] Like all ideologies, liberalism mirrors the tensions of the society that produces it, even as it works to ease or conceal those tensions.

Historically speaking, liberalism arose alongside capitalism, and developed in response to the decline of feudalism in Europe and the growing power of the capitalist class.[10] In *The Rise of European Liberalism,* Harold J. Laski notes,

> The control of politics by an aristocracy whose authority was built upon the tenure of land came to be shared with men whose influence was derived solely from the ownership of moveable capital. The banker, the trader, the manufacturer began to replace the landowner, the ecclesiastic, and the warrior as the types of predominant social influence.[11]

This profound shift in the economic and social fabric of society created a need for new ideas and doctrines that could make sense of the emerging social order. As Laski observes, however, liberalism's evolution was "never direct and rarely conscious[...]Into the development of liberalism there have entered winds of doctrine so diverse in their origin as to make clarity difficult, and precision perhaps unattainable."[12] But while liberal norms and values have changed a great deal over the years, some general trends can still be identified. These include:

- a tendency towards idealism and ahistoricism, separating ideas from the material and historical conditions that produced them and prioritizing the former over the latter[13]
- an attachment to individualism, in particular the notions of individual reason and agency[14]
- the promotion of certain individual political rights, for example the right to "life, liberty, and property" advocated by Locke,[15] or the right to free speech and free association[16]
- faith in law and legal procedure as the guarantors of these political freedoms[17]
- a commitment to legitimizing private property and breaking down barriers to the expansion of capital[18]

While liberalism is typically presented as the polar opposite of conservative ideology, this narrow view of politics that centres primarily on established political parties and ignores broader social movements is itself a product of modern liberal ideology. Today conservatives are just as likely to emphasize the rule of law as liberals, and uphold many of the same institutions, including, most importantly, the institution of private property. The only concrete difference between most liberal and conservative parties is that conservatives are slightly less likely to bend to the demands of oppressed groups, operating as the "bad cop" to the liberal's "good cop" persona. Both camps are, above all else, interested in upholding capitalism, with a large portion of politicians and influential figures coming from the capitalist class.[19]

Although liberalism is often associated with progressive or democratic social reforms, historians such as Domenico Losurdo have noted that liberalism is self-contradictory in this regard. Liberals have frequently made appeals to lofty notions like equality, peace, and liberty, while at the same time carrying out and legitimizing some of the most brutal forms of violence and oppression in recorded history. For example, many prominent European and American liberals participated in the slave trade, and used classical liberal arguments about the inherent connection between liberty and private property to support the institution of slavery.[20] Although liberal attitudes towards slavery have changed in response to shifting economic priorities, slave revolts, and the organizing efforts of abolitionists, today's liberal politicians and pundits are just

as inclined as their predecessors were to support colonialism and imperialism in the name of "human rights," "democracy," and "freedom."[21]

Liberal ideology extends far beyond the political parties and public figures that explicitly endorse it. Many of its underlying principles are so deeply embedded in liberal institutions and forms of social organization that they are now considered common sense, to the point that most people may not stop to question these ideas or consider how they play out in practice. Ideology refers to more than just people's conscious beliefs about the way the world works—it also encompasses the unspoken assumptions, dispositions, tastes, and practices that we develop and engage in as we move through institutions. It is not only reproduced through stories in popular media, but also through institutional rules, procedures, and the social systems of punishment and reward that shape and constrain our actions.[22] When boys are teased or beaten up for defying gender norms and behaving in ways that are considered "girly," that is ideology in action. When a student is praised and rewarded by teachers, parents, and other authority figures for getting a good grade in school, that is ideology. When we brag about how hard we work to our friends and colleagues, or feel shame for taking time off, that is ideology. Ideology is an integral part of our social reality, and our sense of self. There is no way to get "outside" of ideology, just as there is no way to get "outside" of society; the best we can hope for is to develop the tools to analyze it from within. As Slavoj Žižek remarks, drawing on the French theorist Louis Althusser, "the idea of the possible end of ideology is an ideological idea par excellence."[23]

While we can't escape ideology, we can change it by working together collectively to shift the balance of power. The process of deconstructing liberal ideology (which today often takes the form of neoliberalism—a repackaging of classical liberal ideas aimed at justifying more intense forms of exploitation and imperialist expansion) can open up new avenues for popular struggle and help us refine our tactics and strategies. At the same time, engaging in these struggles is part of the work of deconstruction.

It was partly through my efforts to promote safer spaces and diversity in games that I learned to recognize the limits of the worldview that I had inherited from liberal institutions. I saw first-hand the way that taken-for-granted notions of individual success and merit formed a barrier to collective action, and contributed to the marginalization of women, queer and trans folks, people of colour, neuroatypical people, and anyone else who did not fit the pre-established mould. I saw how agency was selectively assigned to certain people in certain situations, so that blame, and the negative consequences that come with it, would always flow away from those in positions of power, even as these same people took credit for the work of

others. In short I saw how hierarchy and exclusion were maintained, despite surface-level claims about equality and inclusivity. These experiences led me to focus on meritocracy as a central pillar of liberal ideology that is reinforced through popular media, especially videogames, as well as institutional practices such as grading and "merit-based" reward systems.

Merit is a loosely defined term that usually refers to some combination of individual skill, effort, natural talent, or intelligence. Merit also has moral connotations, and can be used as a synonym for deserving: for example, "she merits respect." With this dual meaning, merit serves as both an explanation *and* a justification for "success" (i.e. the accumulation of money and power), framing it in purely individualistic terms.[24] As I'll explain throughout this chapter, merit recasts structural oppression as the sum total of individual failures, while at the same time justifying the extreme concentration of wealth and power at the very top of the social hierarchy. If the elite have "earned" their wealth by demonstrating exceptional merit, then the poor and marginalized have also "earned" their place at the bottom. Even though meritocracy is often thought of as a progressive alternative to systems that are more clearly based on inheritance, gender, race, or other markers of identity,[25] in practice meritocracy works to disguise, legitimize, and reproduce the inequalities that exist under capitalism. As Michael Young, the author who coined the term meritocracy in his satirical book, "The Rise of the Meritocracy," argues,

> If meritocrats believe, as more and more of them are encouraged to, that their advancement comes from their own merits, they can feel they deserve whatever they can get. They can be insufferably smug, much more so than the people who knew they had achieved advancement not on their own merit but because they were, as somebody's son or daughter, the beneficiaries of nepotism. The newcomers can actually believe they have morality on their side.[26]

This chapter begins by unpacking the concept of merit, and asking what a society based on the ideal of meritocracy would actually look like, given widespread inequality. Here I argue that merit is founded on an individualistic view of the world, which creates an artificial separation between an individual's characteristics and the social and material conditions that shape them. From there I move on to discuss how the concepts of merit and meritocracy are reinforced through videogame design and the culture that surrounds it. I start by looking at how games centre the player as an active agent and decision-maker, directing attention away from how our desires and expectations are structured by the game and the social context. The next section focuses more directly on merit in games, how competition and hierarchy are naturalized through game design, the way that different types of games are valued, and the connection to class. I then turn to the education system and grading as an example of an institutional practice that is similarly

structured around the logic of meritocracy, and which works to naturalize and reinforce class differences as well as other overlapping systems of oppression. From there I move on to a discussion of how the concept of individual agency is used to legitimize exploitation under capitalism and the culture of overwork that is so pervasive in both the game industry and academia.

**Breaking down merit**

The widespread use of grading and other merit-based reward systems in schools and universities seems to have had an impact on the academic study of meritocracy. While many academics have criticized the notion that we live in a "true meritocracy," few are willing to go one step further and reject the concept of merit altogether. For example, in *The Toxic Meritocracy of Video Games: Why Gaming Culture Is the Worst*, Christopher Paul states that,

> Instead of starting from the same place with a relative equality of opportunity, those from marginalized groups typically face substantial obstacles simply to catch up to the starting line of those born with advantages tied to their sex, gender, race, and/or economic and social status. All of these elements and so many more set the stage for a culture where what matters is not just merit, but also all the structural advantages or disadvantages one faces.[27]

Stephen McNamee and Robert Miller make a similar argument in "The Meritocracy Myth": "while merit does indeed affect who ends up with what, the impact of merit on economic outcomes is vastly overestimated by the ideology of the American Dream."[28]

But what would a system based solely on merit look like? If we remove all the structural advantages and disadvantages from the picture, what is left over? Is "equal opportunity" really possible in a world where rewards and other outcomes are unevenly distributed? I address these points of contention in the blog post "Merit is a Myth,"[29] which deconstructs the concept of merit and argues that there is no way to separate our individual "merit"—meaning some vague and ever-shifting combination of skill, work ethic, effort, talent, and intelligence—from the social and material structures that shape us.

There are two interrelated problems with the concept of merit: development (how we gain an ability or other characteristic in the first place) and assessment (how others evaluate those abilities or characteristics). Most if not all skills are gained through exposure and practice. We aren't born knowing how to walk or talk, let alone play an instrument, fix a car, write a book, or any number of other skills we gain later in life. The factors that determine which skills we gain, when, and how are influenced by the society we grow up in and the distribution of

resources.[30] For instance, it's hard to become a gifted programmer if you never have access to computers, don't speak English (the language that most programming languages are based on), or are told your entire life that computers are for boys and girls are bad at math.[31] All of these factors, and many others, combine to ensure that certain people are more likely to become programmers early on, and therefore more likely to excel in the field, than others.

Effort, something we tend to assume is under our individual control, is also a reflection of our life experiences, the social context, and our physical state. For example, a Black student in a class that teaches a Eurocentric[32] curriculum that does not speak to their experiences or concerns may be less motivated to invest effort in that class than a white student who clearly identifies with and benefits from that particular version of history. It would be dangerous to assume from the outset that effort, in this case, has nothing to do with race, or the history of colonialism and imperialism, especially given that calls for an Afrocentric curriculum have been a crucial part of Black liberation struggles for decades.[33]

Even assuming the subject being taught is equally useful and interesting to all students, many students face high levels of stress, chronic sleep deprivation, malnutrition, and other issues due to abusive or financially precarious home and school environments, which impact their ability to stay focused or invest time and energy in schoolwork.[34] Given that our start in life and our capacity for learning is strongly affected by who our parents are and what they're able to provide for us, the idea that there is anything approaching equal opportunity in a society with unequal outcomes is deeply suspect.[35]

Not only are our chances of acquiring skills or developing an interest in certain topics shaped by social and material conditions, but our assessment of skill, intelligence, effort, and so on are heavily dependent on the values, assumptions, and norms instilled in us from a young age.[36] If we are considering the impact that merit has on our society, then the existence of merit is inseparable from our ability to perceive or measure it. In concrete terms, "merit" does not exist until it is assigned to certain individuals.

Using the example I evoked earlier, we could argue that the student who identifies the problems with a Eurocentric curriculum has more historical knowledge and critical thinking skills than the students who passively accept what they are taught, but that doesn't mean they're in an environment where they can apply that knowledge in a way that will be recognized. Chances are, their teacher will assume that their lack of investment is a sign of inferior intelligence or merit, and they will be dismissed or punished accordingly.

Even before we have a chance to demonstrate our skills, we are being unconsciously evaluated by others based on how we speak, what we wear, what we look like, where we come

from, and so on. These assumptions and associations seem to develop relatively early on, as part of the process of socialization, and often persist into adulthood.[37] For example, a 2012 study suggested that American children as young as nine or ten years old would assume that people with a Northern US accent were smarter than people with a Southern US accent, backing up previous research showing the impact of accents on assessments by adults.[38]

It's not just that our measurements are biased either. Often the quality we're trying to measure is hopelessly vague and composed of criteria that are constantly shifting and strongly influenced by the balance of power in any given group or society. Ask someone what they mean by "intelligence" and you will probably get different answers from different people, depending on the values they hold and cultural associations. For many, appreciation of the opera or the fine arts is a sign of high intelligence, whereas a love of reality television, wrestling, or other forms of "low culture" might be associated with low intellect. Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu addresses this in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste:*

> Whereas the ideology of charisma regards taste in legitimate culture as a gift of nature, scientific observation shows that cultural needs are the product of upbringing and education: surveys establish that all cultural practices (museum visits, concert-going, reading etc.), and preferences in literature, painting or music, are closely linked to educational level (measured by qualifications or length of schooling) and secondarily to social origin.[39]

As I'll discuss with videogames, the type of tastes that are validated or seen as inherently superior tend to reflect how expensive or accessible those forms of culture are to the general public. Associating a more expensive pursuit (for example international travel) with high intelligence is simply a way to naturalize and justify class differences.

If instead our assessment of intelligence is based on someone's ability to memorize and regurgitate "facts," then we have to deal with the question of how facts are established, who decides what is true and false, and the various institutions that play a role in legitimizing or discrediting different forms of knowledge. In *Laboratory Life: The Construction of Scientific Facts*, Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar argue that, in contrast to the common-sense view that facts exist in reality but must be "discovered" by scientists, facts are constructed through a complex social process, involving many moving pieces that all together contribute to something being interpreted and accepted as a "fact."[40] Powerful interests will often intervene to ensure that certain conclusions are never accepted as fact, including funding research to "prove" that opposing claims are true, dictating research agendas, intimidating scientists, and manipulating government bodies. For example, the sugar industry has used a variety of tactics to cast doubt

on research linking sugar to coronary heart disease, as well as "deflect[ing] attention to public health interventions that would reduce the harms of sugar consumption rather than restricting intake."[41] Since, concretely speaking, a "fact" is nothing more than a statement that a large number of people in certain positions of authority have declared is true, facts will always reflect political interests and power relations, even in cases where the interests involved are less clear-cut. In the end, whether or not we judge someone to be right or wrong, knowledgeable or ignorant has more to do with the social context and established beliefs than any inherent property of the individual.[42]

Faced with these kinds of questions, many defenders of merit retreat to the realm of biology: if someone is intelligent or displays "natural" talent it's because of superior genes or other supposedly innate, biological traits.[43] However this stance is based on the flawed assumption that there is a clear-cut separation between biology and society, mistaking fluid categories created by academic institutions for a fixed facet of reality. Since all humans exist within a society, social relations end out having an impact on what we would typically call "our biology," even before we're born. For example, the child of a mother who lives in a poor community and suffers from chronic malnourishment is more likely to suffer from various health conditions later in life than a child born in an upper class household.[44] But beyond that, a hierarchy determined by biology alone seems questionable as an ideal (to put it mildly), even assuming such a thing was possible. Given that merit is taken as a sign of individual worth, are we comfortable living in a society where people who are able-bodied, or fit our standards of health and fitness, are considered to be worth more than people who do not meet these standards. Is a society based on eugenics really the "ideal" form of meritocracy? This retreat to biology, which often ends out evoking the arguments of scientific racism, lays bare the link between the discourse of merit and a more openly reactionary ideology that portrays disempowered groups as subhuman.

The recent revival of racist pseudoscience surrounding alleged racial differences in IQ, which paints Black and Latinx people as inherently inferior to white and Asian people, is a case in point.[45] Although these arguments were initially promoted by white supremacists and eugenicists like Stefan Molyneux and Charles Murray,[46] more mainstream conservative figures like Jordan Peterson and Sam Harris have helped to re-popularize claims that have long since been discredited.[47] The Southern Poverty Law Centre summarizes Murray's arguments as follows:

> In Murray's world, wealth and social power naturally accrue towards a 'cognitive elite' made up of high-IQ individuals (who are overwhelmingly white, male, and from well-to-

> do families), while those on the lower end of the eponymous bell curve form an 'underclass' whose misfortunes stem from their low intelligence.[48]

Although we tend to associate this kind of worldview with a bygone era, it could be argued that the underlying logic never really went away. Instead it has been embedded in our institutions through practices like standardized testing and grades. As historian Ibram X. Kendi points out, "Americans have been led to believe that intelligence is like body weight, and the different intellectual levels of different people can be measured on a single, standardized weight scale. Our faith in standardized tests causes us to believe that the racial gap in test scores means something is wrong with the Black test takers–and not the tests."[49] The first popular standardized intelligence test in the United States was created by a eugenicist named Lewis Terman, who used the test to lend scientific legitimacy to his overtly classist and racist views.[50] While this alone should be enough to call the whole project of standardized testing into question, the emphasis on meritocracy as a politically neutral concept that transcends categories like class, race, and gender has helped to obscure the racist origins of these institutional practices.

The function of both meritocracy and merit is ultimately to deny the role that society has in shaping who we are, what we do, and how we're assessed by others. As Chris Paul puts it, "Meritocracy isolates, individualizes, and strips out context."[51] Cultural spheres that are built around the logic of meritocracy, such as the culture surrounding games, form an ideal breeding ground for reactionary or fascist movements, which aim to reinforce structural oppression by scapegoating and persecuting marginalized groups. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, the videogame industry came into its own in the 1970s and 80s, around the same time that neoliberalism rose to become the dominant economic and political doctrine. Like other media forms, videogames reflect the way our society is organized, the relations of production, and the kinds of demands that are placed on us as workers. As Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter argue, "Virtual games simulate identities as citizen-soldiers, free-agent workers, cyborg adventurers, and corporate criminals: virtual play trains flexible personalities for flexible jobs, shapes subjects for militarized markets, and makes becoming a neoliberal subject fun."[52] Although the idea that games are "just for fun" is often used to deflect criticism and avoid a deeper investigation of their politics, perhaps it's the "fun" of games that makes them so effective as tools for the transmission and reproduction of ideology.

**Interactive media: Games and player agency**

Most people who have played games for any amount of time have probably had the experience of struggling with a particularly challenging section and feeling a rush of pride and accomplishment when you finally manage to beat it. This sense of satisfaction is a key part of the appeal of videogames, at least for me, and one of the reasons I keep coming back to them. It helps to make up for the fact that the work I do outside of games often goes unrecognized and unrewarded. In the "real world," progress is much more difficult to define,[53] particularly when so much of our time is spent working under someone else's direction, for someone else's benefit. Even if the rewards and recognition games provide are fictional, the feelings they generate are very real, and may help to account for why so many of us are willing to look the other way when confronted with the more harmful or "toxic" aspects of videogames and gaming culture.[54] It's important to interrogate what makes games pleasurable, and why, but doing so can be a painful process, since it involves questioning our own motives and assumptions. Where do those feelings of pride and accomplishment come from, and what am I being asked to accept in exchange for that sense of validation? These kinds of questions are crucial to getting to the heart of how ideology functions in videogames.

In "The Ideology of Interactivity: Videogames and the Taylorization of Leisure," Matt Garite argues that "video games operate on players through an updated, aggressively interactive and immersive form of interpellation."[55] Interpellation is a term used by theorist Louis Althusser to describe how our values, norms, and identities are constructed by capitalist institutions that "hail" or recognize us as unique, autonomous, free-thinking individuals. Althusser's theory of ideology deconstructs the apparent opposition between freedom and control, individual and society, by suggesting that it's the experience of being treated as a free individual by institutions that leads us to reproduce expected behaviours and norms.[56] When we believe that we're acting entirely of our own accord, we have no reason to rebel or question our actions, which are shaped by cultural norms, social practices, and material constraints. We never stop to consider the social origin of our own wants and desires. As Garite puts it, "Within ideology, it appears 'obvious' that people are unique, distinguishable, irreplaceable identities—and that, as autonomous individuals, they possess a certain kind of subjectivity or consciousness which is the ultimate source of their beliefs and actions, independent of the world around them."[57]

For example, as a student I *want* to get a good grade, and I often feel proud of myself when I manage to meet or exceed my own expectations. I also feel disappointed and ashamed when I fail. These feelings and desires are genuine, but they're also a reflection of the pressures and expectations that have been imposed on me since early childhood, including the pressure

to find a good job, excel over my peers, and demonstrate my "value" to authority figures. After years of exposure to these social pressures, I no longer have to be explicitly told to get a good grade—I'm more than happy to pursue that goal of my own accord.

This drive to be a good student is based on the assumption that if I do not get good grades then I'm somehow lacking, or inferior to my peers. As an institutional practice, grading not only produces good students, but also bad ones, successes, as well as failures, with the former being dependent on the existence of the latter. Toby Miller and George Yúdice refer to this duality as "ethical incompleteness": teaching people how they might be bad, irrational, or foolish, so that they can also learn how to become good, self-regulating subjects.[58] In *Cultural Policy,* they argue that, "Such normalizing power sets an ideal that can never quite be attained, yet must be striven for. The notion of 'ethical incompleteness' is premised on instilling a drive towards perfection."[59]

My desire to complete a quest or beat a level in a videogame can be seen under a similar light. It's not that the desire is fake, but that the desire itself is shaped by my interactions with the game (as well as all the other games I've played, and the broader culture), which is set up to enable and reward some behaviours, and punish and constrain others. For Garite, "The individual who 'willingly' subjects herself to ideology in Althusser's model is not unlike the video game player who submits 'freely' to the commandments of the game. Indeed, we might say that the interactive structure of video games produces that primary ideological effect whereby subjects are interpellated or called upon to (mis)recognize themselves as distinct, autonomous, freely acting individuals."[60] Games constantly call on players to act or make choices that seem to determine if and how the game advances, placing us at the very center of the fictional world, while at the same time shaping our behaviour. By repeatedly performing the same sort of actions over and over again, we internalize the logic of the game. Pressing the A button to jump and B to shoot becomes habitual, natural, something we no longer have to think about. Although we may encounter bugs or surprising design decisions that interrupt the flow and force us to reconsider our actions, most of the time the relationship between gesture and response is taken for granted, as is our desire to jump over spikes or shoot enemies.

These habitual actions are given context and meaning thanks in part to the game's narrative and fictional setting, which also plays a role in shaping our actions and expectations. While a number going up could mean just about anything on its own, games teach us to associate rising numbers with familiar ideas like increased physical strength or an expanding fortune. As with any other media, the narratives games tell reflect the broader social context. Take for instance, some of the common tropes found in digital role-playing games, which

include games like *Baldur's Gate, Dragon Age: Origins*, *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim, The Witcher 3, Persona 5, and Chrono Trigger:*

- Rags-to-riches stories. Generally speaking, the more time you put into the game, the richer you get, reinforcing the idea that money is acquired largely through hard work and dedication.
- The pursuit of individual wealth and power is justified by associating in-game progress with a simplistic narrative about "evil forces" that must be defeated by the player character in order to rescue an innocent or save the world from certain destruction.[61]
- The player's ultimate goal is to restore the world to its previous state, before it was infiltrated and corrupted by evil, naturalizing a conservative worldview that sees social change as inherently sinister.
- While player characters may receive help from others, they are also exceptional in many ways, and typically take on the role of the natural leader or commander of the group. This reinforces the "great man" theory of history, which argues that history is made by exceptional individuals who often hold a great deal of power in society, rather than ordinary people acting collectively.[62]

These narrative trappings help to guide and frame the action, highlighting the player's agency, while constantly assuring them that they are doing the "right thing" (no matter how many bloody corpses they leave in their path). Wealth and power rarely come at the expense of other people—at least not the people that count—and are instead portrayed as something we pursue for the sake of the common good.[63] While these idealized worlds may provide relief from the disempowerment, alienation, and moral uncertainties many of us face in our day-to-day lives, they also reproduce some of the core tenets of (neo)liberal ideology, naturalizing the real-world accumulation of wealth and power in the hands of a small elite.

Role-playing games are not the only genre that contain these tropes or reflect the dominant ideology of course. Many other types of games teach us to develop skills, goals, and values that fit neatly with the demands of a capitalist economy. For example, games often reward us for achieving maximum efficiency and productivity, whether it's optimizing the use of arable land in farming simulators like *Stardew Valley*, choosing the most effective weapon loadout in the multiplayer battle royale game *Player Unknown: Battlegrounds*, picking the optimal location to found a new city in *Civilization IV*, or selecting the highest paying jobs for your characters so you can buy a fancy new couch in *The Sims*. Generally there is nothing that specifically *requires* players to pursue these goals, other than the desire to win or see numbers go up, but that alone can be a powerful motivator in the right context. As Garite points out, it's

precisely at the moment that a player "chooses" to act in a way that is rewarded by the game, without having to be explicitly instructed or forced to do so, that ideology is reproduced. The fact that players have the option to play "against the grain," or can refuse to play altogether, is what renders those moments of tacit acceptance all the more powerful.

It's not just the experience of playing games that reinforces our view of ourselves as free, agential beings—the way we talk about games and other new media also has an impact. The marketing for many games underlines freedom and choice as key selling points, while positioning players as the driving force within the game's narrative. For example, the website for Nintendo's open world game, *Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* calls on players to "explore the landscape of Hyrule any way you like."[64] Advertising for Bethesda's post-apocalyptic *Fallout 4* makes similar appeals: "Only you can rebuild and determine the fate of the Wasteland"; "Do whatever you want in a massive open world with hundreds of locations, characters and quests. Join multiple factions vying for power or go it alone, the choices are all yours."[65] This fantasy of unrestricted freedom obscures the way that the game's design, and the context that surrounds it, structures player's expectations, actions, and desires.[66]

The way that games are advertised may also shape how these subjects are discussed in academic circles. Theorists often associate videogames and other new media forms with the concept of interactivity and player agency.[67] On its own, interactivity suggests a mutual, two-way relationship between the user and the text. However the term is frequently used to contrast games to other so-called "passive" media, such as film or books, which don't seem to place the same emphasis on measuring or responding to input from the audience.[68] This has the effect of emphasizing the "active" role of the player and their capacity to directly influence what is happening in the game world. The implication is that passive media act on us, whereas with interactive media, we are acting on the text. More recent writing has acknowledged that this binary is too simplistic and doesn't account for the many ways that "old" media is also interactive (both in the sense that audiences are interpreting the text, and in the sense that all media must be physically interacted with in order to be experienced in the first place).[69] Still, many theorists continue to emphasize the unique agency of players.

By attributing actions and outcomes to our own individual agency, games draw our attention away from the external factors that influence our desires and determine what we can and cannot do. If individuals are solely responsible for their own success or failure within the game, then it's not much of a jump to assume that they are also responsible for what happens to them outside of games. In this sense games may play an important role in reinforcing some

of the key assumptions underlying the concept of merit—including the notion of individual responsibility and agency.

**Games and Merit**

As Christopher Paul notes in *The Toxic Meritocracy of Video Games: Why Gaming Culture Is the Worst*, "Videogame design is predicated on an extreme focus on rewarding skill and effort. Merit is a key part of the code within games, effectively becoming a central ideology that shapes what games get made and how they are played."[70] If meritocracy is based on the idea that those who "do well" deserve to be rewarded and elevated above their peers, then game design puts this principle into practice. In many games players are ranked, either explicitly or implicitly, based on their performance in the game, with more skilled or dedicated players gaining access to better loot, more powerful abilities, new characters, higher stats, bonus levels, and other in-game rewards. Often these rewards are associated with a number or clear progression system that makes it easy for players to compare themselves to others—points being an obvious example—encouraging competition even in nominally non-competitive or single-player games.

Of course the emphasis on numbers makes sense given that videogames are generally created and played on personal computers, smartphones, consoles, or other computational devices. Filtered through clunky interfaces, networked connections, and computer code, the complexity and messiness of human beings is reduced to a series of binary inputs and outputs. In this context "outside" factors, which include things like the relative wealth, race, gender, or personal background of players, are rarely taken into account, at least explicitly (what is happening behind the scenes, at the level of the built-in surveillance and data-gathering mechanisms, is another matter altogether).

Much of the early discourse surrounding computers and the internet tended to assume that digital technologies have the capacity to separate our minds from our bodies, freeing us from the constraints imposed on us by our flesh and allowing us to take on any identity we desire, or none at all.[71] This argument lines up nicely with the neoliberal emphasis on "colourblindness" and "post-feminism," which asserts that the old identity-based struggles against oppression and exploitation are over and done with, and that we are entering a new era of social harmony and cohesion. However research examining online interactions, the digital divide, and the design of computer technologies reveals that race, gender, and class are still very much embedded in new media, just as they were in "old media."[72]

In the case of games, the selection of inputs and outputs, the connections between them, and the ways they are interpreted are all deeply ideological, even though the intervention of a computer often makes it seem like this process is objective or detached from human values and "bias." Given the widespread assumption that computer technology is somehow politically neutral, despite being made by and for fallible human beings, it makes sense that many players seem to think of videogames as the perfect meritocracy, particularly those who come to games with all the necessary privileges to succeed.[73]

In order for players to take pride in overcoming challenges and beating other players, they must be able to tell themselves that they "earned" their success—that it was not just a result of luck or circumstance. The appearance of objectivity and fairness is important for maintaining the impression that games are a "true" meritocracy. "Good" game design is supposed to create an even playing field, where players can compete with one another on what is assumed to be an equal basis.[74] If every player has an equal opportunity to win, then the only thing that can distinguish players is their skill, which is viewed as politically neutral and something that can be acquired by anyone who is "willing" to put in the time and effort.

However, the material world in which videogames exist is far from equal or even. Different players have access to different resources, and the more money and free time they have, the more likely they are to develop the skills and knowledge that come with regular practice and exposure to games. Framing differences in skill as a matter of personal choice or agency rather than the result of a complex array of socially determined factors oversimplifies the situation and obscures what's really going on. No matter how balanced a game may be, players will never have an equal opportunity to succeed, simply by virtue of the fact that they are starting from very different places. There can be no equal opportunity in a world with unequal outcomes.

**Meritocracy in Games Culture**

The emphasis on merit has bled into the culture surrounding games as well. Take for example the spread of memes like "git gud" (get good), a phrase used jokingly to encourage players to get better at a game or, more often, shame them for failing.[75] The phrase implies that failure is the fault of the player, not the game design: it's not that games are too hard, it's that certain players aren't good enough. While "git gud" is very much a product of competitive gaming communities, it also reflects broader beliefs about individual responsibility, which tend to lay the blame for struggle and hardship at the feet of the people who are struggling, rather than finding fault with the system itself or the people who benefit from it. Instead of questioning why

so many games only seem to measure a select set of skills tied to combat and resource management, or asking more fundamental questions about how leisure time is distributed under capitalism, players are encouraged to cultivate a false sense of superiority, and lord it over others.

You can see the same logic at work in the way different games and game genres are valued. Games that are purposefully designed to be difficult or punishing, such as *Dark Souls* or *Super Meat Boy*, are often put on a pedestal, while games that are easier to play and more accessible are looked down on or excluded from the realm of "real games" altogether.[76] The reactions to games like *Gone Home*, *Dear Esther*, and other so-called "walking simulators," are a case in point.[77] These games allow players to explore a detailed environment at their own pace, piecing together clues in order to develop a better understanding of the characters and the fictional world. However, because there are few if any predefined goals, and the games are not generally considered "challenging" to play (in part because they encourage players to develop skills that are very different from the ones most games cultivate and reward), "hardcore gamers" have tended to react negatively to these and other similar titles. In fact, the very identity of hardcore gamers—a marketing category created by the game industry that refers to consumers who are heavily invested in videogames and spend a significant amount of money on games—is often dependent on excluding or distancing oneself from certain kinds of games and players.[78]

"Casual" games, which are usually played on mobile phones or internet browsers and include popular titles like *Angry Birds* or *Bejeweled*, have received similar treatment.[79] Despite the fact that casual games have been a huge commercial success, with some of the top games attracting millions of users, they are generally viewed as less legitimate than big-budget AAA games or retro indie titles.[80] Following the explosive growth of the casual games market, jokes about "filthy casuals"[81] have evolved into fear-mongering about the "casualization" of games in general. For example, one poster on the community forums for Bungie, the developer of first-person shooters like *Halo* and *Destiny*, argues that, "the current generation of gamers are more casual than the previous generation, and instead of adapting and embracing difficulty, they demand easy content across the board, demanding everything be accessible to them. Many of them don't want a challenge; they want everything handed to them on a silver platter."[82]
Here the desire for more accessible games is presented as if it were a character flaw, rather than a reflection of someone's circumstances. The poster never considers that these players might have other responsibilities that they have to manage, which limit how much time they can

devote to playing games. Instead it's implied that other players are simply weak, lazy, and lacking merit; no deeper explanation is required.

By demonstrating an elitist contempt for "casual gamers," more experienced players are able to elevate their own status within the community. These same players also tend to conflate cheaper technology and more accessible design with a drop in quality. This allows them to validate and universalize their own taste in games, which is shaped by decades of targeted marketing aimed primarily at middle-class men. In *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, Pierre Bourdieu notes that, "to the socially recognized hierarchy of the arts, and within each of them, of genres, schools or periods, corresponds a social hierarchy of the consumers. This predisposes tastes to function as markers of 'class.'"[83] Buying a gaming PC or console, controllers, and the latest AAA games generally costs hundreds if not thousands of dollars, a price tag that is out of reach for people who are struggling to get by, even assuming they can afford to take time off to play and develop the skills necessary to master more difficult games. In contrast, most casual games can be played on just about any smartphone or laptop (devices which many people already own), tend to be relatively cheap or free, and can be played in short bursts of time while commuting or waiting in line. While there may be wealthier players who prefer casual games, it is virtually impossible for someone with very little disposable income to meet all the requirements needed to be recognized as a "hardcore gamer," regardless of interest or personal preference. As a result, hardcore gamers are much more likely to come from a middle- or upper-class household.

Having invested so much time, energy, and money into a restricted definition of games, it's no surprise that hardcore gamers have developed a sense of ownership over the medium as a whole. For years they have enjoyed a privileged position within gaming culture as a result of their ability to spend large amounts of money on games. Now that new games are being developed that are cheaper and more accessible to the general population, this privileged position is coming under threat. One of the reasons that hardcore gamers end out clinging to the idea that games are a meritocracy is that it allows them to claim that they have "earned" their spot at the top.[84] From this point of view it's unfair for more casual players to enjoy the same level of cultural influence and status as the people who have demonstrated their "merit" by buying and playing all the most challenging games. Appeals to merit become a way of isolating out social factors and explanations for differences in taste, access, and status, instead refocusing the conversation on the skills or dedication of individual players.

This attachment to merit isn't just limited to playing games either; the same principles are often applied to making games or working in the industry. As Stephanie Fisher and Alison

Harvey point out, popular understandings of what it means to succeed in the game industry are often premised on the myth of meritocracy, which covers up or denies the effects of systemic oppression by presenting success or failure in terms of individual strengths and weaknesses.[85] The unstated assumption is that anyone can make games, and the only thing that separates the "winners" from the "losers" is dedication, work ethic, skill, or other traits that are assumed to be intrinsic to the individual. As a result, oppressed people end up being blamed for the additional challenges that they face, and are further excluded and marginalized, while those with the structural advantages required to succeed are hailed as "geniuses" and entrepreneurs. For example, Fisher and Harvey observe that participants in a program aimed at helping women develop their first game were instructed by a female organizer to develop a "thick skin" and not "take it personally" in response to stories about how misogyny and harassment were the primary barriers preventing them from entering the game industry.[86] This kind of attitude, which the authors associate with the cultural emphasis on meritocracy, places the onus on marginalized individuals. Far from countering the effects of structural oppression, meritocracy often works to reinforce it by disguising discrimination and individualizing inequality.[87]

**Academia and Meritocracy**

This belief that people can and should be divided into winners and losers based on something called merit is ingrained in us from a very young age, and reflects the competitive environment created by capitalism. Whether we're playing games with friends online, comparing grades with our classmates in school, or watching TV shows about heroes striving to "be the best there ever was,"[88] we are constantly being encouraged to pit ourselves against one another for wealth, glory, survival, or (in its most idealized version) the betterment of society as a whole.

While popular media is an important part of the picture, many of our ideas about merit are also passed on through major institutions like the education system. A short essay I wrote in 2017 entitled "Against Grading" focuses on the role that grading plays in reinforcing the myth of meritocracy.[89] This piece is based on Althusser's observation that ideology isn't simply spread through words or images—rather it's a system of meaning that is reproduced on a daily basis through our encounters with institutions.[90] By assigning grades to our students, and then determining privileges and opportunities based on those grades, teachers, school administrators, and employers play a role in shifting responsibility away from systemic oppression and onto individual students. Grades are taken to be a sign of each student's intelligence, knowledge, or effort, rather than a reflection of their position in society. If students fail, it's their own fault, and they must be punished accordingly. Those who do well, on the other

hand, deserve their success. In this way, grades help to form the basic instincts that lead to the idolization of billionaires and the justification of wealth inequality, reinforcing class differences.

Grades also play a more fundamental role in disguising the effects of authority and power. By subjecting students to our evaluation, we recognize them as "free" individuals capable of making choices and shaping their own destinies. When we say that students "earn" their grades, we position students as the active agents, with the teachers playing a comparatively passive role, limited to the assessment of something (intelligence, merit, talent, etc.) that already exists. This is despite the fact that good grades are generally awarded to students who follow instructions and produce the "right" answers, as determined by the teacher and other figures of authority. Through repeated exposure to this system, many students internalize its logic, feeling shame or guilt when they fail to meet the standards set for them by the institution. Students come to obey their teachers, and authority figures more generally, in part because teachers treat them as free subjects, encouraging them to view their actions, and the outcome of those actions, as originating from their own "free will," and not from any external coercive force. In this way, grades function very similarly to scoring systems in games, taking on the appearance of an "objective" measurement of our individual worth, skills, intelligence, talent, etc., when in reality, grades exist in order to create docile workers that are ranked according to their expected productivity.

As with the game industry, the education system's structural commitment to merit seems to be connected to the lack of diversity in many academic fields, particularly among senior faculty.[91] Merit is an exceptionally vague and pliable concept that can be used to make all sorts of arguments about who does and does not belong in the academy.[92] If women continuously prove that they can work just as hard or harder than men, then merit can be redefined to refer primarily to "natural" brilliance or "raw talent"—something which is less easily tied to measurable outcomes.[93] A study from 2015 published in *Science* suggests that there is a correlation between how a field is perceived and the representation of women within that field:

> Surveys revealed that some fields [including philosophy, physics, computer science, engineering, and math] are believed to require attributes such as brilliance and genius, whereas other fields [for example education or psychology] are believed to require more empathy or hard work. In fields where people thought that raw talent was required, academic departments had lower percentages of women.[94]

The same trend held true for Black Americans. The researchers note that both groups are stereotyped as lacking intelligence or innate talent, suggesting that the lack of representation is tied both to how these groups are perceived by others, and how they learn to view themselves

(i.e. the lack of self-confidence that comes from being constantly subjected to negative stereotypes).[95] However, viewed through the lens of merit, such findings suggest that women and Black people are simply inherently inferior to white men. In other words, merit leads us to view inequality as a property of the individual or group, rather than a reflection of how society as a whole is structured.[96]

The flexibility of merit also serves a purpose in masking the corporatization of universities, which are increasingly demanding that students and faculty demonstrate certain kinds of traits and skills, namely those that contribute to corporate profits. As Margaret Thornton notes in her article "The Mirage of Merit,"

> The ideal academic has become a 'technopreneur'—a scientific researcher with business acumen who produces academic capitalism. This new ideal academic evinces a distinctly masculinist hue in contrast to the less-than-ideal academic—the humanities or social science teacher with large classes, who is more likely to be both casualised and feminised.[97]

While this selection process clearly has political implications, framing evaluation procedures and standards in terms of merit allows administrators to present them as apolitical, neutral, and "objective." Merit, in effect, serves as a handy catch-all answer for probing questions about why certain people get selected over others ("Because they have more merit!"), and whose interests are being served ("We *all* benefit from selecting the most 'qualified' candidate.") The same principle can also be used to dismantle existing efforts to address historical inequalities, such as affirmative action policies that give priority to people from marginalized groups.[98]

In "Class Rules: The Fiction of Egalitarian Higher Education," Peter Sacks argues that the fiction that higher education is a meritocracy benefits the wealthy and educated classes; "But also, just as elites of whatever race harbor the conceit that their unlimited opportunities are well deserved, nonelites — white people in particular — tend not to believe that their disadvantages can be attributed to their social and economic class, but rather to something else, something more sinister. Scapegoats are invented."[99] In obscuring the structural causes of inequality, merit and the myth of meritocracy open the door to reactionary scapegoating, encouraging the frustrated middle classes to lay the blame at the feet of marginalized groups.

**Agency, Work, And Passion**

The concept of merit, and liberal individualism more generally, depends on constructing an artificial boundary between society and the individual. This individualistic perspective tends to downplay the importance of collective action, while disguising the effects of structural

oppression, coercion, and violence. In other words, we are led to believe that we are already free, not because we actually are in any meaningful sense, but because the systems that constrain us have been pushed out of view. Agency is, more than anything, a political concept meant to assign responsibility to something or someone while disregarding other contributing factors.[100] When we assign agency to an individual we make them "the cause" of the situation or event. While there are certain situations in which it might be important or even necessary to attribute agency to individuals—for example, when trying to hold people in positions of power accountable for their actions, or asserting that a worker deserves compensation for their work—we need to recognize that this argument can just as easily be used to assign blame to marginalized people in order to legitimize oppression.

Arguably liberalism's greatest innovation was to tie a violent and coercive system built on enclosure, deprivation, and genocide—i.e. capitalism—to the notion of individual choice, freedom, and consent. As the economist and philosopher Frederic Lordon notes,

> Were [capitalism] not at times such a repulsive spectacle, one could almost admire the audacity with which it tramples the main tenet of the very body of thought that it flaunts as its ideological reference; for it is indeed liberalism that commands, here in Kant's formulation, to "act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end and never simply as a means." Yet, in a dialectical reversal peculiar to major advances in social control, the idea that some are free to use others as means to an end, while others are free to allow themselves to be used in that manner, has been proclaimed the very essence of freedom. The superb meeting point of these two freedoms is called employment [salariat].[101]

In other words, employers treat workers as a means (labour) to an end (profit), and yet liberal ideology has managed to redefine this relationship of servitude in terms of freedom. As long as individuals "consent" to working for an employer through the act of signing a contract, exploitation is assumed to be justified. This assumption is even more pronounced when workers actually enjoy their work. Just as it's hard to imagine that we're being influenced by oppressive structural forces when we're playing a fun game, the social realities underlying our relationship to our employer are often obscured by the pleasure and satisfaction we derive from performing certain kinds of labour.

In *Willing Slaves of Capital*, Lordon explores the question of how and why workers find happiness or joy in a relationship which is, at its core, fundamentally coercive. As Ellen Meiksins Wood puts it,

> The distinctive and dominant characteristic of the capitalist market is not opportunity or choice but, on the contrary, compulsion. Material life and social reproduction in capitalism are universally mediated by the market, so that all individuals must, in one way or another, enter into market-relations in order to gain access to the means of life. This unique system of market-dependence means that the dictates of the capitalist market – its imperatives of competition, accumulation, profit maximisation, and increasing labour-productivity – regulate not only all economic transactions but social relations in general.[102]

Although workers must essentially sell themselves to their employers in order to survive, at least some segment of workers seem happy to spend most of their time doing work for someone's else's benefit. The spectacle of the happy workforce is especially evident in the creative industries, as well as other "white collar" and "pink collar" industries where people are expected to be deeply invested in the work they do, such as education, healthcare, or the nonprofit sector.[103] The game industry is a prime example; it thrives on the "passion" of its employees, who regularly sacrifice their own health and well-being for the sake of their work. The predominance of crunch time, where developers work exceptionally long hours for an extended period of time, usually in an attempt to meet a deadline set by the studio or publisher, is often explained away as something employees engage in "willingly."[104] No one is forcing them to do it, or so the story goes, so how can it be a problem? In this case the discourse of individual agency is used to justify exploitation, and erase the role that power structures and social pressure play in shaping people's actions and desires.

Academia operates according to a very similar logic. Long working hours are normalized and validated by a culture of overwork premised on our "passion" for learning, teaching, and research.[105] Even when that passion starts to fade, the responsibility and emotional attachment we feel towards our colleagues, students, and supervisors pushes us to carry on, as does the competitive environment and the pronounced tendency among academics and graduate students to brag about how busy we are. The nature of the work is such that it's possible to work at home, on the bus, even in the shower, making it difficult to establish boundaries or maintain regular working hours even for those who are aware of the problem. As job markets become more competitive, tuition rises, and universities become increasingly subject to corporate control, these long-standing issues are only becoming more pronounced, giving rise to what some have called a mental health crisis in academia, with huge numbers of students and staff reporting stress-induced anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues.[106] In this context, the call to find joy in your work and "do what you love" is at best a coping mechanism,

and at worst a way to extract more productivity and profit from workers who are already being stretched to their limits.[107]

Just as the game industry encourages consumers to identify themselves with the product being sold through the construction of the "gamer" identity (a topic I explore in more detail in the next chapter), game developers, academics, and other members of the "creative class"[108] are taught to identify with and express ourselves through our work.[109] Being productive and creating high-quality goods becomes a source of pride and the basis of our sense of self-worth, causing us to align our interests with those of our employers. The more we invest ourselves in our work, the more the distinction between employee and employer—including crucial differences in power and ownership—fades from view, and is subsumed by the totalizing identity of "the company," "the brand," or "the project." This not only maximizes productivity, but also ensures that employees are more likely to react negatively to anything that threatens the company's reputation or interferes with their work, such as unionization, strikes, public criticisms or boycotts, and other forms of collective action. While our passion and investment may be genuine, it is also highly profitable for the capitalist class, which appropriates the bulk of the wealth produced by our labour.

While all workers are subject to the capitalist cult of productivity, marginalized people are more likely to be dealing with additional sources of stress, whether due to added responsibilities at home (women, for instance, are still more likely to be doing the bulk of the domestic labour in their household),[110] financial precarity, a lack of safe and stable housing,[111] workplace harassment,[112] or other causes. Marginalized workers are also more likely to be called upon to perform additional (generally unpaid) labour in order to address problems related to diversity and inclusion in the workplace.[113] As a result, a culture of overwork is particularly hard on marginalized workers and represents yet another barrier to entry. As I pointed out in the previous chapter, the struggle against exploitation under capitalism and the struggle against other interrelated forms of oppression, including patriarchy and white supremacy, necessarily go hand in hand. If our efforts are limited only to one and not the other, we will keep encountering limits to our ability to organize and build solidarity, particularly on a mass scale. This in turn renders all of us more vulnerable to far-right and reactionary tendencies that already exist within liberal institutions and the dominant ideology.

**Confronting the Contradictions**

Even if we recognize the systemic factors behind crunch and other labour issues, it can be difficult to imagine an alternative. Many of us have been taught that capitalism is the best

possible system, and that change (insofar as change is even necessary) must be brought about by gradual reforms implemented in a top-down fashion. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, Margaret Thatcher's famous slogan "there is no alternative" has been adopted as a matter of fact in most of the imperialist core.[114] However, a growing number of people refuse to accept that we are indeed living in the best of all possible worlds, pointing to expanding inequalities, an impending environmental catastrophe, and daily experiences of abuse and violence.[115] But without an analysis rooted in history and a structural understanding of society, it is much more difficult to figure out why conditions are getting worse and what we can do to improve them.

As I've argued throughout this chapter, the dominant ideology of capitalism, which is enforced through institutional practices as well as popular media, primes us to view the world through an individualistic lens that serves the capitalist class and erodes our capacity to imagine or engage in meaningful collective action. Instead of organizing our neighborhoods and workplaces to build working-class power and challenge a system that puts profit before people, we're told to invest our hopes in individual actions such as recycling more, buying "green," practicing positive thinking and mindfulness, getting a university degree, purchasing self-help literature, and so on. However, most of these avenues are only available to the relatively small segment of the population that can afford them, and even then, the ability of these consumer-oriented measures to produce the types of changes needed to counter the large-scale, systemic effects of global capitalism, such as climate change and wealth inequality, is extremely limited. In effect we're being sold the illusion of power, in place of actual power.

Faced with the ineffectiveness of these so-called "solutions" in times of crisis, portions of the middle class turn to victim blaming and scapegoating as the logical end-point of the basic principles established by liberal ideology and meritocracy. People who have attained some degree of financial and material success are taught to believe that this is a sign of their own superiority/merit, and not the result of structural advantages, so that their sense of self-worth is tied to an unjust system that elevates them above their peers. If people are responsible for their own circumstances, then it follows that the most oppressed people within our society are inferior in some way, and that when things go wrong with the economy it's because these meritless masses are dragging the rest of us down with them. The problem isn't with the game, the problem is with the losers who can't hack it. It's the "casuals" and the "SJW snowflakes" who are ruining the game industry, not the monopolistic corporations and shareholders. It's the immigrants and Muslims that are destroying this country, not the capitalist class or a system premised on endless accumulation and dispossession. In this way the ideology of capitalism

undermines solidarity, making it harder to organize collectively to improve conditions for everyone.

Liberalism contains within it a contradiction between the surface-level rhetoric, which emphasizes freedom, equality, and democracy, and the stark inequalities produced by liberal capitalist institutions, which oppress and divide people along the lines of class, race, gender, ability, sexuality, religion, age, etc.[116] Although it might be possible for some of us to ignore this contradiction during the boom years when there is plenty to go around (at least in the imperialist core), a crisis forces many people who were previously sheltered from these harsh realities to confront the contradiction head-on and either reject liberalism's stated ideals, or reject the institutions that produce this inequality in the first place. In other words, people are increasingly forced to choose between socialism or fascism, a rejection of hierarchy and the capitalist world system, or a rejection of equality and the embrace of a "might is right" philosophy. The upper echelons of our society, have, unsurprisingly, tended to favour the latter, while brutally repressing any attempt to develop an alternative to capitalism.[117] In this sense, liberal capitalism sets the stage for the growth of fascism, both materially and ideologically.

The so-called "culture wars" in videogames and academia, which will be the main focus of the following chapter, provide some insight into how reactionary movements grow and develop during a period of crisis. Using GamerGate as an example, I suggest that more privileged groups adopt reactionary or fascist politics in large part because they derive some material and social benefit from doing so, not because the arguments of far-right figures are especially convincing. Rather, these arguments are post-facto rationalizations that allow people to act in ways that they might otherwise find morally repulsive. Fascist movements create a social context that is oriented towards scapegoating oppressed people and reinforcing existing hierarchies. While the specific targets, symbols, and strategies used by those movements may change to reflect the changing circumstances, there are also many similarities that can be found between early 20th-century fascism, and contemporary neo-fascist movements like the Alt-Right.

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# Chapter 3 - GamerGate and Neo-Fascism

As videogames have moved from a niche hobby to a global, multi-billion dollar industry, the scope of games, the types of topics they address, and the number of people working on and playing games has expanded. In the face of new market pressures and growing competition, many companies can no longer afford to cater only to a select audience of white, cis male, middle-class, abled gamers, and those that do are more likely to face criticism from the public. These changes have opened the doors, to some degree, for those who have struggled to find a space within games, but they have also sparked anger and resentment.

GamerGate, a consumer-oriented movement that emerged online in 2014 and led to a surge of harassment targeting marginalized workers, critics, and scholars in the game industry, is perhaps the most obvious manifestation of this growing resentment.[1] While GamerGate began as a harassment campaign targeting a specific female developer, the campaign was quickly recast as an issue of ethics in games journalism, attracting a much broader audience, including many who had a bone to pick with so-called "social justice warriors" (a pejorative label used to describe people advocating for socially progressive views, including feminism, identity politics, multiculturalism, etc.). Although targeted harassment directed at marginalized people in games is hardly unusual, the scale of the backlash generated by GamerGate seemed to be unprecedented, and continues to have an impact.

The term GamerGate was coined by actor Adam Baldwin, who first used the GamerGate hashtag on Twitter in reference to the 1970s Watergate scandal.[2] Under the guise of protecting free speech, GamerGaters have accused feminists of censorship, harassed those who speak out, and attacked media outlets and organizations that publish feminist critiques or criticize GamerGate.[3] As I discuss in "GamerGate and the Right,"[4] while people may identify with GamerGate for a wide variety of reasons,[5] the core of GamerGate's activities, the people it's targeted, and the impact it's had on the world of gaming and beyond, identify it as a right-wing, reactionary campaign.[6] It has also played a role in the rise of what is now called the Alt-Right, providing a testing ground for many of the strategies and tactics that have since become hallmarks of the neo-fascist movement.[7]

**(Neo-)Fascism**

We're often encouraged to think of fascism as an anomaly, as something that emerges "out of nowhere" and is impossible to explain. However framing fascism as a movement, rather

than a set of personal beliefs, allows us to examine its historical, social, and material roots.[8] Movements don't appear out of nowhere, but are a reflection of long-standing social pressures and antagonisms that have reached a tipping point. Fascism is a movement that emerges during a period of crisis and has its mass base in the middle class—a relatively privileged sector of society that benefits to some degree from imperialism, white supremacy, capitalism, or other oppressive social structures.[9] As the crisis develops and conditions decline for the vast majority of people, this base turns to violent, organized force as a way of protecting their privileged status and crushing anti-oppressive movements that challenge traditional hierarchies.[10]

While fascism is often associated with specific figures, symbols, and tactics, the surface level details of fascism are much less important than the historical role it has played in suppressing the Left and disrupting any attempt to establish an alternative to capitalism.[11] Fascism can be thought of as capitalism's last gasp, growing in the cracks left by an economic and political crisis. This crisis is a result of capitalism's own internal contradictions or tensions, including the contradiction between the interests of capitalists and workers, profit and social welfare, and expansion and sustainability. Crises are marked by declining living standards, rising inequality, and a spike in political unrest and polarization, as people begin to lose faith in the status quo and start looking for alternatives. Faced with a system that is no longer working in their favour (or at least not to the same extent), fascists advocate a return to a mythologized past, while scapegoating leftists and marginalized groups. Today's neo-fascists may look and sound different than the fascists of the past, but they maintain the same commitment to reinforcing systems of oppression and destroying the Left.[12]

**The Rise of the Alt-Right**

Because of the stigma associated with fascism in the wake of World War II and the horrors of the Holocaust, neo-fascists are often reluctant to be identified as such. The Alt-Right, in particular, has made significant efforts to distance themselves from the neo-Nazi skinheads of the 80s and 90s, presenting themselves as a more intelligent, respectable, "cleaned-up" version of white supremacy.[13] Operating mainly online, the Alt-Right is a loose collection of different far-right factions which include, but are not limited to:

- Men's Rights Activists (MRAs), pick-up artists (PUAs), incels, and other elements of the anti-feminist "manosphere" that seek to reassert men's dominance over women
- The Silicon Valley-based Dark Enlightenment (also known as neoreactionaries or nRXers), who fetishize technology and advocate for a return to monarchy or other forms of authoritarian rule

- Geek culture “consumer revolts” like GamerGate, Sad Puppies, and ComicsGate
- Islamophobic New Atheists, who use criticisms of organized religion as a cover for anti-Muslim bigotry
- Paleoconservatives that advocate a return to “traditional values,” are staunchly anti-immigrant and isolationist, and position themselves in opposition to the neoconservative establishment
- The European New Right, which adopts the language of leftism to serve fascist ends (for example, arguing that universal human rights and open borders stifle “cultural diversity”)
- White nationalists and neo-Nazis who want to establish an all-white ethnostate through ethnic cleansing

Uniting these online subcultures and fringe political movements is a shared disgust for social justice warriors and left-wing identity politics, along with a network of websites such as 4chan, The Right Stuff, Stormfront, and Breitbart, online media channels and podcasts like Rebel Media and This Hour has 88 Minutes, and far-right think tanks such as the National Policy Institute.[14]

As Josephine Armistead notes, one of the key ideological underpinnings of the Alt-Right is American right-libertarianism, particularly the variation popularized by Silicon Valley technocrats, which Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron describe in an influential article entitled “The Californian Ideology.”[15] Unlike left-wing libertarianism, which is associated with anarchism and anarcho-communism, and generally advocates for the overthrow of capitalism and the abolition of the capitalist state,[16] right-wing libertarianism is largely pro-capitalist and anti-egalitarian, often drawing inspiration from classical liberalism. Murray Rothbard, an American economist and political theorist who played a significant role in popularizing modern right-libertarianism, argues that “while classical liberal thought began in England, it was to reach its most consistent and radical development—and its greatest living embodiment—in America.”[17] His book, *For a New Liberty: The Libertarian Manifesto*, rails against taxation and blames “Big Government” and conservative statism for the failures of capitalism. In contrast to more moderate libertarians and neoliberals, who generally argue for a “minimal state” that is restricted to the functions required to enforce private property rights, Rothbard insists that every service provided by the state “could be supplied far more efficiently and far more morally by private and cooperative enterprise.”[18] He includes in this the police and the judiciary, which he argues should be replaced by private protection agencies and private courts. He also opposes the idea of redistributing wealth to create a more equitable society, on the grounds that this would infringe on the natural rights of individuals.

For Rothbard there is no society, only individuals, and so it makes no sense to speak of the “public good.” If the “undeserving poor” (a term he borrows from the classical liberal political theorist, Herbert Spencer)[19] can’t afford to pay for basic necessities, or police protection, then it is their own responsibility, and they should be left to die. The rich, on the other hand, are the heroes of Rothbard’s libertarian utopia, ”for it is the rich who provide a proportionately greater amount of saving, investment capital, entrepreneurial foresight, and financing of technological innovation that has brought the United States to by far the highest standard of living—for the mass of people—of any country in history.”[20] These statements lay bare the extent to which his ideas are simply a logical extension of capitalism’s founding ideology, one that eliminates all forms of collective responsibility and ends in the genocide of the “undeserving poor.” In this sense right-libertarianism bears many similarities to the neoliberal trumpeting of “individual responsibility.”

The shared intellectual foundations of libertarianism and neoliberalism might come as a surprise given that the Alt-Right often positions itself in opposition to neoliberalism. But as Quinn Slobodian points out, “an important current of the Alt Right was born within and not against the neoliberal movement. By following how, why, and when dissident neoliberals became key thinkers and coordinators of the Far Right, we can see right-populist thought as not so much a backlash against neoliberalism but the realization of possibilities latent within it.”[21] While neoliberalism has been thoroughly incorporated into both private and state institutions, libertarian’s like Rothbard took a slightly different approach, recuperating elements of the leftist counterculture that emerged in the 60s, and adopting the language of rebellion in an effort to lure radicals away from New Left social movements and towards right-wing libertarianism—a strategy that has also been employed by the Alt-Right and other far-right movements.[22]

The term “Alt-Right” was popularized by Richard Spencer, a white nationalist and leader of the National Policy Institute, and has been widely adopted in an effort to disguise the movement’s connections to more traditional forms of fascism and white supremacy, and render their ideas more palatable to the mainstream.[23] The rebranding efforts of the Alt-Right have coincided with a shift to new recruiting grounds, away from punk shows and towards gaming forums and university campuses.[24] There are a number of potential reasons why both universities and the videogame industry have proven to be prime recruiting sites for the Alt-Right. First, there is a large concentration of the very people who form their mass base: i.e. middle class, straight, white, cis men. This group is more inclined to see the advance of left-wing identity politics as a threat to their status, while also having ready access to disposable income and free time, making them useful foot soldiers for a growing neo-fascist movement.

Second, there are aspects of the dominant cultures that surround games and academia that play into the ideology of fascism, namely meritocracy, which leads those with more privilege to assume that they are inherently superior to those with less.[25] Third, with the rise of university enrolment and the expansion of the game industry, both games and academia play an increasingly important role within popular culture. As Stuart Hall points out in “Notes on Deconstructing ‘the Popular,’” “Popular culture is one of the sites where this struggle for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged: it is also the stake to be won or lost in that struggle.”[26]

The culture neo-fascism seeks to advance is the culture of the powerful, but with a new, edgy, “rebellious” skin. Given that a significant portion of the funding Alt-Right figures receive seems to come from wealthy donors, it’s unlikely that their anti-elitism is anything more than a marketing strategy.[27] As Michael Parenti puts it,

> Fascism’s national chauvinism, racism, sexism, and patriarchal values...served a conservative class interest. Fascist doctrine, especially the Nazi variety, makes an explicit commitment to racial supremacy. Human attributes, including class status, are said to be inherited through blood; one’s position in the social structure is taken as a measure of one’s innate nature. Genetics and biology are marshalled to justify the existing class structure, not unlike what academic racists today are doing with their ‘bell curve’ theories and warmed-over eugenics claptrap.[28]

Fascists appear to be rebellious only because they break with standard, liberal norms, making explicit arguments that, within liberalism, are generally left implicit.

**Academia and Cultural Marxism**

One of the main points of agreement between liberal elites and the Alt-Right is the demonization of the radical Left. This has been especially obvious during the most recent round of the “campus culture wars.”[29] In the last several years there have been a number of prominent cases[30] where university administrators have either failed to respond to or tacitly supported far-right attacks on left-leaning professors and students, such as Masuma Khan, a Dalhousie student union representative who was threatened with disciplinary action by her university for making a Facebook post calling out white fragility.[31] Although Dalhousie later withdrew the action in response to a public outcry, Khan noted that, “It doesn't stop these messages from pouring in. It doesn't stop the conversations that we're having. It doesn't stop the fact that systemic racism happens on our campus, and it doesn't stop that the university still isn't dealing with that."[32] As Parenti points out, academia can and often has served to advance capitalism,

patriarchy and white supremacy, providing justifications for racist and sexist social practices and policies while pretending to operate as an independent or “neutral” third party distinct from both the state and private enterprise.[33] Despite the presence of token leftists like Noam Chomsky and Angela Davis, university professors remain disproportionately white, cis, male, and middle- or upper-class, while the institutions themselves are increasingly governed by corporate interests.[34]

The strategic importance of universities as a site of authority and “expertise” has resulted in a growing alliance between neo-fascists, and centrist and conservative intellectuals like Jordan Peterson, Steven Pinker, Sam Harris, and Christina Hoff Sommers, who have seen their fame and fortunes grow as a result of their popularity within the Alt-Right. The Alt-Right, meanwhile, gains another entry point into the mainstream, as these individuals each, in their own way, advance arguments that lend support to more overtly white supremacist or patriarchal views, often by cherry-picking data and applying conclusions drawn from the natural sciences to complex social phenomena.[35]

Many of these figures rely on the popular belief that science is a purely rational, objective pursuit that operates completely separately from the realm of politics, money, or power. Backed by the authority of academic institutions, they insist that history and context are irrelevant to a clear-minded discussion of the “facts,” separating society from science, and from the people who perform and interpret scientific experiments. This fetishized understanding of science is coupled with a general hostility towards the humanities and campus activism, which conveniently targets many of the people who might criticize or oppose supposedly “rational,” “objective” arguments about society and our place within it.[36] We are encouraged to trust in the power of science and the wisdom of the experts, who will supposedly solve all of society's ills, while regarding anyone who pushes for bottom-up change with suspicion.[37] This message not only works to reinforce the power of academic institutions, and the authority of the “experts”, but is also soothing to a segment of the middle class that might otherwise feel guilty about their privilege and their lack of involvement in political organizing in the face of growing inequality. It’s no surprise then that Harris, Peterson, and others have found such a large and receptive audience, particularly among young men.

Although the public figures at the head of the Alt-Right generally have access to large platforms, institutional power, and immense amounts of money, they tend to present themselves as a small embattled minority struggling for truth and justice against a much more powerful and aggressive foe. In a bid to win public sympathy and cement their image as the true underdogs, they have worked to revive the myth of cultural Marxism, an anti-Semitic conspiracy theory that

claims that academic and cultural institutions have been infiltrated by a powerful group of Jewish Marxists, who are trying to undermine and destroy Western civilization.[38] The conspiracy theory made its most infamous appearance in the manifesto of fascist serial killer Anders Breivik, who murdered 77 people in Norway, and has its origins in Nazi Germany, where the term "cultural Bolshevism" was used to attack and scapegoat leftists.[39] The term has recently been updated and repopularized by Jordan Peterson, who replaces "cultural Marxists" with "postmodern neo-Marxists," Jews with Muslims, and the Frankfurt school with women's studies.[40] Although the details have been revised to better reflect the current political situation, the takeaway for many of his followers is the same: leftist politics—and the marginalized people who advocate for it—represent a threat to their future, and can be blamed for most if not all of society's ills.

This message has been repeated and echoed countless times, appearing everywhere from the anonymous imageboards of 4chan, to the pages of *The Atlantic* and *The New York Times*. Using a wide range of platforms, liberal pundits and academics have worked alongside conservatives and neo-fascists to popularize the idea that safer spaces, trigger warnings, "callout culture," and political correctness present serious threats to "free speech."[41] This narrative played a particularly important role in GamerGate, helping to expand their audience well beyond the small handful of people who were personally committed to harassing feminists like Anita Sarkeesian and Zoë Quinn, while providing a veneer of legitimacy to these attacks.

**The Gamer Identity**

In mainstream gaming communities the call to "keep your politics out of my games"—which assumes that games are somehow separate from politics and power—goes hand in hand with the idea that marginalized critics and developers are "outsiders" that have infiltrated games for their own nefarious ends.[42] This allows GamerGaters to portray themselves as the indigenous defenders of games, the "true" fans, and the last line of defence against a mass of dangerous foreigners. For example, the description for the first GamerGate Life comic, which was created by supporter kukuruyo and features the GamerGate mascot Vivian and her cousin Lilliam Woods (a stand in for feminists opposed to GamerGate), notes that the movement started as a response to "unethical behavior on [sic] games journalism and the invasion of the so called Social justice warriors."[43]

The framing of SJWs as invaders who are bent on destroying videogames bears a strong resemblance to the claims made by white nationalists and anti-feminists in the Alt-Right, who argue that the "white race" and "Western civilization" are being threatened by immigrants

(particularly Muslim immigrants), Jews, and social justice warriors.[44] In both cases marginalized people are framed as outsiders who are invading or infiltrating a space that does not belong to them. This framing is designed to foster a sense of entitlement in the target audience, presenting the people in a more dominant position as aggrieved victims, while providing a sense of urgency and moral justification for violent backlash. Meanwhile the history and context behind the conflict is erased, as is the constructed nature of whiteness and the gamer identity.

Underneath the manufactured panic about feminism and censorship are the effects of capitalist ideology. It's no coincidence that many GamerGaters refer to the movement as a "consumer revolt."[45] Through our daily interactions with the market, we're taught to view ourselves primarily as consumers, shaping our identities around the media and other commodities we consume.[46] This has the effect of limiting our political horizons by cultivating the idea that the only legitimate way for us to express ourselves politically is through consumer choice,[47] while also exploiting our desire for recognition and community in order to increase consumption.[48] As is the case in most fandoms, gamers are encouraged to compete with one another in order to claim the title of a hardcore fan, and gain respect and admiration from their peers. Winning this competition requires purchasing and playing all the latest games and hardware, representing a significant investment of both time and money. In return, fans are taught to expect that the industry will cater to them and their interests by providing an entertaining power fantasy.[49]

These fantasies are often designed to reaffirm the player's (presumed) masculinity. The player characters in mainstream titles are often buff, aggressive men who spend most of their time fighting, building their strength, and generally dominating over others, including female characters, who have traditionally been assigned a passive role as either victims or rewards.[50] This setup provides an additional incentive for male gamers to buy more games and hardware, and further invest themselves in games culture. In order to prove that they're a "real man" they must not only play a lot of games, but play them well. In this sense, game playing functions in a similar way to sports: as a signifier of masculinity that is deeply tied to consumption.[51]

This aspect of mainstream games culture also aligns well with certain branches of the Alt-Right, particularly the pick-up artist or PUA community and the broader "manosphere," which largely targets heterosexual men who are insecure about their masculinity and concerned about threats to the cultural, sexual, and economic dominance of cis white men.[52] The PUA community addresses these insecurities by promoting extremely misogynistic views (often interwoven with homophobia, transphobia, racism, and Islamophobia) and treating heterosexual sex and dating as a competitive game, where the end goal is for men to demonstrate their skills

and virility to one another by manipulating as many women as possible into having sex with them.[53] As Anita Sarkeesian points out in her video analysis of the "damsel in distress" trope, "In the game of patriarchy, women are not the opposing team. They are the ball."[54]

For those who have already established themselves as winners, anything that challenges the status quo is likely to be perceived as a threat to their social status and self-image. In the case of hardcore gamers, this includes a shift towards new target demographics, as well as political critiques of their medium of choice and the culture that surrounds it. Take for example the outraged response to Sarkeesian's Tropes vs. Women video series, which analyzes sexist tropes in videogames.[55] Although her criticism was aimed at the industry as a whole, for at least some self-identified gamers, there is no difference between "videogames are sexist" and "you are sexist," because within the dominant ideology, everything is reduced to the level of the individual and our agency as consumers. You are what you consume. In this context, structural critiques of games culture, or the society that produces it, can only be understood as personal attacks on an individual's moral character, and the more invested gamers are in the medium, the stronger the defensive reaction is likely to be. This isn't helped by the fact that games have long been presented as a niche hobby that only certain kinds of people are into,[56] a representation that may make some gamers more hostile to criticism or to people they perceive as outsiders.[57] When your very sense of self is premised on the exclusion of others, then inclusion becomes an existential threat.[58]

These aspects of the gamer identity made it a useful tool in the hands of white nationalists and right-wing opportunists who were seeking new ways to bolster their careers, expand their audience, and advance a far-right political agenda. Some prominent examples include Steve Bannon, former chief strategist for the Trump campaign and the co-founder of Breitbart News, which Bannon has described as a "platform for the alt-right";[59] Roosh V (Daryush Valizadeh),[60] an infamous pick-up artist whose website, *Return of Kings*, has regularly featured articles expressing misogynistic, racist, and Islamophobic views;[61] Vox Day (Theodore Beale), a white supremacist game designer and science fiction writer;[62] Mike Cernovich, a men's rights activist who regularly appears on "The Alex Jones Show" hosted by the far-right conspiracy website *InfoWars*; and Milo Yiannopolous, a conservative media personality and former Breitbart writer who worked closely with Steve Bannon.[63]

While these figures all expressed open support for GamerGate and contributed to shaping the discussion within and around the movement, much of the language used by GamerGaters was already well-established on Internet forums and imageboards like 4chan, 8chan, the r/gaming subreddit, and other anonymous or pseudonymous online communities that

were heavily populated by self-identified gamers. These communities have developed their own subcultures based on a constantly shifting morass of memes, gaming references, the “ironic” use of slurs, and other social conventions that can be used to distinguish between those who are part of the in-group, and those who are not.[64] Because much of this culture is deliberately designed to be offensive to “normies” (i.e. people with mainstream political views and tastes), marginalized people who aren’t willing to tolerate the “ironic” racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, fatphobia, and ableism that typify sites like 4chan and as well as many online gaming communities are, de facto, excluded. As a result, these imageboards and forums have become prime targets for fascist recruiters, and a useful base from which to organize “operations” against progressive gaming websites, social justice warriors, and other enemies of GamerGate and the Alt-Right.[65]

The cross-pollination between gaming communities and the far right through these websites helped to give rise to the Alt-Right’s distinctive lexicon, which combines gaming terms and references like kek and NPC (non-player character), with internet slang and white nationalist dog-whistles like cuck (usually used to refer to liberals, mainstream conservatives, or anyone not part of the Alt-Right), 1488 (a reference to Hitler and a white supremacist saying), free helicopter rides (a reference to a form of execution used against leftists under Augusto Pinochet’s fascist regime) and deus vult (referring to the medieval crusades against Muslims). The use of coded language ensures that only people who invest a substantial amount of time in these groups can tell what is actually being said under all the layers of irony, while at the same time granting the Alt-Right an air of mystery that helps attract media attention.[66]

**It’s About Ethics in Games Journalism**

The defensive attitude that helped drive GamerGate reflects the way that capitalism manipulates our sense of self and our personal interests in order to suppress critique and protect corporate profits. Because the gamer identity is a consumer identity, created by capitalism, it’s impossible for gamers to turn against capitalism without also going through the painful process of deconstructing their own identity. At the same time, however, the contradictions of capitalism produce a whole array of problems, including the “corruption” of the gaming press by commercial interests, as well as the relentless push to expand consumer markets and sell more games, regardless of the human cost. This tension between the desire to address these issues, and the desire to avoid any line of thinking that questions the foundations of the capitalist economy, is reflected in GamerGate’s approach to “ethics in games journalism,” which became the movement’s rallying cry.

In the years leading up to GamerGate, there was a growing concern about issues like product placement and the tendency of the games enthusiast press to disguise paid advertisements as independent reviews.[67] Outlets that toed the line were provided with free copies of games, lucrative advertising deals, and other perks, while journalists and outlets that did not cooperate or give sufficiently positive reviews were fired and/or blacklisted by major companies. Two flashpoints which are often referenced within GamerGate include the firing of Jeff Gerstman from Gamespot in 2007 over a low score he gave to a game, and Doritosgate, which refers to a video interview with games journalist Geoff Keighley featuring prominent product placements for Halo, Doritos, and Mountain Dew.[68] Both incidents were widely seen as indications that games journalists were being bribed or blackmailed into performing PR for publishers, while posing as independent sources, and that games journalism as a whole was corrupt.

Although these problems are the product of a capitalist economy that prioritizes profit over other concerns, GamerGaters have tended to frame the issue as an individual or cultural problem. In the media and discussions surrounding GamerGate, personal relationships, feminism, and political correctness often replace corporate power and monopolies as the perceived source of "corruption" in the game industry.[69] This is particularly obvious in the case of the harassment directed at game developer Zoë Quinn, who was accused of sleeping with a games journalist in exchange for positive coverage of her game *Depression Quest*. Quinn and others like her function as a handy stand-in for both the predatory, exploitative nature of an industry that runs on money, *and* repressed concerns over the growing visibility and cultural influence of marginalized people in games. By making attacks on "social justice warriors" synonymous with a high-minded "crusade" for ethics and free speech, GamerGate works to funnel resentment away from large corporations like EA and Microsoft, and towards feminists and progressives.[70] In this respect, GamerGate plays the same role as other fascist and reactionary movements.

**"We're All Liberals Here"**

The political leanings of GamerGate are a highly contested issue, in part because, like the Alt-Right in general, GamerGate is more a loose network or movement composed of different factions than a clearly defined group. The fact that "anyone" can use the GamerGate hashtag is often deployed by the more moderate supporters of GamerGate to distance themselves from the neo-Nazis and white supremacists who show support for the movement, a tactic that has also been used to legitimize more moderate branches of the Alt-Right, sometimes

referred to as the “Alt-Lite.” People who are sympathetic to GamerGate have written articles attempting to prove that GamerGate is not a right-wing movement, pointing to surveys and polls indicating that most GamerGate supporters self-identify as left-leaning libertarians,[71] or vote for liberal parties and politicians.[72] This counter-argument is based on a narrow notion of politics that restricts the political terrain to voting and the self-reported political views of individuals, rather than critically examining the overall impact or structural foundations of the movement. Beyond this, opposing liberals and libertarians to conservatives and “authoritarians” ignores the complex structural, historical, and ideological connections between certain forms of libertarianism, conservatism, liberalism, and fascism, and how each of them plays a role in supporting the interests of the ruling capitalist class.[73]

It’s telling that the chart most frequently used to argue against the idea that GamerGate is right-wing includes two axes: a horizontal Left-Right axis, and a vertical Libertarian-Authoritarian axis.[74] This particular chart is a variation on the “Nolan chart” invented and popularized by the American libertarian David Nolan, and is implicitly designed to support a libertarian perspective.[75] The Nolan chart reframes politics in terms of “personal freedom” versus “economic freedom,” arguing that libertarians favour both personal and economic freedom, while liberals aim to restrict economic freedom and conservatives aim to restrict personal freedom. The political quiz that usually accompanies the chart,[76] which was also designed by libertarians, implicitly associates “economic freedom” with laissez-faire economics, obscuring the impact that “free market” policies have had on the freedoms of working-class people. The use of the catch-all term “authoritarianism” also provides a handy way to smear opponents of libertarianism, while presenting it as a third way ideology that transcends the Left-Right dichotomy.

As Brad Glasgow, a journalist who is sympathetic to the movement, argues, “Many of Gamergate’s detractors are anti-capitalist, and Gamergate, which adores gaming culture and the consumption of gaming products, is in direct conflict with such philosophy.”[77] This statement, which I think provides an accurate summary of GamerGate’s overall political leanings, doesn’t necessarily contradict the argument that GamerGaters are mostly liberals or libertarians, since both political identities are compatible with efforts to maintain capitalist social relations. However, it doesn’t follow from this that GamerGate is left-wing, a point that (perhaps intentionally) obscures the underlying motivations and material interests that gave rise to the movement, the impact it’s had, as well as what is at stake for those involved.

**#NotYourShield**

A crucial component of GamerGate that is often overlooked is the NotYourShield Twitter hashtag. NotYourShield encouraged members of marginalized groups to vocally demonstrate their support for GamerGate through tweets, videos, and selfies. Like the slogan "it's about ethics in games journalism," the hashtag was promoted in response to criticisms of the movement, in particular the accusation that GamerGate was a hate group consisting entirely of straight white cis men.[78] Although the name NotYourShield was initially based on the belief that leftists were using marginalized people as "shields" to deflect criticism, the hashtag was often deployed by GamerGaters for exactly that purpose. By highlighting the diversity of gamers, NotYourShield was used to argue that the problems feminists were trying to highlight either didn't exist in the first place, or had already been solved. It also allowed GamerGaters to argue that "anti-GamerGaters" who criticized the movement or attacked its supporters online were the "real" racists/sexists/homophobes.[79] This tactic is similar to the one used against anti-fascists, who are often accused of being the "real fascists" in an attempt to muddy the waters and blur the distinction between Left and Right.[80]

While it's clear that NotYourShield was useful to straight white cis men, this doesn't mean that the marginalized people who participated were simply "tricked" into supporting someone else's agenda. Women and minorities who take part in reactionary movements often benefit directly from their involvement. In exchange for helping to prop up existing power structures, token figures like Milo Yiannopoulos or Christina Hoff Sommers are granted social recognition, money, influence, and other rewards. However, these short-term incentives on their own may not be enough to explain NotYourShield's popularity, or why marginalized people continue to join reactionary movements. For that, we need to turn to a broader analysis of the psychic effects of systems of oppression.

In his book, *Black Skins, White Masks,* Fanon remarks that black men, and colonized people more generally, often suffer from an inferiority complex that is rooted in colonialism and white supremacy: "If he is overcome to such a degree by a desire to be white, it's because he lives in a society that makes his inferiority complex possible, in a society that proclaims the superiority of one race over another."[81] Fanon argues that this desire to join the ranks of the dominant group often exists on an unconscious level. Colonized people may look down on members of their own race, or adopt behaviours and tastes associated with whiteness in order to win approval from whites, all without being aware of what they're doing or why.[82] This same pattern often plays out for other forms of marginalization as well. For example, women are often taught to police one another's appearance or engage in slut shaming in order to distance ourselves from women who have supposedly failed to live up to patriarchy's standards. But in

our attempts to prove that we're "one of the good ones," we end up reproducing the social structures that give rise to our insecurities in the first place.

A number of the women who were the most actively involved in GamerGate and NotYourShield, such as Lizzy Finegan (aka Lizzyf620) and June Nicole Lapine (Shoe0nHead),[83] adopt a "cool girl" persona[84] and regularly use ironic humour and heavy sarcasm to distinguish themselves from SJWs and their over-eager criticisms of the game industry. Irony has proven to be a popular tool for much of the Alt-Right.[85] It's a convenient way for speakers to maintain plausible deniability and present themselves as more detached, and therefore more "logical" and cool-headed, than their ideological opponents. But it is also a defensive strategy used to mask deeper insecurities and fears of humiliation and rejection.[86] Earnestness and sincerity involve making yourself vulnerable to others—they demonstrate commitment and attachment, which is something that can be used to hurt you. In some cases, irony may be less a conscious political weapon, than an unconscious attempt to avoid vulnerability.

Ironic distance is just one part of a broader strategy of disavowal used to divide the feminist movement into "good feminists," like Christina Hoff Sommers and the women of GamerGate, who generally present themselves as less threatening and hostile to men, and "bad feminists," like Anita Sarkeesian or Zoë Quinn. This distinction comes up many times in "The Women Of #GamerGate" stream, which is part of a series of moderated discussions involving marginalized supporters of GamerGate.[87] During the stream the male moderator encourages the women to distance themselves from "SJWs" by belittling or dismissing them, arguing against the "politicization" of games, insisting that women are not unfairly targeted, harassed, or misrepresented in gaming communities (or that the problems that do exist are relatively minor and do not warrant a public outcry), while at the same time emphasizing the fact that they themselves are victims of harassment by the Left. Although some participants do self-identify as feminists, they're quick to assert that they are the "right" type of feminists who want to work with men, not against them. As women themselves, they are ideally placed to downplay systemic violence and denounce "extremists" who take things "too far."

Overall this has the effect of demobilizing people and discouraging mass, militant organizing, which is precisely the point of what Black scholars and activists have dubbed the "politics of respectability."[88] Respectability politics pushes marginalized people to police their own communities and make themselves more compatible with dominant values and norms. While this provides some temporary comfort and relief to those who are willing to play the game, ultimately it creates a vicious cycle in which more and more people must be thrown under the bus to appease a political "center" that is moving farther and farther to the right. This ensures

that any form of resistance to dominant structures, no matter how moderate or non-threatening, will eventually be denounced and attacked as too "extreme."

It's worth noting that many of the arguments used by participants in NotYourShield originally come from the Left. For example, when GamerGaters argue that "asserting that something is offensive to all women deprives individual women of their voices," they take for granted that it is morally wrong to silence women or treat them as a monolith.[89] In fact the very existence of NotYourShield is premised on the notion that diversity is a good thing. However, treating these statements as purely moral arguments detached from a broader analysis means that they can easily be decontextualized and recuperated to serve conservative interests.[90] While it's true that monolithic understandings of "women" are often used to reproduce patriarchy and silence women (for e.g. when people insist that all women are "natural caregivers"), the call to treat women as pure individuals that share nothing in common also makes it impossible to address structural issues or organize on a collective basis. Some level of generalization is necessary because without it there is no way to identify and address broad patterns in the way society is organized. The problem is not the generalization itself, but the way those generalizations are used, who benefits from them, and how. In order to make that distinction however, we need to go beyond the level of the individual and develop a critical understanding of capitalism and systemic oppression—something GamerGate actively pushes against.

NotYourShield is unlikely to improve the situation for marginalized people in games. If anything, it has made it harder to deal with issues like harassment and discrimination. This strategy of pitting marginalized people against one another is not unique to NotYourShield, but goes back to the early days of capitalist expansion and colonial rule. As Fanon recounts, "Every time there was a rebellion [in the colonies], the military authorities sent only the colored soldiers to the front line. It is the 'peoples of color' who annihilated the attempts at liberation by other 'peoples of color,' proof that there were no grounds for universalizing the process."[91] NotYourShield acts as living testimony that not all marginalized people are on board with proactive efforts to curb harassment or promote more diversity in the industry, undermining the legitimacy of these movements and discouraging broader participation.

**Identity politics and liberal individualism**

Although this chapter is largely focused on GamerGate and the Alt-Right, the same social structures that give rise to reactionary movements also have an impact on the Left, and this needs to be taken into account as well. GamerGate and NotYourShield would not have had the same appeal if they hadn't been gesturing, at least to some extent, towards real

weaknesses within contemporary feminism and left-wing politics more generally. While GamerGate may have misidentified the source of the problems, and greatly exaggerated their significance or scope, this should not be taken as an excuse to dodge internal critique or avoid talking about how identity politics is recuperated and reshaped by capitalism and liberal ideology.

Liberal identity politics prioritizes the individual and reduces structural issues like sexism and racism to an individual and moral problem. In the context of late capitalism, where individuals are encouraged to manage their "personal brands," this can often lead to people promoting values like diversity and equality in public, while doing little or nothing to challenge the institutions that reproduce structural oppression. Anti-racism, feminism, and so on are treated as branding opportunities, rather than social movements based on solidarity, collective organizing, and accountability. Hillary Clinton's cynical use of feminist talking points and terms like intersectionality during her 2016 US presidential campaign is a particularly stark example, given her political track record.[92] As a result of the pressure to get ahead and maintain a positive public image, people who claim to be supporting marginalized groups may instead participate in their erasure, react defensively to criticism, or use marginalized people in tokenistic ways to promote their own public persona.

Ultimately the root of the problem lies in the competitive structures of capitalism, which force us to fight one another for social clout in the hopes of eventually translating our reputation into money or jobs. Opportunism is constantly incentivized, and because of this there are countless examples of individuals privileging their own ego or career over the collective good. While there are ways to introduce accountability measures that prevent opportunism, or at least make it more difficult, GamerGate and other reactionary movements are less interested in improving the Left, than they are with destroying their credibility and pushing people to abandon anti-oppressive movements altogether.

**Recruiting from the Fence**

GamerGate's use of "ethics in games journalism" helped to cement a strategy that has become integral to the rise of the Alt-Right. This strategy involves identifying a broad principle that most liberals will agree with, such as anti-corruption, diversity, or "free speech," and recontextualizing that issue to direct negative attention away from the centres of power, and towards a marginalized (but relatively visible) group that can serve as a convenient scapegoat, such as feminists, Muslims, transgender rights activists, or immigrants. In the wake of GamerGate, it's become increasingly clear that abstract arguments about ethics, free speech,

and censorship that do not address capitalism or structural oppression generally serve to protect fascists who are trying to normalize oppressive language and far-right talking points.

For instance, take the growing pool of “free speech fundamentalists” who insist that fascists have a right to express their ideas, regardless of the context or long-term consequences.[93] In these arguments speech is disconnected from power and history and treated as an end in and of itself, rather than as a means to an end. As I point out in “The Limits of Free Speech,”

> In theory, free speech is a right available to everyone; in reality, it’s a function of power. The more power you have, the more freely you’re able to speak, the larger your platform, and the less likely you are to be silenced by the threat of violence. Because of widespread inequality and differences in power, some speech also prevents other speech. When a cop tells you “stop talking or I’ll have you arrested,” chances are you’re going to shut up.[94]

Speech, when backed up by power, often has material consequences. Anyone who has ever been pronounced guilty by a judge, married by a priest, or fired by their boss should know this. As long as the person in question has the power of an institution behind them, all it takes is a few words to radically alter someone’s life. This is all the more true when those words are repeated over and over again, or magnified through large platforms. Debates around free speech on college campuses often attempt to frame students as sheltered children who are afraid of new or unorthodox ideas.[95] However the ideas that students seem to be protesting against—such as the idea that accusations of sexual misconduct are driven by paranoia, that modern feminism is hurting women rather than empowering them, or that progressive movements have gone “too far”—are in fact quite old, and deeply embedded in our social structures and institutions. It’s their tired familiarity, not their novelty, that makes them threatening.

The simplistic and one-sided view of free speech advocated for by free speech fundamentalists has become a dangerous tool in the hands of a growing neo-fascist movement, which has managed to significantly expand their platform and organizing efforts by attracting conservative, centrist, and liberal allies. Using online platforms like YouTube, Twitter, Reddit, 4chan, and 8chan as their base, the Alt-Right has developed a pipeline that gradually funnels its audience from more moderate, liberal-friendly content, towards more overtly fascist and white supremacist content and organizations.[96] This pipeline, however, is only effective because so many of the base assumptions underpinning far-right movements (namely that some groups of

people are inherently superior to others and therefore more deserving of wealth and power) are already present in the existing social structure and its dominant ideology.

**Capitalist crisis**

While it's important to take note of these strategies and tactics, on their own they can't really explain why fascism has re-entered the mainstream *now,* and not say, 20 or 30 years ago. As Josephine Armistead notes in "The Silicon Ideology Revisited,"[97] the rise of fascist movements is closely tied to the motion of capital. As capitalism enters a stage of prolonged crisis, job security has decreased, wages have gone down or stagnated, and social support structures have been dismantled, even in relatively wealthy countries. The result is that many middle-class people who were promised a comfortable life now face the prospect of being pushed into the ranks of the global working poor, creating both fear and resentment. While crisis typically leads to polarization and opens up opportunities for both the Left and the Right, the repression of left-wing grassroots movements such as Idle No More, Black Lives Matter, Standing Rock, and Occupy Wall Street has meant that many people who are fed up with the status quo and seeking change are left with no alternative to fascism. Faced with a choice between a failing neoliberal political establishment typified by Hillary Clinton and Justin Trudeau, and reactionary leaders like Donald Trump who promise a return to the "glory days," the middle class is increasingly siding with the latter.

Although many liberals are publicly opposed to Donald Trump and other far-right figures, they are just as if not more strongly opposed to the anti-fascists that are actively trying to stop fascist groups from gaining power.[98] This tacit support for the fascist cause is driven not so much by ignorance, as material interests. Some of the major factors that are contributing to the growth of fascism, including the imperialist wars in the Middle East, the industrial practices driving climate change, and the implementation of austerity policies, have been carried out by liberal capitalist institutions such the police, the military, the market, the press, and the universities. Upper- and middle-class liberals who are embedded in these institutions have contributed, directly or indirectly, to the current state of affairs, and are loathe to support groups that might try to hold them accountable or radically alter the structural foundations of our society. This is why many are so eager to seize onto vague claims about the importance of "protecting" fascists' free speech, while disregarding or demonizing the marginalized people who fight back.

**Fighting Back**

As I write in “Fighting Fascism,” while it is important to confront fascists and prevent them from gaining power, people who would oppose fascism also need to address the conditions that produce fascist movements in the first place—including patriarchy, capitalism, and imperialism—and provide a viable alternative.[99] A feminist, anti-racist, and anti-capitalist movement that is well-organized and able to make real, material gains for its members will be far more effective in preventing fascism from growing than a political strategy that is limited only to “education” or awareness-raising. Social change only happens when enough people act collectively to apply pressure in the same direction. Building the networks and organizations capable of making that collective action both possible and sustainable on a global level is a major challenge, and we’ll need every tool at our disposal if we’re going to succeed.

In *Speaking Truth to Power: Essays on Race, Resistance and Radicalism*, Manning Marable argues that,

> As socialists, we must be critical of the government and its policies, opposing such American adventures as the invasion of Iraq, protesting cutbacks in education, health care, and other areas of human need. But the politics of criticism is an act of negation. We cannot construct a political culture of radical democracy simply by rejecting the system. We cannot win by saying what we are against. We must affirm what we are for.[100]

It’s not enough to be anti-GamerGate, anti-fascist, or anti-capitalist. The Left must also be able to envision and construct new social institutions based on democracy, equality, and mutual aid. What if, instead of directing all of our energies into creating profits for an already obscenely rich elite, workers had free time that they could dedicate to caring for one another, expressing themselves, learning about the world, and healing the planet? What if we could live life without the constant fear of deprivation and financial ruin? What if new labour-saving technologies were developed for the benefit of all, rather than the profits of a few, and created to be both durable and sustainable? What if we could eliminate the inequalities that give rise to so much guilt, hatred, resentment, and fear? Instead of taking for granted that such a world is impossible, we should instead be asking ourselves: if this is the world we want to live in, what will it take to get there?

In order to build a more livable world, we will need leverage. The rich are not going to give up their wealth and power freely, nor will they simply sit back and allow a political system that was created by and for the capitalist class to be used against them. This is why labour organizing is absolutely crucial, not just because it allows us to address the immediate concerns of workers, but because it’s the international working class that creates the value that is

appropriated by the capitalists. Capitalist society cannot continue to function without the labour of the working class. As such, workers are the only group that have both the ability, and the incentive, to upend the capitalist system, and all the interrelated structures that support it, and put something better in its place—but only if we are organized and act collectively in solidarity with the most oppressed and marginalized among us.[101]

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[1] Torill Elvira Mortensen, "Anger, Fear, and Games: The Long Event of #GamerGate," *Games and Culture* (2016): 1-20, doi:10.1177/1555412016640408.

[2] Adam Baldwin (@AdamBaldwin), "#GamerGate: pt. 1: https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=C5-51PfwI3M …pt. 2: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pKmy5OKg6lo …," Twitter, August 27, 2014, 6:22 p.m., tweet, archived September 3, 2014. http://archive.fo/CEjvK.

[3] Shira Chess & Adrienne Shaw, "A Conspiracy of Fishes, or, How We Learned to Stop Worrying About #GamerGate and Embrace Hegemonic Masculinity," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 59, vol. 1 (2015): 208-220, doi:10.1080/08838151.2014.999917.

[4] Carolyn Jong, "GamerGate and the Right," *One More Castle* (blog), October 21, 2014, https://onemorecastle.wordpress.com/2014/10/21/gamergate-and-the-right/.

[5] Although it's important to talk about how GamerGate functions as a whole, and the effects it's had on the world around it, this does not mean that the movement is in any way homogenous, or that its members all hold the same conscious beliefs. The goal here is not to individualize, but to look at GamerGate and the Alt-Right from a structural point of view, taking into account broad social, political, and economic processes and how they affect or are affected by the emergence of these movements.

[6] It's worth noting that I was not the only one to recognize the connection between GamerGate and certain segments of the far right, long before the mainstream media caught on in the wake of the 2016 US elections. Other critics, students, and developers who were connected to marginalized games communities, including Lana Polansky, Liz Ryerson, and Daniel Joseph, made similar points and were instrumental in shaping how I came to view GamerGate and other similar phenomena. Their blog posts on the topic can be found in the bibliography.

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# Chapter 4 - Organizing Community

At various points I've referred to myself as a community organizer, but what does that mean exactly? As Susan Stall and Randy Stoecker point out,

> Communities do not just happen. They must be organized. Someone has to build strong enough relationships between people so they can support each other through long and sometimes dangerous struggles. Or, if the community already exists, it may have to be "reorganized" to support political action. This process of building a mobilizable community is called community organizing.[1]

Community organizing is not restricted to leaders or professional activists, and is often taking place even when there is no visible, public-facing movement to speak of. The process of building relationships and networks capable of taking on political battles and looking after people's needs is slow, unglamorous, and involves a lot of gendered labour that is often performed by women and feminized people. Sending emails, taking notes, booking a meeting room, cleaning up, preparing snacks, checking in on people and talking to them about their worries and concerns—all of these tasks, and many more, are part of the process of organizing communities and creating or strengthening personal bonds. Over the course of the last 6 years I've written blog posts, organized and led workshops, participated in reading groups, cooked and served meals in the streets, run game jams, created and distributed zines, posters, and pamphlets, attended and moderated countless meetings, drafted policies and internal documents, mediated conflicts between community members, created and moderated Facebook groups and servers, provided advice and training, joined pickets, and organized contingents to attend protests. Some of this work was associated with formal, relatively public-facing organizations, such as the Mount Royal Game Society, the Concordia Student Union, or the Montreal chapter of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), but much of it also took place in the context of informal groups and collectives, not all of which can or should be named in this context, if they have names at all.

Most of these activities are not exactly headline-grabbing news, which might help to account for why community organizing tends to be invisible to people outside of that community.[2] In some cases community organizing practices become widely associated with a specific individual—such as Saul Alinsky, author of the influential book on community organizing called *Rules for Radicals*—however more often organizers go unnamed and unrecognized in the broader public sphere.[3] This is not necessarily a bad thing. After all, organizing is and

always has been a collective process, and emphasizing one individual too much tends to erase the collective labour of the multitudes of people who contribute to making things happen, while also opening the door to opportunism and careerism. As Rinku Sen points out, “Although Alinsky is credited with having ‘invented’ community organizing, he actually codified and developed a set of rules with roots in many other movements, including the settlement houses and the racial-liberation and labor movements of earlier decades.”[4] That said, community organizing as a whole needs to be recognized for providing the groundwork necessary for large-scale social movements to emerge. It is the work of community organizers that transforms “the grassroots” from a catchy metaphor into a material reality.

In this chapter I want to focus in on my own experiences organizing at the intersection of the game industry and academia in Montreal, Canada between 2013 and 2019, and some of the lessons I’ve learned in the process. To protect the privacy of those involved, I’ve avoided going into detail about specific situations and conflicts, emphasizing broad patterns rather than individual actions. What follows represents my own perspective on the topics of safer spaces, group structure and accountability, collective power, labour organizing, and recuperation. The first half of the chapter will be largely inward-facing, looking mostly at how the groups I’ve participated in have organized themselves and the spaces they control, while the second half will focus more on how these groups enact change outside the bounds of their specific community or organization. While this division is somewhat artificial—after all, the changes we make in our own social circles also have an impact on and are responding to the realities of the world “out there”—I’m also hoping to reflect the broad range of concerns that must be taken into account if we want to build organizations and movements that are capable of weathering the storms ahead.

**Safer Spaces**

*Historically, African-American people believed that the construction of a homeplace, however fragile and tenuous (the slave hut, the wooden shack), had a radical political dimension. [...] it was about the construction of a safe place where black people could affirm one another and by so doing heal many of the wounds inflicted by racist domination*.[5] *(*bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, gender, and cultural politics)*

Safer space policies have often been a target of a moral panic in the conservative and liberal press, but few of the people writing these criticisms seem to have a clear understanding of what safer spaces are, how they are implemented, or the rationale behind them.[6] While there

are many different interpretations of safer spaces, in general they involve a group or organization making a public commitment to provide a safe and welcoming space, particularly for marginalized people.[7] Typically this means creating a written policy that outlines what constitutes unacceptable behaviour, a mechanism for people to make complaints (such as an email address), and a process for dealing with those complaints. People who participate in the group or organization's activities are encouraged to follow the guidelines outlined by the policy, and report any oppressive or harmful behaviour to the organizers and/or a dedicated safer space committee.

Safer space policies have their origins in the women's and LGBTQ movements, and are founded on the recognition that many existing organizations and institutions are not safe for marginalized people.[8] Unlike a standard code of conduct or anti-harassment policy, safer spaces generally do not start from the assumption that everyone is equal. Power relations and systemic oppression have an impact on how people behave towards one another, the consequences of their actions, and their interpretation of events, and this understanding is reflected in the way these policies are created and enforced.[9] When your community has been criminalized, and your voice is routinely ignored or disregarded, you're unlikely to be protected by laws and policies that are created by and for people in positions of power. Instead of trying to recreate a justice system that has shown itself to be unjust, marginalized people can work together to create our own justice—knowing full well that the oppressed and the oppressor will have very different notions of justice, and that this will almost inevitably lead to conflict. Bringing these conflicting interests to the surface, and making policy work *for* the people with the least amount of structural power, rather than against them, is the promise of a safer space. No more pretending that we'll all just get along, that the systems of oppression and exploitation that shape the rest of the world aren't also present in our communities and in our social circles. No more pretending that being equal "in principle" is the same as being equal in practice.

The Mount Royal Game Society was one of the first game-related organizations in Montreal to adopt a safer space policy. The text for the policy was adapted from an anti-harassment policy posted on the Geek Feminism Wiki. When I joined MRGS as a volunteer organizer in 2013, the policy was being referred to as a safe space policy. Later on we changed the name to a safer space policy in order to reflect the fact that the work of creating safer environments for marginalized people is an ongoing process, one that is never really complete. Ultimately there was no way we could guarantee safety, particularly at public events, and while we wanted marginalized people to feel welcome in our spaces, we also didn't want to lure people into a false sense of security.

The content of the policy was also updated at various points to incorporate things we learned along the way. These lessons were eventually recorded in the Mount Royal Game Society's Guide to Running Safer Spaces,[10] a document I produced in 2016 in collaboration with two other organizers. The document includes an explanation of what safer spaces means to us, basic principles we follow, considerations for who should be in charge of handling reports, suggestions for intervening, and rebuttals to common arguments against the use of safer space policies. The guide also reflects the lessons I learned trying to implement a safer space policy at the Technoculture, Art, and Games Research Centre (TAG), where I encountered similar issues, but had much less control over how the space was run due to the hierarchical nature of the university, which limited how we could respond to the problems that came up.

Although the people who attended our events generally seemed receptive to the *idea* of a safer space policy, we encountered a great deal of pushback as soon as we tried to actually enforce it. Over the course of MRGS's eight year existence, only two people (both white cis men) were barred from our events. In response, a number of people complained that it was wrong for an "inclusive" organization to exclude people from attending. We received similar complaints and pushback for attempting to moderate posts about racism and sexism in our Facebook group. In many cases critics insisted that our focus should be on education, rather than censorship or exclusion. From my perspective, however, the choice was not about whether or not to exclude someone; the question was *who* would be excluded, and why. The point of establishing a safer space policy was to avoid situations in which marginalized people would no longer feel safe attending events or participating in our community because someone with more power and privilege was present in these spaces. While a number of people expressed concerns for the careers of the men who were banned, few seemed willing to consider what the impact would be on the marginalized people who would be pushed out in their place. Despite the emphasis on "inclusion," in effect we were being asked to prioritize the needs, comfort, education, and participation of white cis men over those of marginalized people.

These discussions helped to unveil hidden tensions and divergent interests within the local games community, and made it clear to me how vague terms like "inclusion" and "diversity" can be used to reinforce the existing power structure. Unless we specify who we are including, and why, words like inclusion and diversity offer no specific political direction. The same arguments that are used to tear down barriers for marginalized people can also be used to erect them, by, for example, insisting that people with a history of racist or sexist behaviour be included in a space, no matter how many people they push out. Slogans like "No cops in Pride" can be painted as exclusionary, when in reality the inclusion of police makes participation

difficult or impossible for people who are often the targets of police brutality and violence.[11] Making a space “safe” for white, cis, heterosexual, middle and upper class men can also make it unsafe for people who do not have the privilege of treating politics as a debate or intellectual exercise.

Our interpretation of why people are excluded is often shaped by power relations as well. When marginalized people are routinely pushed out of a space or institution we often rationalize it by saying that they “chose” to leave, or that they lacked the necessary skills or commitment to stay (if we recognize these departures at all). In this case all the agency is attributed to the individual leaving, and not to the institution, organization, or community that they’ve left behind, obscuring the broader pattern of exclusion. When someone is excluded as a result of a safer space policy, however, it’s often framed as a personal attack on their moral character. Again the focus is on individuals, but in this case it is not the individual who is excluded that is presumed to be at fault; instead the blame lies with the organizers who excluded them, and the people who made the reports. Many of the criticisms we received focused on the lack of proof or evidence that the people we banned had caused harm. The ban was seen as unfairly punishing someone for a “crime” they didn’t commit. As we pointed out in the Safer Space Guide, however, “Safer spaces are not about proving who is right and who is wrong. The people who make reports under a safer space policy are not responsible for ‘proving’ that something bad happened to them.” The point of safer spaces isn’t to punish people who make mistakes, but to prevent marginalized members of our community from being silently excluded.

The assumption that safer spaces are about judging individuals on a moral level, and separating “good people” from “bad people,” betrays the extent to which common sense notions of justice are premised on liberal ideology. By creating distinct moral categories and separating people into one or the other on the basis of their individual actions or intentions, privileged people are able to distance themselves from the “bad people” and relieve feelings of guilt. As Jane Macwhinney argues, drawing on her experiences in predominantly white, progressive social service organizations, “Within this liberal framework it becomes 'logical' to claim, by virtue of good intentions alone, to be outside of the relations of racism. This is reflected in the often held belief that if one doesn't actively discriminate against anyone, one is not implicated in racism.”[12] This framework not only justifies inaction, but can be used to actively suppress efforts to enact change. Arguing with people who feel personally attacked every time systemic racism or sexism is brought up is exhausting and can lead organizers to burn out or give up altogether.

The demand for proof can be counter-productive in other ways as well. It often has the

effect of discouraging people from making complaints in the first place, either because the incidents happened in private or were not recorded, which then feeds into the assumption that the complainant is lying, or because the process of acquiring and publicly dissecting the evidence is likely to lead to further trauma and abuse for the victim.[13] This is even more likely to be the case when the victim is marginalized. Victim blaming is commonplace, even in supposedly left-leaning communities, and many people, including organizers, are affected by unconscious biases towards marginalized groups that can lead them to downplay or ignore reports, especially if they do not have first-hand experience with a particular form of oppression.[14] Stereotypes about women, people of colour, people with mental illness, poor people, and LGBTQ people often paint them as more emotional, less logical, “crazy,” unreliable, overly sensitive, sneaky, predatory, and vindictive, and this inevitably shapes our judgment of those individuals.[15] Rather than empowering organizers to act as judge and jury, and putting people on trial (something that, as volunteers, we lacked both the capacity and the training for), the goal of the policy was to empower marginalized people to decide for themselves how these situations should be handled, and act accordingly.

Of course safer space policies, and the people implementing them, are not perfect, nor are they the solution to every problem. Safer spaces, like women-only spaces, are not an end in themselves, but a means. They're a way of getting to a world where those kinds of measures aren't necessary, because the material inequalities that create the need for them have been eliminated. They're a temporary measure designed to create the space necessary for healing, community-building, and organizing, for people who have trouble finding those spaces elsewhere in their lives. But for people who don't see or experience the systemic violence that necessitates the extra effort, safer spaces, like many other feminist and anti-oppressive practices, can seem excessive, even scary. Without context, any action, other than inaction, can seem extreme.

Underneath this unease may be a fear of democracy as more than just a symbolic process or lofty ideal, but as a real, material leveling of power and wealth. People who are used to having institutions rule in their favour, who are protected by "official channels," and who always have the benefit of the doubt, are likely to be scared of any system where they lose that level of security and control. Democracy, real democracy, removes the immunity granted by money, status, whiteness, maleness, and other markers of privilege. The fear of safer spaces may in fact reflect a fear of being held to account by the people that we've hurt. When we’ve caused harm to other people, it’s easy to imagine that they might also want to cause harm to us. This act of projection could be described as a “move to innocence”[16] that re-entrenches power

and alleviates guilt by insisting that the oppressed are just “oppressors in waiting,” making them “just as bad” as the people who currently benefit from oppression. This line of thinking is also tied up with the elitist, anti-democratic notion that systems of domination must be maintained, because “ordinary people” can’t be trusted to wield power. These moves are designed to short-circuit critique and suppress mobilizing efforts by placing more emphasis on hypothetical scenarios than on actually existing, material realities.

Despite these fears, my own experiences suggest that people very rarely report to safer space committees. Often the people who do make reports downplay the severity of what happened to them, insist that they may be “overreacting,” blame themselves for the situation, and express more concern for the person they reported, than they do for their own safety or well-being. In some cases, people only agree to take action once they realize that other people are also being negatively affected. In the face of this reality, it is very difficult for me to take seriously the overblown fears, which are often based on nothing more than speculation, that marginalized people are likely to take advantage of safer space policies for selfish or vindictive reasons. While it’s true that any policy can be abused, in my experience the people who abuse them are most often those in positions of power.

Safer spaces have become, for me, about disrupting the appearance of smoothness, safety, equality, and shared interests that "official channels" are designed to create. What I learned from trying to make institutions safer for women and other marginalized people was that official channels are often created precisely to prevent that sort of transformation from taking place. People tell you to go through official channels as a way of preserving privilege and disavowing responsibility, of making sure that it’s “out of their hands.” The appeal to rules and bureaucracy can be a form of self-defence, a way of doing nothing while at the same time avoiding feelings of guilt. As long as the complaints are tied up in official channels, the rest of us no longer have to think about it and can carry on with business as usual.[17]

As David Graeber points out, we are often unwilling to acknowledge that violence, or the threat of physical harm, is an integral part of capitalist society and its institutions—it is the “glue” that holds it all together. As he puts it,

> We are not used to thinking of nursing homes or banks or even HMOs as violent institutions—except perhaps in the most abstract and metaphorical sense. But the violence I’m referring to here is not epistemic. It’s quite concrete. All of these are institutions involved in the allocation of resources within a system of property rights regulated and guaranteed by governments in a system that ultimately rests on the threat of force. “Force,” in turn, is just a euphemistic way to refer to violence. [...]

> What's of ethnographic interest, perhaps, is how rarely citizens in industrial democracies actually think about this fact, or how instinctively we try to discount its importance. This is what makes it possible, for example, for graduate students to be able to spend days in the stacks of university libraries poring over theoretical tracts about the declining importance of coercion as a factor in modern life, without ever reflecting on that fact that, had they insisted on their right to enter the stacks without showing a properly stamped and validated ID, armed men would indeed be summoned to physically remove them, using whatever force might be required.[18]

Of course this statement does not apply equally to everyone. People who are Black, Indigenous, poor, disabled, transgender, undocumented, or otherwise oppressed are much more likely to be exposed to more overt threats of violence, even in supposedly "non-violent" institutions like the health care system, the family, or the university. "Not thinking about it" is a symptom of privilege, more than anything else.

This doesn't mean, however, that this ignorance is inevitable or unavoidable. Even those of us who were born with a fair degree of privilege can learn a lot about systemic violence by working in solidarity with the people who have been directly harmed. As Sara Ahmed observes, "You have to work the system by working out the mechanisms whereby the system is not transformed. You have to work out where things get stuck."[19] Sometimes we have to go through official channels in order to demonstrate, both to ourselves and to others, that they don't work, or, to be more accurate, work in ways that prevent certain kinds of structural change from ever taking place. There is something transformational about that feeling of betrayal that comes from having placed your trust in an institution that ultimately fails you, of getting up close and personal with the procedures and policies that are supposed to protect you, and the people you care about, from harm, only to find that their real purpose is to protect the institution and its higher-ups. No amount of theory or research can substitute for that first-hand experience.

Enforcing safer spaces often means putting yourself in conflict with people who have more power or privilege than you do. It may also mean risking your career or reputation, destroying friendships, missing out on opportunities, or making things awkward at social events. Placing the most vulnerable or marginalized people in these sorts of high-risk positions is not always the best idea. At the same time, it's important to ensure that the people playing this role are considered trustworthy, that they are accountable to the community, and that they have a solid understanding of the types of situations and conflicts they are likely to encounter. Someone who benefits a great deal from systems of oppression may not have that trust or understanding, or worse, they may try to use their position to reinforce their privilege and take

advantage of people who are vulnerable or distressed. This is why it's important to consider who is involved in safer space committees, where their personal interests lie, and whether you are prioritizing the education of privileged people over the safety of the marginalized members of your community.

Failing to pay careful attention to who is implementing safer spaces, and why, can also lead to recuperation. In recent years it seems that "safer spaces" have started to lose their edge as they've been more readily adopted into the liberal mainstream—in some cases becoming almost synonymous with the policies and procedures they were designed to counter. When safer spaces are decoupled from a radical institutional critique, implemented in a top-down manner, and reframed as a branding exercise, it may be time to find new terms or rethink our approach. But while recuperation can be tiring and frustrating, it's also a sign that the efforts that organizers have poured into safer spaces have, in some respects, paid off. The example set by MRGS helped encourage a number of other groups to adopt their own safer space policies, including the Montreal-based non-profit Pixelles,[20] the Hand Eye Society in Toronto,[21] Babycastles in New York, Juegos Rancheros in Austin, Texas,[22] and Game Workers Unite.[23] While the effectiveness of these policies might vary, even in cases where a policy is little more than window-dressing, the expectations that it creates can still be used to put pressure on institutions and organizations that might otherwise be inclined to look the other way when marginalized people are subjected to violence or pushed out. It is much easier to shame organizations for failing to live up to their commitment to provide a safer space, than it is to shame organizations that never made this commitment in the first place.

At the time I was organizing around safer spaces, it made sense to focus on the issue of targeted violence and marginalization. GamerGate and its aftermath left many marginalized people in games feeling extremely vulnerable and scared. In the face of death threats, stalking, and widespread harassment, it's understandable that concerns about safety would rank high on the list of priorities. Since then, however, it's become clearer to me that a safer space policy means little without the collective power to back it up, especially when it comes to confronting institutional hierarchies and systemic exploitation and abuse. For example, if an abusive person happens to occupy a position of power within the organization, or is protected by people who do, there is no way to have that person removed from their position or held accountable without exercising collective power and pushing for change. Marginalized people must be organized and prepared to fight if we want to transform the structures that enable abuse. It was this realization, combined with shifts in the political terrain, that led me to move more explicitly towards labour organizing and unionization as a necessary counterpart to anti-oppressive,

feminist organizing.

At the end of the day there is no one-size-fits-all solution to running safer space, and it is something each community or organization will have to figure out on their own terms. MRGS's approach to safer spaces was shaped around the fact that the game industry continues to be dominated by cis white middle-class men, and it was not well-suited to dealing with lateral violence within marginalized communities where power dynamics may be even less clear-cut. While I believe safer spaces will continue to play an important role in future organizing efforts, there are also other internal issues that many organizers face that cannot be solved solely through a safer space policy. Safer space policies will not necessarily protect against all forms of opportunism, nor do they address every problem with how decisions are made within organizations, how those decisions are acted upon, and how new people are incorporated into the group. To address some of these issues, I want to turn to a more general discussion about horizontal, structureless organizing.

**Horizontal vs. Democratic Organizing**

In the same way that safer spaces are a response to the lack of safety that many people experience in their day-to-day lives, horizontal organizing is often a reaction against the lack of democratic control and frequent abuses of power so many of us have encountered in vertically structured, hierarchical organizations. This can lead to the assumption, particularly within anarchist circles, that horizontal, "leaderless" organizing—in which no one is granted an official position of authority or leadership—is inherently more democratic and less oppressive than formally structured organizations where people are assigned official roles and responsibilities, and required to abide by a defined set of rules and organizational procedures. Having worked within both structured and unstructured or horizontal organizations, however, I've noticed a number of limitations with the latter approach.

The drawbacks of horizontal organizing have been discussed at length by feminist organizer Jo Freeman (aka Joreen) in her article "The Tyranny of Structurelessness." At the beginning of the piece she argues that,

> During the years in which the women's liberation movement has been taking shape, a great emphasis has been placed on what are called leaderless, structureless groups as the main — if not sole — organizational form of the movement. The source of this idea was a natural reaction against the over-structured society in which most of us found ourselves, and the inevitable control this gave others over our lives. […]
>
> The idea of "structurelessness," however, has moved from a healthy counter to those

tendencies to becoming a goddess in its own right.[24]

While Freeman notes that there are certain situations in which “structureless” groups can be very effective, for example when the main focus of the group is on internal consciousness-raising, this does not mean that it should be the model for all forms of collective action.

Although horizontal organizing sounds appealing on the surface, it generally doesn’t account for soft power or the effects of oppression and marginalization, which often result in the loudest or most privileged people having more authority and influence within an organization. Instead of openly acknowledging that these differences in power and privilege exist, and creating mechanisms to account for this and hold people in power accountable to the broader membership, members are encouraged to believe that everyone is equal within the group. This makes it much harder to deal with conflicts created by uneven power dynamics, because there is no shared recognition that these dynamics exist in the first place, and often no established structure in place to resolve the underlying issues. You can’t call someone out for abusing their position if they have no position to begin with.

Regardless of the intentions of the group’s members, some structure will inevitably form even within “structureless” groups, simply by virtue of the fact that people are different and come to the group with different capacities, skills, interests, and backgrounds. Those members who have been around the longest, who are the most actively involved, who have the greatest access to resources or free time, or are the most well-connected often end out forming an inner circle of friends, with newer, less privileged, or less involved members occupying the margins. In many cases this inner circle is no less exclusionary than a formally recognized leadership or hierarchy. The only difference is that this structure is informal rather than formal, and the criteria for joining the inner circle (for e.g. having a university degree, or living in the same neighborhood, or being roughly the same age) is never made explicit. As Freeman points out, “structurelessness becomes a way of masking power, and within the women's movement is usually most strongly advocated by those who are the most powerful (whether they are conscious of their power or not).”[25] Because there is no shared, formal understanding of where power lies or how decisions are made, and much of the communication happens through informal side channels between friends, only those who have been initiated into the “inner circle” know what’s going on, while everyone else is left in the dark. As I’ve experienced first-hand, this can lead to paranoia, distrust, or resentment building up over time, which can eventually lead to irresolvable conflicts and people leaving the collective if the problem is not nipped in the bud.

Organizations that are openly hierarchical, with formally defined rules and procedures and elected authority figures, have the advantage of making some power relations more visible

and therefore (potentially) easier to navigate. This does not mean that informal structures disappear altogether, but it can make it easier to prevent individuals or cliques from gaining unilateral control over the organization, and acting in ways that are harmful to other members or to the group as a whole. Formal structures can take a variety of forms, but some basic components include the following:

1) Clearly defined roles that include a list of tasks and responsibilities. Roles can be held by multiple people, or an individual, but there should be a regularly updated list that indicates who is currently occupying each role.
2) Mechanisms for replacing the people occupying those roles, as well as creating, changing, or eliminating roles when they're no longer needed.
3) A basis of unity or similar document outlining the stance of the organization on key issues. This may also be accompanied by a mission statement outlining the group or organization's goals.
4) Meeting and decision-making protocols that outline how meetings should take place and how collective decisions are made.
5) Membership criteria, onboarding documents, and processes for training new members and communicating necessary information down the line.[26]

Of course, figuring out the details of all of this and writing it down takes time, and so it's no surprise that smaller groups would want to avoid the hassle and numerous meetings that are required to build formal structures from the ground up, especially if things seem to be working relatively well without them. However, I've also found that the process of collectively deciding on the rules we will abide by can be a valuable experience in and of itself, particularly for those of us who are used to following orders from above. Direct democracy requires participation in decision-making, collective problem-solving, negotiation, and a deep consideration of the power dynamics that shape how we live and work together. All of these are skills that working class and marginalized people in particular are rarely encouraged to develop beyond the basic point required to do their jobs.[27] Involving people in the process of writing their own bylaws, basis of unity, or other organizational documents forces them to consider fundamental questions, such as: "How are we currently organized? Who is performing what type of labour? What are we trying to accomplish, and why? What are our rules regarding funding? Should organizers be paid? Why or why not? What is the most effective way to fulfill our mission?" In other words, it encourages people to take a step back from their immediate tasks and consider the big picture, while helping to ensure that the overall direction of the group is not solely determined by the unstated goals and assumptions of a handful of informal, unelected leaders.

At the end of “The Tyranny of Structurelessness,” Freeman lays out a number of basic principles for democratic organizing that can be applied in just about any type of organization or group. These include:

1) Delegating authority to specific individuals for specific tasks through democratic processes, rather than allowing people to assume tasks by default.
2) Making people who take on tasks responsible for reporting back to the group. The group maintains the final say on how the powers that have been transferred to each individual can be used, and may withdraw that authority if the person in question is not fulfilling their responsibilities.
3) Avoid a monopoly of power by distributing authority as much as possible within the group.
4) Rotate tasks and responsibilities, so that they don’t become the “property” of any one individual. This also ensures that there are plenty of opportunities for people to learn new skills and grow as organizers, ideally with the help and mentorship of people who have more experience. The mentorship process can itself be formulated as a task or responsibility that accompanies certain positions of authority, ensuring that key people can be replaced when needed, rather than allowing the organization to die when they leave or burn out.
5) Allocate tasks based on interest, ability, and the likelihood that they will be completed, rather than personal vendettas or favoritism.
6) Diffuse information to as many people as possible as often as possible (keeping in mind that some information must be limited for security reasons). This is another way to prevent a monopoly of power forming around people who have exclusive access to information, which can be a source of vulnerability for the group.
7) Equalize access to resources, especially those that are needed to maintain the regular functioning of the group.[28]

Because we tend to learn by doing, any structure that’s created should be open to revisions in the future, allowing the organization to adapt to changes in the political terrain, the composition of the group, and feedback from the membership. In order to collect feedback, however, it must also be possible for members to voice criticisms and complaints without fear of retribution, even when the person they’re criticizing has more power than they do. This is easier said than done. As I discussed briefly in the last chapter, our hyper-competitive, capitalist society often trains us to be more concerned about our public image than we are about the effectiveness of our organizing efforts. Liberal ideology prompts us to react defensively to

criticism and treat it as a personal attack on our moral character rather than a learning opportunity.[29] This context also makes it more likely that criticism will be used to boost the social standing of the critic, or reinforce existing hierarchies, rather than address real problems within the organization. Both patterns of behaviour ultimately get in the way of efforts to cultivate a culture based on constructive feedback, transforming what should be a straight-forward process into a fraught and emotionally draining experience for everyone involved.

These concerns have given rise, especially in recent years, to frequent criticisms of "call-out culture" on the Left.[30] In a widely circulated article in *Briarpatch Magazine* entitled "A Note on Callout Culture", Asam Ahmad defines call-out culture as "the tendency among progressives, radicals, activists, and community organizers to publicly name instances or patterns of oppressive behaviour and language use by others."[31] In the piece he contrasts calling out to "calling in," which is the practice of speaking privately to individuals about their actions in order to address oppressive behaviour. This second approach can be useful when the consequences of the behaviour are relatively minor, when the problem arises largely as a result of a lack of awareness or knowledge, and when the person is receptive to criticism and doesn't wield a significant amount of power over the person calling them in. However, it also has its limits, as Ahmad notes in his follow-up article, "When Calling Out Makes Sense." Here Ahmad argues that not all grievances are best kept to the private sphere, and weaponizing critiques of how call-outs are sometimes deployed in order to dismiss the tactic altogether is counter-productive. He goes on to argue that;

> Discussing the toxic aspects of call-out culture requires acknowledging that some people's anger and rage continues to be considered legitimate and reasonable (white men's, mostly) while our culture teaches us that Black, racialized, and Indigenous people – particularly women – are always already angry and hostile. The question of whose anger counts as legitimate and valid is never just a neutral question; it is informed by what someone looks like, the colour of their skin, their gender, as well as their social standing and location. When thinking about call-out culture or being called out yourself, it is illusory to pretend that everyone's voice is equally heard.[32]

Call-outs may be the most effective, and sometimes only form of leverage that people have available to them when it comes to holding people with more power accountable for their actions. However uncomfortable or damaging call-outs might be for the people being called out, demonizing the practice is likely to cause even more harm in the long run.

Unfortunately even good-faith criticisms don't always get to the root of the problems with call-out culture. Capitalism, liberal individualism, white supremacy, and other power structures

complicate social relations, making it harder to build trust, while incentivizing oppressive actions. Presenting these issues as problems that are inherent to the Left and disconnected from broader structures makes it much easier for the Right to cynically recuperate internal criticisms for reactionary ends. After all, on the surface there are a lot of similarities between right-wing criticisms of "political correctness" and censorship, and left-wing critiques of call-out culture.

A structural problem requires a structural solution, and while we may not be able to eliminate the underlying cause of liberal defensiveness or opportunism overnight, we can create accountability structures that ensure that differences in power and privilege are taken into account and corrected for, at least to some extent. For instance, setting aside time during meetings for group members to provide constructive feedback to one another can be a useful way to "clear the air" and normalize criticism so that it is less likely to be taken personally. Having an independent third party that can handle grievances and is empowered to censure or remove authority figures that abuse their position can also make it more likely that complaints will be acted on even when the organizers in question hold a great deal of formal or informal power within the organization. Another option is to create a caucus or smaller group within an organization that is only open to members of marginalized groups, such as a group specifically for people of colour, marginalized genders, or disabled people. These caucuses can provide a space for marginalized people to safely voice their concerns, support one another, and come up with collective solutions to address oppressive power dynamics that exist within the larger organization. These groups can also be given greater decision-making power in regards to issues that specifically affect them, to avoid situations where a dominant majority is able to ignore or downplay the concerns of an oppressed minority.

Although a number of the criticisms written in response to "The Tyranny of Structurelessness" frame it as an unfounded attack on anarchist organizing principles,[33] many of Freeman's observations and critiques resonate with my own organizing experiences, and I believe her recommendations for addressing these issues are sound, though of course not entirely fool-proof. At the end of the day, there is no automatic process for ensuring accountability and democracy. The struggle never ends, even within our own organizations. This is particularly important to keep in mind for organizations that have paid staff and receive funding from wealthy donors, corporations, or governments, as this introduces new pressures and incentives that may lead organizers to prioritize continued access to funding over the stated mission of the organization. Money almost always comes with strings attached, even if those strings are not immediately visible.[34]

The tendency to stick with horizontal organizing, even in cases where it's proven to be

ineffective, may reflect a general desire to avoid confronting some of the messier implications of building power as an organization. For those of us who have had largely negative experiences with heavily structured, bureaucratic, top-down organizations, it seems only natural to want to avoid going down the same path by bypassing any type of formal power structure whatsoever. However, this assumes that all organizations and structures are created equal, and that the class composition of the organization, and the historical and social conditions that produce it, have no bearing on how that organization functions or what impact it has on the world. Perhaps it's not the tool that's the problem, but who controls it, and how it's used. More specifically, perhaps it's not authority itself that's the problem so much as how that authority is granted to and exercised by political and economic elites.[35] If we can recognize the difference between the violence of slave revolts, and the violence of the slave-master, then we should be able to recognize that not all forms of authority are necessarily harmful to oppressed people.

Maintaining a suspicious attitude towards formal power structures and those who occupy them is a healthy impulse for any organizer to have, but prioritizing our own individual sense of moral righteousness or desire for purity over strategic effectiveness can also lead us to a political dead-end. If we refuse to work with anything that could possibly be associated with oppression or violence, we will find ourselves with very few tools at our disposal.

**Building power**

The question of how we organize ourselves is intimately related to the question of how we change the world around us, and once again, power is a central component. Sociologist Dennis Wrong defines power as "the capacity of some persons to produce intended and foreseen effects on others."[36] In the 1988 preface to *Power: Its Forms, Bases, and Uses*, he expands on this basic definition, arguing that power involves the actual or potential mobilization of resources such as money, fame, and knowledge. Wrong cautions against definitions that reify power or view it as a resource in and of itself that can be disentangled from social relations and the distribution of material resources. Rather power is "both a generalized capacity to attain ends that is unequally distributed among the members of a society as a result of the structure of its major institutions, on the one hand, and an asymmetrical social relation among persons manifested directly in social interaction or indirectly through anticipated reactions, on the other [emphasis added]."[37] While we are not always aware of the ways in which we hold power over others, power is often much easier to identify when you are on the other end of it, either because you are being forced to do something you don't want to do, or because you are being prevented from getting something you want or need, such as adequate housing, or a safe

working environment.

Most efforts to address pressing issues like low or unequal wages, discriminatory hiring practices, overwork, harassment, and sexual assault end out coming up against a brick wall sooner or later.[38] Whether that wall takes the form of a stubborn manager who thinks that prioritizing diversity will harm the company's ability to attract the most talented people, an outdated law or policy and the institutions that enforce it, or a board of directors whose top priority is ensuring high returns on investment, it indicates the point at which a request must be transformed into a demand. Asking nicely will only get you so far, especially when your request happens to contradict the interests of the people who make the decisions and write the rules. At this point, the people pushing for change will either have to give up, or attempt to build up the power and leverage necessary in order to force their opponents to accept their demands.

Assuming they move towards the latter, this raises a new question. How do they go about building power? Obviously the specifics of this vary depending on the situation, but in general, it helps to think about where power is currently concentrated in our society.[39] Capitalism is a society ruled by the capitalist class.[40] The capitalist class derives their power from owning capital—an arrangement that is enforced by state power, including the police, the prisons, the courts, and the military. However, capital alone cannot produce new commodities. Even in highly mechanized and automated industries, some human labour is required to design, build, and fix the machines. Without the workers who provide this labour, nothing gets made, nothing gets sold, and there are no profits for the capitalists. The international working class not only makes up the vast majority of the world's population, it also has the latent ability to halt production in its tracks, provided workers can organize themselves and coordinate their actions, while evading the divide and conquer tactics of the bosses.

The ability to withhold labour on a mass scale across multiple industries, also known as a general strike, has long been recognized as one of the Left's most powerful bargaining chips, but getting to the point where that power can be exercised is an enormous feat in its own right.[41] Striking, even on a small scale, is incredibly risky for workers, particularly those who are constantly teetering on the edge of financial ruin. At the same time, these workers have the most to gain from collective action, and are less likely to be bought out than workers who are more comfortable with the status quo.

This is why organizing must start with the most precarious and vulnerable, including minimum wage workers, outsourced labour, assembly line workers, interns, support staff, unemployed workers, as well as workers who are marginalized due to race, gender, immigration status, disability, or other factors. Building a strong base here will also help to avoid a situation

in which management divides and weakens the labour movement by promising to improve conditions for more privileged employees, at the expense of the people below them. As long as the people at the bottom are confident and organized, they can use their collective power to hold those above accountable.

This is particularly important in the face of rising anti-immigrant sentiment, which is a reactionary response to capitalist crisis, climate change, and the acceleration of offshoring and outsourcing.[42] Despite the fact that most of the wealth that has been concentrated in the Global North was created by the intense exploitation of workers in the Global South, capitalist ideology and white supremacy have taught us to view this inequality as a sign of our inherent superiority and ingenuity. Intan Suwandi, R. Jamil Jonna and John Bellamy Foster make this point in "Global Commodity Chains and the New Imperialism":

> In twenty-first-century imperialism, multinational corporations are able to carry out a process of unequal exchange in which they get, in effect, *more labor for less*, while the excess surplus obtained is often misleadingly attributed to 'innovative,' financial, and value-extractive economic activities taking place at the center of the system [emphasis added].[43]

This leads to workers here feeling resentful towards workers that flee to the Global North to try to escape the poverty, war, famine, and other problems that are often caused by imperialism. The tightening of border controls and the high death tolls, particularly at the European and US borders,[44] are a crucial tool in maintaining this system of imperialist exploitation, which empowers large multinational corporations at the expense of most of the world's population.

Even if increasing immigration rates leads to more competition on the labour market and declining wages for workers (which is not at all a guarantee, especially for native-born workers),[45] it is the business owners who use this competition to suppress wages that are to blame for this phenomenon, not the people seeking work to survive. Anti-immigrant policies and racism more generally only serve to push racialized workers into more desperate and precarious positions, creating more downward pressure on wages, which ends up hurting workers in both the Global North and the Global South. By buying into anti-immigrant scaremongering, workers are shooting themselves in the foot. Organizing migrant workers, fighting to prevent imperialist acts of aggression, and pushing for the redistribution of wealth on a global scale is not only more humane, but more strategically effective than knee-jerk xenophobia.[46]

As large areas of the Global South become uninhabitable due to climate change, restrictions on the movement of racialized workers will become increasingly genocidal. For

these reasons, and many others, it is absolutely crucial that any labour organizing efforts are strongly rooted in anti-racism and anti-imperialism. The labour movement today cannot afford to repeat the mistakes of the past by abandoning solidarity in favour of narrow opportunism.[47] Working alone we are vulnerable to strike-breakers, scabbing, outsourcing, offshoring, and recuperation, but together workers have the power to bring entire global supply chains to a halt.

**Workplace Organizing**

These grand goals have humble beginnings. Like many, I started getting involved in labour organizing long before I even had a name for it, let alone any formal training or expertise in the topic. Most workplace organizing campaigns start simply, with two or more workers talking to one another about the problems they're encountering at work. Rather than simply venting and moving on, however, these workers may decide to do something about their problems collectively, whether that's complaining to management together, writing a collective letter, asking pointed questions at a meeting, refusing to work overtime as a group, threatening to quit en masse, temporarily blocking access to a building, or other creative solutions. In order to pull this off they will probably have to meet regularly outside the workplace to discuss their grievances, plan out the action, and chart their progress. They may also reach out to a local union or labour organization to get training, information, resources, and support from experienced organizers. If they're successful in winning small gains and building trust with their colleagues, other workers will join, which in turn allows the group to take on bigger challenges as well as more impactful, but riskier actions, such as mass walkouts, occupations, or strikes. Depending on their approach to organizing, they may eventually decide to hold a vote to establish a legal union (in Québec, this requires 51% of the workplace or bargaining unit to vote in favour of forming or joining a union),[48] and send representatives to negotiate with the boss to form a collective agreement. Or they may decide to use the leverage they've gained through organizing to push for further concessions without the legal protections and limitations that come with a formally established union.

At its most basic level, unions are simply a group of workers coming together to improve conditions in the workplace. For many years unions were illegal, and so it would be a mistake to reduce them to the legal entity that many of us associate with unions today. In the end, the power of a union always comes from the workers, and while the law (which is backed by the power of the state) can provide some leverage, the state itself is not a neutral entity. Most of the legal protections that exist now were only won through labour organizing and mass action on the part of workers.[49] With the decline of unions and the labour movement in North America,

these protections are being rapidly eroded by corporate lobbying and the development of new business models that are designed to take advantage of legal loopholes.[50]

In *No Shortcuts: Organizing for Power in the New Gilded Age*, Jane McAlevey notes that over the last few decades in the United States there has been a "significant and long-term shift away from deep *organizing* and toward shallow *mobilizing.*"[51] McAlevey argues that while mobilizing focuses on recruiting large numbers for specific events such as protests or rallies, it tends to be primarily aimed at people who already consider themselves activists, and is often run in a top-down fashion by paid professionals who see themselves as the primary agents of change. Organizing, by contrast, is about developing the skills of masses of "ordinary people" who do not already self-identify as activists, and getting them involved in the process of analyzing power structures, developing strategy, and engaging in collective actions to accomplish their goals. In other words, the main goal of organizing is to transform people into organizers.

For McAlevey, successful organizing generally centres around existing structures, such as a neighborhood, a workplace, or a religious institution such as a church or mosque. These structures provide a clear constituency and pre-established social bonds that make it much easier to assess progress and identify organic leaders. Organic leaders are the individuals within any given structure or community that others tend to look up to for help or guidance, regardless of whether or not they hold formal leadership positions. Recruiting organic leaders and developing their organizing skills is critical for scaling up. This is particularly important in the context of workplace organizing, since organizers often face hostility and threats from management (despite the fact that such threats are illegal in many countries). Recruiting large numbers reduces the risk to individual workers who participate in organizing activities, while at the same time expanding the possibilities for direct action and opening the door to union certification.

The cornerstone of any successful workplace organizing campaign is one-on-one, face-to-face conversations between workers. These conversations should focus on identifying workers' concerns, giving them space to express their feelings about work (both positive and negative), and gently guiding them towards developing collective solutions to the problems they face. Organizers should never assume that they already know what other workers need or want, and should focus on asking open-ended questions rather than lecturing them or providing information that may not be useful or relevant. The goal is to get to know the other person, and beyond that, to build up their confidence and motivation to work with others to improve their situation.

Organizers have various other tools at their disposal when it comes to building up the movement, planning actions, and tracking progress. One such tool is social mapping, which can be done by the group as a whole or in small teams, and involves mapping out the social relationships that exist in the workplace, identifying who the organic leaders are, assessing each person's level of support for collective action, and based on this information, deciding who to talk to next at any given point.[52] Social maps should be continuously updated throughout the process to reflect changes in the workforce, as well as shifting attitudes and relationships.

Workers' goals can also be written down and sorted on a scale from relatively small and achievable goals that can be won with small numbers, such as getting a broken air conditioner replaced, to goals that are more difficult to accomplish and will likely require mass actions, such as getting a pay raise for all employees. For each goal workers should decide on collective actions they can take to achieve that goal and discuss together how they will carry out the action, how they think management will react, and what they will do if the initial action fails or things don't go according to plan. Gradually scaling up to bigger goals and actions helps to build confidence and support from other workers, while ensuring that workers aren't taking huge risks before they're ready. Actions have a way of speaking for themselves: seeing positive changes happen as a result of the collective efforts of workers will often do much more to convince new people to get involved in organizing campaigns than any verbal argument you could hope to make. Face-to-face conversations are still crucial, but organizers should ideally also be able to point to a list of things they've done to improve their lives and the lives of other workers through collective action.

Concrete gains can also serve as an effective counter to the union-busting tactics that are often used by employers and managers in an attempt to discourage workers from organizing. Some common tactics include intimidating, punishing, or firing organizers, while offering benefits or promotions to individuals who are willing to side with management. This is sometimes used alongside more subtle methods such as:

- Emotional manipulation: Can take many forms, but examples include employers crying in response to employees confronting them about bad working conditions, or attempting to undermine the confidence of workers who speak out by insulting the quality of their work
- Obscuring class conflict: Pretending that the company is "one big happy family"
- Open door policy: Encouraging workers to report issues to management rather than talking to one another about their problems
- Anti-union talking points: Spread through mandatory meetings or company emails; most

> of these talking points, such as presenting unions as third parties that are only interested in collecting dues, rather than organizations that are created by and composed of the workers themselves, are well-worn and highly predictable

By talking to workers ahead of time about how bosses are likely to react, organizers can undermine the effectiveness of such tactics.

Union-busting, particularly when it involves direct retaliation against workers, often has the effect of exposing the conflicting interests of workers and bosses. As the authors of the Game Workers Unite 2019 GDC zine point out;

> It's not a question of “good bosses” vs “bad bosses.” Workers and owners have fundamentally different interests. Most of the things that benefit workers — higher wages, shorter working hours, better benefits, job security, a safer work environment — also cut into company profits. In short, every dollar that goes to your wage is a dollar that doesn't go to the owners.[53]

While business owners and their representatives will often go to great lengths to disguise this underlying conflict, they cannot erase material reality altogether, especially if workers are active in pushing for better conditions.

This reality holds whether we’re talking about the game industry, universities, or any other institution or workplace that exists under capitalism. In order to address the issues affecting marginalized people in each of these arenas, we must confront the fundamental conflict that lies at the heart of the capitalist system, while recognizing that the vast majority of workers are not white, cisgender, able-bodied, male, or middle class. As McAlevey notes, we need to move beyond the idea that labour organizing is separate from other forms of community organizing, or other struggles for social justice, and move towards organizing “the whole worker.”[54]

**Organizing the Game Industry**

Organizing is hard, risky, and time-consuming work, particularly in industries that do not yet have an established history of labour organizing. However the emergence of Game Workers Unite (GWU), a grassroots movement aiming to build a unionized game industry, has shown that there is a large contingent of people willing to sacrifice their time and energy in the hopes of improving conditions in the industry and empowering their fellow workers. Game Workers Unite started in March 2018 in response to a roundtable on unions in the game industry at the Game Developers Conference (one of the largest conferences for game developers in the world).[55] Fearing that the roundtable would be dominated by anti-union voices, a group of workers and

allies spontaneously organized to produce zines, buttons, and pamphlets promoting unionization, and ensure that there was a large contingent of pro-union workers and organizers at the roundtable.[56] The grassroots mobilization was incredibly successful, attracting widespread support and media attention, and quickly snowballed into the formation of an international organization dedicated to helping workers organize the industry. Within a few months, local chapters of Game Workers Unite were created in cities around the world, including Montreal.

The emergence of Game Workers Unite was followed by a slew of articles shining a spotlight on poor working conditions in the industry. Of these, some of the most impactful stories included the mass layoffs at Telltale Games in September 2018, which affected roughly 250 employees and left many without health insurance or severance pay;[57] Jason Schreier's exposé on the culture of crunch at Rockstar Games;[58] and Cecelia D'Anastasio's article investigating the sexist culture at Riot Games.[59] Less than a year after the publication of D'Anastasio's article, over 150 employees at Riot Games' Los Angeles office walked out to protest the company's stance on forced arbitration, which they argued was being used to silence victims of harassment and discrimination by depriving them of their right to present their case in front of a judge or jury.[60] This, combined with the perception that the company was doing little to dismantle the culture of sexism or hold people in power accountable, led to one of the first large-scale industrial actions by game industry workers in North America.

While it's impossible to tell for certain what the future holds for workers in the game industry, it's clear that the labour movement as a whole is currently undergoing a revival as more and more people are disenfranchised and pushed into precarity by capitalist crisis and neoliberalism. The Riot walkouts were preceded by mass walkouts at Google, a wave of unionization in the digital media industry (including a large portion of the videogame press),[61] and the ongoing organizing efforts of workers in the so-called "gig economy."[62] These struggles have the potential to unite workers across the divides created by structural oppression and capitalist competition, and rebuild community on the basis of shared interests and genuine solidarity. If we want to see a more diverse, inclusive, sustainable, and welcoming game industry, then the industry must be organized.

**Organizing Within Unions**

Unions come in many shapes and sizes, and it would be a mistake to assume that the mere existence of unions is enough to bring about the kind of radical political change needed to overcome a capitalist crisis. As Sydney Ghazarian points out, "many unions have settled for

operating in accordance to a ‘service model,’ meaning they aim to satisfy their members’ demands through handling grievances, lobbying and securing benefits rather than direct pressure on their employers—which diminishes the power a union could have against threats to working class interests.”[63] While a service model union may be better than no union at all, rank-and-file organizing and direct action can win far more significant gains, and help expand the struggle beyond the narrow confines of a single workplace.[64]

My experiences working at Concordia University as both a research assistant and part-time instructor have given me a first-hand appreciation for both the benefits and limits of established unions. On the one hand my working conditions were significantly better than some of my peers in other universities,[65] thanks in large part to the collective agreements negotiated by TRAC (Teacher and Research Assistants at Concordia) and CUPFA (Concordia University Part-Time Faculty Association). On the other hand, different groups of workers were divided into different unions and often pitted against one another by the hierarchical structure of the university. The faculty unions appeared to have little direct involvement in, understanding of, or solidarity with the struggles of students and non-teaching staff, and conversations I had or overheard made it clear that many part-time faculty felt they were not being treated fairly or respectfully by full-time faculty, who maintained many privileges and benefits that were not available to part-timers. Research by Indhu Rajagopal and Louise Birdsell Bauer on the experiences and working conditions of Canadian contract faculty suggests that this situation is not unique to Concordia, but rather reflects systemic issues within the Canadian university system as a whole.[66] These divisions only serve to weaken the unions, making it more difficult to mount a broad-based struggle against neoliberalism and austerity.

Like any other organization, unions are susceptible to being manipulated and captured by employers and corporate interests, particularly if there is little active involvement on the part of rank-and-file union members. Bosses will often attempt to negotiate behind closed doors and win over union leaders in order to sow distrust and tip the scales in their favour.[67] If we want unions to serve as effective tools for social change, we have to do the hard work of organizing, even after the union is officially recognized by the state and the first collective agreement has been signed. Organizations like the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), for example, have long recognized the need for continuous, militant, bottom-up organizing across trades and national borders, and the dangers of relying entirely on the state and its legal institutions to enforce workers’ interests.[68]

Thankfully, even the most conservative unions are beholden to workers in ways that other organizations are not, since their power ultimately relies on workers’ ability to withhold

their labour and take collective action. Even if union leadership is disconnected or ineffective, rank-and-file democracy can still be achieved using many of the same strategies and tactics that are used to build a union in the first place. However, it takes a committed group of organizers that is willing and able to empower their fellow workers to take matters into their own hands. Just as the majority of union organizing drives end up failing on the first attempt, efforts to mobilize workers within existing unions will likely encounter many failures before they can succeed. However, these failures are an important part of the learning process, and are sometimes just as valuable in the long run as the victories. Combating climate change, austerity, and neoliberal capitalism will require more than just the creation of new unions, it must also involve a radical rethinking of the role that labour plays in both global and local affairs.

**#Resistance**

Resistance is an appealing word, but one that lacks any substance unless it is firmly rooted in a materialist understanding of power.[69] If you are not pissing off the people who have power over you, then you are not resisting. If your activism involves no personal risk, and does not actively threaten the legitimacy and day-to-day functioning of the white supremacist, patriarchal, capitalist system, then it is not resistance in any meaningful sense of the word. The tendency to call everything and anything "resistance" is often nothing more than a transparent effort to rationalize inaction and complicity. While it's true that resistance can sometimes take on surprising forms, there is no form of resistance that doesn't threaten the ruling class and the structures that support them in some way.[70]

Of course this doesn't mean that just because something is dangerous, it is also inherently useful or strategic. Doing dangerous things for the sake of proving that you are more radical and "revolutionary" than the people around you can lead to self-destructive adventurism, and is just another way that people prioritize their individual self-image and reputation over the project of building a better world. Most of the time it's more important to live to fight another day than it is to go out in a blaze of glory. But if we want our efforts to have any impact in the long run, we will also have to get comfortable going beyond the very narrow space afforded to us by liberal recuperation. Starting a small business, getting a job at an NGO, giving to charity, buying green, recycling, voting for the Liberal party, consuming media "against the grain," giving talks to privileged audiences, or attending marches that have been explicitly approved by the police state do very little to challenge or alter social structures (in fact capitalists engage in or profit from most if not all of these activities). Although they might make you feel good, none of these things are likely to put you in direct conflict with your boss, your landlord, or the police, nor will

they do much of anything to stop the rise of fascism, arrest the ongoing murder and genocide of colonized people, diminish the power of multinational corporations, or address extreme wealth inequality.

An essential component of resistance is solidarity, and there is no solidarity without sacrifice. Whether that means risking arrest to join a blockade, breaking off a friendship with someone who has been abusive, lending a hand with the dishes at the end of a meeting, standing up to your boss alongside other workers, turning down corporate funding, donating money to bail people out of jail, or refusing to cross a picket line, there are countless ways that solidarity requires us to give up a bit of what we have for the sake of others. This doesn't mean, however, that solidarity is a purely selfless act. The slogan "solidarity not charity" is often used to make the point that while charity is a top-down effort to assuage guilt (as well as a form of tax evasion for the wealthy),[71] solidarity is a form of mutual aid that all oppressed people can benefit from. Solidarity is not an individual but a social act. It requires a collective effort, and it provides collective benefits. By standing in solidarity with others, we also enable others to stand in solidarity with us.

In my time studying, working, and organizing in and around games and academia, I've often encountered a strong desire for a community that is built on something other than careerism and profit.[72] As more and more of the social sphere is colonized, enclosed, and commodified by capitalism, this desire is likely to grow even stronger. Both the indie games "community," and the game studies "community" are rife with abuse, exploitation, and cutthroat competition, and for every moment of support and solidarity, there are many other moments of disappointment and betrayal.[73] If we're going to break free of these cycles of abuse we need to first acknowledge that they exist, analyze how and why they are reproduced in connection with broader systems such as capitalism, patriarchy, and white supremacy, and organize at the grassroots level to build working class power and solidarity.

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# Conclusion: The Ruthless Criticism of All that Exists

*"Feminism, in giving you somewhere to go, allows you to revisit where you have been. We can become even more conscious of the world in this process of becoming conscious of injustices because we had been taught to overlook so much. A world can flood once we have let it in, once we have unlocked the door of our resistance."*[1] (Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*).

In *Living A Feminist Life* Sara Ahmed describes her method as "putting a sponge to the past" and seeing what gets soaked up.[2] This is more or less what I've tried to do, using the things I've written in the past as a springboard for a broader theoretical reflection on capitalist crisis, liberalism, and fascism. In this sense the blog posts I've linked to function like waypoints or markers, an indication of what my concerns were both during and after GamerGate. As I've pointed out, GamerGate was driven by many of the same social processes and systems that led to the election of Donald Trump, and the growth of far-right organizing in Europe, Canada, and the United States. Viewed through this lens, it serves as a test case for how 21st-century fascist movements can exploit insecurities and fears about the future to reinforce pre-existing divides.

My own understanding of these things is very much rooted in my experiences organizing at the intersection of the game industry and academia. Although the main audience I have in mind are activists and labour organizers working in these spaces, I hope this body of writing can be helpful for anyone who is looking to build more just and equitable alternatives to the status quo. While I have been highly critical of liberalism, liberal feminism can and often does act as an entry point for a more radical politics. Although it's important to highlight the limitations of liberal ideology, it's only by coming up against these limits, through direct, first-hand experience, that I learned how to move past them. Marxists who respond to liberal cooptation by rejecting identity politics, intersectionality, and feminism altogether are only cementing their own irrelevance, as are liberals who continue to bracket off economics from the rest of social existence. On a practical level, the fight against discrimination and bigotry must go hand-in-hand with calls for unionization and international solidarity, or neither one will be successful. A holistic, intersectional approach that can re-unite cultural critique with collective action, and which leverages workers' economic power in the struggle against capitalism, patriarchy, and white supremacy, will be crucial moving forward in these dangerous times.

Although it's impossible to predict exactly what will happen in the future, it's becoming increasingly clear that resistance to capitalism is growing, even in the imperialist core. Mass

layoffs in the game industry,[3] an enormous student debt bubble,[4] and the rise of neo-fascist movements are just three of the many telling signs that we are living in a period of crisis. The old consensus, which was built on the super-exploitation of the Global South, is starting to fall apart as capitalism encounters more and more limits to its continued expansion.

Billionaires like Jeff Bezos and Elon Musk are now pinning their hopes on space exploration as the "new frontier" that will allow capitalism to continue expanding indefinitely.[5] Like the colonists of old, they claim to be acting in the name of "humanity" as a whole, but unless we reckon with the massive inequalities created by capitalism, any benefits will mostly be limited to a handful of billionaire investors. Instead of a space utopia, we are more likely to get space fascism. The liberal elite's faith in market-driven technological progress and "entrepreneurial genius" continues to play a paralyzing role, preventing people from addressing the root causes of climate change and environmental devastation, even in the face of possible extinction. This same mentality underlies the popularity of coding bootcamps and tech-oriented training programs that place the blame for poverty and inequality on workers who simply "can't keep up" with changing technology and new economic priorities. Rather than admit that the game is rigged and that only a small handful will ever be able to "succeed" within the current structure, science and technology are propped up as the source of our salvation.

It is in this context that public intellectuals like Steven Pinker are pushing for a return to "liberal Enlightenment values," which, for Pinker, seems to translate into placing our trust in capitalism and the scientific establishment, while casting a suspicious eye on radical political projects.[6] This isn't to say that there isn't some grain of truth to the tales told by Pinker, Peterson, and other self-proclaimed defenders of the "rational middle-ground." People have good reason to be skeptical of corporate media, politicians, professional pundits, academics, and activists that have built their careers on their political brand. But too often the centrist and conservative response to the real failures of liberal capitalism is to individualize the problem, appeal to vague ideals like order versus chaos,[7] or fall back on thinly veiled conspiracy theories designed to demonize leftists and marginalized groups. While it's comforting to believe that everything would be more or less fine if it weren't for a small "tribe" of radical social justice warriors, this story doesn't really explain why so many people have been sliding into poverty, why "cash-strapped" governments are spending billions of dollars on corporate subsidies and bailouts, or why greenhouse gas emissions continue to climb despite decades of science linking these emissions to catastrophic climate change. If wealthy intellectuals like Pinker and Peterson aren't focusing on these types of questions, it's probably because it's generally much less profitable to confront capital than it is to peddle arguments that justify the status quo.

The so-called “culture wars” in academia, videogames, and elsewhere are not new, but they are becoming more urgent and more heated as the crisis develops. As I’ve argued already at various points, liberals that opt to bury their head in the sand are sowing the seeds of their own destruction. For now, fascism is content to cloak itself in liberal norms and values. But as soon as fascist movements secure power, they won’t hesitate to devour the ideology and transform the institutions that birthed them in the first place. Private property, the economic core of liberalism, will remain in place, but any shred of commitment to democracy, tolerance, openness, equality, or plurality will be stamped out and destroyed.[8] To quote from Harold J. Laski’s conclusion to *The Rise of Liberalism,*

> Before their advent to power, Fascists, often enough, have proclaimed objectives with a socialistic flavour. But it is notable, first, that they have always attained power in concert with the army and big business, and that, after its attainment, they have left effectively unchanged the ownership of the means of production. Fascism, in short, emerges as the institutional technique of capitalism in its phase of contraction. It destroys the liberalism permitted by the experience of expansion in order to impose upon the masses that social discipline which creates the conditions under which, as it is hoped, the making of profit may be resumed.[9]

Those who still want to hold on to liberal values are increasingly being forced to make a choice: do they side with the fascists and opportunists that are gradually gaining power in countries around the world, or do they side with the communists, anarchists, and socialists that they’ve been taught to hate and fear? Liberalism itself provides no real answer to this dilemma. Within the bounds of liberal ideology, “both sides” are equally bad—in fact, they are almost indistinguishable from one another.

But there are other perspectives out there, other ways of relating to one another, and it’s these perspectives that I’ve tried to highlight. I chose to focus on both videogames and academia in part because I wanted to make it clear that movements like GamerGate do not appear in a vacuum, and their existence cannot be reduced down to a niche problem with videogames or even new media writ large. Although there are aspects of games as a medium and culture that are somewhat unique and might make the field particularly susceptible to far-right recruitment and marketing strategies, the same underlying economic and social structures that gave rise to the videogame industry also play a role in shaping major institutions.

A materialist account of the game industry and academia starts from the fact that videogames, consoles, university degrees, and academic research papers are all products of labour, and that who labours, how, and under what circumstances matters. Although the lack of

diversity in games and academia has been noted many times, most accounts tend to blame the problem on personal bias, while ignoring the role that capitalism plays in breaking up the working class into more easily exploitable tiers. The history of patriarchy, colonialism, and imperialism has created an international division of labour in which better paying, more prestigious, and less dangerous or mundane jobs are concentrated in the imperialist core and disproportionately held by middle or upper class white cis men. This in turn makes it easier to undermine solidarity and suppress wages for everyone, especially in the Global South, while providing a flood of cheap consumer goods for consumption in the Global North.

The concept of merit has been popularized in part because it helps to justify this inequality and allows capitalism to reproduce itself more readily. Although merit appeals to the notions of fairness and equality, in practice it often works against efforts to combat injustices by masking the historical and structural roots of inequality. As Richard Delgado notes, this is a common theme that connects many different liberal ideals, including both merit and free speech:

> All formalist devices, like merit, free speech, and the economic free market of trades and exchanges, serve a similar purpose. They decontextualize the transaction and so enable the powerful to exclude from consideration past actions, like slavery and female subjugation, that have effects even today which prevent some from entering the competition on equal terms. In fact, the First Amendment is a special case of merit. The First Amendment is designed to winnow out meritorious from nonmeritorious speech and ideas. Supposedly, through a clash of ideas, the truth, the most robust idea of all, will emerge. Thus, if one culture is dominant, it must deserve to be that way. Our ideas competed against those other, more easygoing, ones and won. It was a fair fight. Merit serves the same function in slightly different spheres.[10]

Is it any wonder then that prominent GamerGaters like Carl Benjamin (aka Sargon of Akkad)—a self-identified classical liberal who ran for the European Parliament with the far-right, anti-immigrant party UKIP in 2019—seem so keen to present themselves as defenders of free speech and meritocracy?[11] By disregarding questions of power and context, speech, videogames, grades, and other practices and forms of communication (which are inherently social) can be presented as apolitical, neutral, and detached from society as a whole. This individualistic and idealist perspective will always be more useful to people in positions of power than to people in the margins, who have much less to gain from what Yasmin Jiwani refers to as "discourses of denial."[12]

The title of this work, "Bringing Politics Into It," reflects my desire to push back against efforts to depoliticize social spaces. GamerGate and other reactionary movements are

appealing for many of the same reasons that leftist movements are: they provide a sense of purpose and community, social connections, collective power, and access to resources for people who might otherwise feel isolated, powerless, and alone. But the consequences of those movements are very different, not because of the tactics they use, but because of who is being targeted, and why. The feminists and "social justice warriors" are not the ones wielding real power in the game industry or in universities; it's the executives, the board of directors, the politicians, and the shareholders who are calling the shots, and it's against them, and the systems that empower them, that our criticism and anger should be directed. As new generations take up the struggle against climate change, capitalism, patriarchy, imperialism, and colonialism, we need to find the courage to fight alongside them, and to not avert our eyes when confronted with uncomfortable truths. In the words of Karl Marx:

> But, if constructing the future and settling everything for all times are not our affair, it is all the more clear what we have to accomplish at present: I am referring to ruthless criticism of all that exists, ruthless both in the sense of not being afraid of the results it arrives at and in the sense of being just as little afraid of conflict with the powers that be.[13]

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# Key Concepts

What follows is a brief introduction to key concepts and terms such as capitalism, imperialism, fascism, and neoliberalism. Each section is meant to serve as a starting point for further research and analysis, rather than an authoritative take on the subject. Many of these topics have been at the center of decades if not centuries of politically charged discussion and debate, much of which has been left out in the interest of providing a relatively quick and accessible explanation of what these terms mean to me, and how I am using them throughout the rest of the text. Although topics like capitalism and liberalism can be intimidating due to their scope and complexity, I believe it's important to unpack these terms if we want to understand what is going on in the world today.

Ultimately it's impossible to have a purely "objective" or external view of capitalism, as each of us also exists within it, meaning we are subject to its social pressures and material constraints. That said, the more we know about the history of capitalism and the various divergent schools of thought that have emerged over the past several centuries, the more we will be able to place these theories in context and make informed decisions based on our own interests and commitments.

## Capitalism

Capitalism is an economic system in which the means of production—meaning the physical tools, machinery, infrastructure, and raw materials required to create commodities—are privately owned and primarily used to produce a profit for the owner.[1] Capitalist society can be characterized by a number of key features:

1) The institution of private property, which is enforced by the power of the state, gives rise to two major classes: capitalists, who own the means of production; and workers, who do not own the means of production and must therefore sell their capacity to work (also known as their labour power) on the market in order to survive.[2]

2) Wage labour—i.e. work performed by workers in exchange for wages paid by capitalists—plays a central role within the economy. The amount of wages paid or hours worked are key sites of struggle between workers and capitalists.[3]

3) Money is exchanged for commodities on the market and becomes the primary means by which value is measured.[4]

4) Most goods are created so that they can be sold for a profit as commodities, rather than being created for personal or shared use or consumption. Some of this profit is consumed or hoarded by capitalists, while the bulk is reinvested in order to produce more commodities and more profit.[5]

5) Capital (i.e. investments) continuously expands and accumulates in the hands of capitalists.[6] The endless circulation, expansion, and accumulation of capital is the driving force of capitalism, and one of its defining features (hence the name). To put it simply, capitalism can be defined as a society organized around capital growth.[7]

Capitalism emerged as the dominant mode of production with the decline of feudalism in Western Europe. Although the transition from feudalism to capitalism took place at different times in different places and was not necessarily a smooth or linear process, many of the major changes occurred during the 16th and 17th centuries.[8] As Chris Harman argues, this shift involved a decline in the economic importance of rural agriculture alongside the growth of trade, wage labour, and urbanization, as peasants were increasingly driven off their land by profit-seeking landlords.[9] These landless peasants and former serfs provided the mass of "free" labour required for the development of industrial production, while the concentration of wealth in cities enabled the evolution of bureaucratic, centralized states that mediated between the interests of the old feudal classes, and the growing power of the merchants and industrialists The state eventually came to serve an important function within the emerging capitalist system as the primary enforcer of private property, providing the coercive institutions, in the form of publicly-funded courts, police, prisons, and armies, needed to allow for the constant accumulation and concentration of capital in the hands of the capitalist class.[10]

In the first volume of *The Modern World System* Immanuel Wallerstein suggests that the overseas expansion of Portugal, Spain, and other European nations from the 15th century onwards was driven primarily by economic competition.[11] The drive for profit led to wars of conquest, the formation of commercial monopolies, and the establishment of colonies abroad, which not only helped to secure the trade routes and foreign markets necessary to export Europe's ballooning supply of finished goods, but also provided access to an abundance of cheap raw materials, land, and labour. This came at the cost of genocide and the enslavement, oppression, and elimination of countless indigenous civilizations.[12] While the nobility and the emerging capitalist class clearly benefited the most from this wanton destruction of human life, European settlers from working class backgrounds also participated in the violence and displacement in exchange for a parcel of land as well as a privileged place in the emerging system of white supremacy. As J. Sakai argues in *Settlers: The Mythology of the White*

*Proletariat*, “Genocide was not an accident, not an ‘excess,’ not the unintended side-effect of virile European growth. Genocide was the necessary and deliberate act of the capitalists and their settler shock-troops.”[13]

Colonialism and the growing concentration of wealth in Western Europe formed the material basis for the industrial revolution, which saw the rapid development of the means of production in the form of new machines and factories.[14] Whereas previously most finished goods had been produced by artisans and peasants working independently or in small workshops using simple tools, the introduction of industrial manufacturing required a more complex division of labour. The production process was broken down into a large number of small, simple tasks, each one carried out by a different group of workers. This allowed commodities to be produced cheaply and more efficiently, but also resulted in the gradual deskilling of workers and the elimination of artisans and guilds which could no longer compete with modern industry. This process of automation and deskilling continues to this day, often driving desperate workers into more precarious and lower-paying jobs, thus forcing them to work longer hours despite rising productivity.[15]

All together these changes helped to lay the groundwork for the modern capitalist economy, characterized by globalization, the dominance of markets and industrial production processes, and an international division of labour. As capitalism has developed, more and more of the social and material relations that make up our society have been subsumed by the market, and have come to be defined in terms of economic transactions and the maximization of profit.[16] This reflects the expansion of capital and the constant need for new sites of investment and new markets to sell the growing supply of commodities. When too many commodities are produced and not enough can be sold capitalist businesses may either go bankrupt or be bought up by other companies. If the problem is particularly widespread, capitalism may enter a period of crisis.

Crises brought about by boom and bust cycles have occurred on a regular basis throughout the history of capitalism, however occasionally a cyclical crisis will give rise to a structural crisis. [17] A structural crisis takes place when capitalism cannot continue functioning without significantly altering its structure. Examples of structural crises include the Great Depression of the 1930s, which led to World War II and the rise of the Keynesian welfare state, and the crisis of the 1970s, which spurred support for neoliberalism. During the crisis life under capitalism becomes untenable for a critical mass of people, producing substantial opposition to the capitalist system and further threatening its continued existence. As William Robinson points out, global capitalism is coming up against both geographical and ecological limits to its

expansion, making it more difficult for the capitalist class to find profitable sites of investment, while also greatly increasing the suffering of the working class.[18] Arguably, the period we are living through now, which is marked by stark inequality, endless war, the dominance of transnational monopolies, global environmental destruction, mass displacement, and political polarization, could be defined as a structural crisis of capitalism.[19]

*Different Visions of Capitalism*

It's important to note that there are many different conceptions of capitalism that reflect different interests within capitalist society. The owners of capital have a vested interest in promoting capitalism and presenting it in the best possible light, and this will almost inevitably shape which economic theories and approaches are prioritized by institutions that are controlled or funded by the capitalist class.[20] Depending on how capitalism is viewed, different pictures of history and society emerge. Published in 1867, Karl Marx's *Capital: Critique of Political Economy* represented a significant break from previous approaches to the study of economic and social relations, which Marx and other economists at the time generally referred to as "political economy."[21] Although Marx died before all three volumes could be finished, the uncompleted work, combined with other writings by Marx and his close collaborator, Friedrich Engels, helped give rise to the field of Marxist political economy. Although Marxism has had a huge impact on economic theory as well as the development of sociology and many other disciplines, it has often been marginalized due to its political implications. Even today, mainstream economics (largely dominated by neoclassical economics, the branch of economics taught by most university programs), is in many ways deeply opposed to the fundamental tenets of Marxist economic theory.[22] As such, it's worth providing a brief overview of some of these major differences.

For Marxists, the wage relation is fundamentally exploitative, since workers produce the goods, yet capitalists derive most of the benefit from their labour.[23] Marxists argue that all profit is the product of human labour and represents the additional value that is produced by workers but appropriated by capitalists through their monopoly over the means of production (which is enforced by the capitalist state through policing, laws, etc.).[24] In order to maximize profits, capitalists are incentivized to cut costs by reducing wages, skirting regulations, cutting benefits, and increasing working hours, whereas workers can improve their quality of life by increasing wages, fighting for better conditions, and ultimately taking direct control over their workplace and state institutions.

Many of the institutions and political structures that exist under capitalism are shaped by this conflict of interests. The history of capitalism (and all other forms of class society) is therefore the history of class struggle.[25] For Marxists, capitalism is just one possible mode of production, and is marked by a number of internal contradictions or tensions that will eventually lead to its downfall. For example, under capitalism there is a contradiction between the capitalist tendency to cut wages in order to increase profits, which reduces effective demand since workers have less money to spend, and the need to sell a growing supply of commodities on the market in order for profits to be realized (i.e. made real), which requires ever-increasing demand.[26]

While Marxism emphasizes production, Lee Boldeman notes that neoclassical economics tends to focus on the market, often prioritizing abstract mathematical models over concrete social relations, the study of which is generally relegated to other disciplines such as sociology.[27] Christian Arnsperger and Yanis Varoufakis argue that neoclassical economics in particular tends to de-emphasize class struggle, while presenting market exchange as voluntary, meaning that workers enter into the wage relation of their own accord and not out of necessity. People are generally treated as individual units pursuing their own preferences, while capitalism is presented as if it were a stable, eternal entity that tends towards equilibrium, rather than a system that is historically contingent and deeply unstable.[28]

Although both Marxism and neoclassical economics draw on the insights of early "classical" economists such as David Ricardo and Adam Smith, they tend to highlight or reject different aspects of their work. For example, Marxists often underline the importance of the labour theory of value developed by Smith and Ricardo and further refined by Marx, which argues that the economic value of commodities is determined by the socially necessary labour time required to produce them (i.e. how much time does it take, on average, to produce a given commodity, including all the elements that went into its production).[29] Neoclassical economics, on the other hand, constructs a theory of value on the basis of individual exchange, perceptions of usefulness, and the relation between supply and demand, deemphasizing labour in the process. As Kit Sims Taylor observes:

> The classical economists found the determinants of value in the conditions of production; the neoclassical economists found the determinants of value in the meeting of buyer and seller in the marketplace. It also shifted the attention of economists away from social classes to individuals. If one assumed that the act of exchange was governed by the same laws whether the item being exchanged was a yard of cloth, a pint of ale, an hour of a carpenter's labor, the use of 160 acres of Iowa farm land for a year, or the use of a

> million dollars for a year, then there was no essential difference among capitalists, workers and landlords.[30]

This process of selection has political ramifications, producing different perceptions of the capitalist economy depending on what is highlighted: production or the market, conflict or exchange, coercion or freedom, malleable social relations or fixed, universal laws.[31] While Marxism does not necessarily reject concepts that are fundamental to neoclassical economics, such as the laws of supply and demand, it tends to view them as surface-level manifestations of deeper social and material processes, and generally takes a more holistic approach to the study of capitalist economies.[32]

Of course the danger in generalizing to this extent is that we end up skating over a wide variety of different trends and theoretical divergences that exist within both neoclassical and Marxist economics. However hopefully this brief introduction demonstrates that there is some value in taking a birds-eye view of economic theory and considering the general impact that different frameworks and approaches have on our view of the global capitalist system.

## Class

The term “class” can mean a variety of different things depending on how it’s used. It can be framed as a general tool for describing power relations—for example, when people speak of women as a class of people that is subjugated and exploited by men. It can refer to whether we own private property, or how much wealth we have in respect to others. It can refer to how labour is organized in our society, and who performs what types of labour (if they labour at all). It can refer to cultural practices, tastes, and behaviours that are shaped by how much money our parents have, where we live, what schools we attend, and so on, and how these practices, tastes, and behaviours are interpreted by others. Or, as Zak Cope argues, it can refer to all of those things simultaneously:

> Class denotes a dynamic social relationship corresponding to the system of ownership, the organization of labour and the distribution of material wealth as mediated by ideological, cultural and political institutions and practices. Above all, class is the product of political practices, with the relationship between the state and class struggle revolving around the issue of class domination.[33]

As Michael Parenti points out in *Blackshirts and Reds: Rational Fascism and the Overthrow of Communism,* there are few topics more avoided in mainstream American liberal discourse than class, a rule that seems to apply just as well to Canada. It’s considered rude or taboo to discuss

even mundane things like how much money we make at our job, or how much debt we have. While movements like Occupy and the fallout of the 2008 financial crisis have helped put class struggle back on the map, many still avoid naming capitalism or class domination as the root of the crisis, instead substituting these for less threatening terms like “neoliberalism” or “financialization.” The result is that most of us grow up without any understanding of the economic system we occupy (let alone the systems that preceded it), or how that shapes our relationships to one another, to our work, to the products of our labour, and to the planet as a whole.

While class is not a concept that is unique to capitalism—after all, class struggle existed under feudalism and slave societies as well—it is absolutely essential to understanding how capitalism works. It’s not money per se, but ownership over the means of production (meaning everything we use to produce the commodities we rely on to survive), that gives capitalists their power, and allows them to extract profit from the labour of the working class. But this alone is also not enough to explain how society is organized, how our lives are valued differently depending on where we fall in class hierarchies, or how wealth is transferred from one generation to the next. Why are the children of rich parents more likely to be rich? Why are poor people seen as lazy, stupid, or inept? What is the relationship between our political system and the economy? The tendency to divide economics from questions of culture, politics, the family, and other supposedly separate spheres hinders our ability to fully develop the concept of class or apply it to our day-to-day life. This is why I tend to prefer Cope’s definition, which views class as something which is dynamic, historically contingent, and interwoven with other social relations and categorizations, such as race, gender, ability, sexuality, and religion. At the same time, Cope also recognizes that class is fundamentally about domination or oppression, and how this gives rise to a struggle between competing interests: the interests of those whose labour is exploited, and the interests of those who exploit.

## Fascism

Fascism is a tricky term to define. One of the issues with many existing definitions of fascism is that they tend to focus on surface-level features, including aspects of fascist ideology, psychology, or culture, without analyzing the class composition of fascist movements, or the historical and material factors that lead to their emergence and growth. Without an understanding of its historical roots, fascism appears as a kind of anomaly, a spontaneous mass delusion that can’t be understood by any rational means. This makes it not only impossible to

predict when and where fascist movements will arise, but also very difficult to fight back, since we may know what fascists believe but not how they came to believe those things. Even knowing who is likely to join a fascist movement becomes difficult, since participation is framed purely as a matter of an individual's psychology or state of mind. This involvement also tends to be seen in black and white terms: either you are a fascist, or you're not, foreclosing any exploration of the various factors, forces, and groups that contribute to the growth and development of fascism. This is why it's important to see fascism as a *movement,* made up of a wide variety of actors with different interests and different levels of commitment to fascist beliefs, rather than a disembodied collection of ideas, values, or temperaments. While fascism may seem incomprehensible to the liberal mainstream, it is very much a flesh and blood phenomenon for those fighting it in the streets, online, at their workplace, or wherever else it happens to emerge, and this needs to be taken into account if resistance is going to be effective.[34]

To develop a clearer picture of how fascism has been discussed historically, and how it's broadly understood today, I'll be providing a brief overview of a selection of influential texts that either attempt to explain fascism directly, or explore contemporary fascistic movements without necessarily making the connection to older forms of fascist organizing. These various accounts of fascism can, I would argue, be classified into two broad categories: idealist definitions that focus largely on the culture, ideas, and psychology of fascism, and materialist definitions that explain fascism in terms of the material conditions and interests that give rise to it, often emphasizing the role played by capitalism and/or imperialism. Despite my criticisms of the former, I've included both in the hopes of fostering a more holistic understanding of fascism which refuses to simply take fascists at their word or to dehistoricize fascist movements, while still paying attention to how they present themselves to the world and the various types of recruitment strategies they use to grow their numbers during periods of crisis.

## *Idealist definitions*

### *Umberto Eco: Ur-Fascism*

Umberto Eco's essay "Ur-Fascism" attempts to explain fascism in terms of "a way of thinking and feeling, a group of cultural habits, of obscure instincts and unfathomable drives."[35] On the one hand, Eco acknowledges the "fuzziness" of fascism, the fact that its public face, its organizational structure, and the expressed ideas of its proponents varies from one historical period or location to another. At the same time, he insists that it is possible to come up with a

comprehensive list of features that, together, define what he calls “ur-fascism.”[36] These features include:

1) *The Cult of Tradition*: The development of a culture based on a combination of different beliefs and practices, regardless of contradictions, which is held up as the ultimate source of truth, rendering the advancement of learning impossible

2) *The Rejection of Modernism*: a rejection of the Age of Reason and the Enlightenment as the source of “modern depravity,” which does not include a rejection of technology or industrial production

3) *The Cult of Action for Action’s Sake*: Action is seen as beautiful in and of itself, and prior reflection is discouraged, while intellectuals are framed as degenerate snobs who reject tradition, encouraging distrust of the liberal intelligentsia

4) *Disagreement is Treason*: Analytical criticism is attacked because it threatens to expose the contradictions required for fascist ideology

5) *Fear of Difference*: Fascism exploits a “natural fear of difference,” and rejects intruders

6) *Appeal to a Frustrated Middle Class*: As a result of an economic crisis, the middle class suffers from “feelings of political humiliation,” and fears pressure from the lower social classes, creating a mass audience for fascism

7) *Obsession with a Plot*: Fascism weaves the fear of difference into a plot, leading its followers to feel besieged, and cultivating xenophobia and nationalism

8) *The Enemies are Too Strong and Too Weak*: The enemy is alternately presented as incredibly strong, in order to stir up feelings of humiliation and resentment, and incredibly weak, in order to promote confidence and a sense of superiority

9) *Pacifism is Trafficking With the Enemy, Life is Permanent Warfare*: Fascism depends on a state of perpetual war, creating a predicament where a final victory that would lead to peace is simultaneously sought after and rejected

10) *Contempt for the Weak*: All citizens of the nation are considered superior by nature, yet society is structured hierarchically, so that every group despises its inferiors, creating a form of popular elitism

11) *Everybody is Educated to Become a Hero*: Heroism is the norm, and followers are taught to crave a heroic death, tying the cult of heroism to the cult of death

12) *Machismo*: The desire for heroism is displaced onto sex, fostering machismo and a disdain for women, which is then further displaced onto weapons (as phallus and symbol of masculinity)

13) *Selective Populism*: Citizens are called upon to play the role of the People, which is conceived of as a monolithic entity with a singular will, to be "interpreted" (i.e. dictated) by the Leader

14) *"Newspeak"*: Discourse is limited to a simple vocabulary and syntax that limits the tools for critical thinking[37]

While Eco's text does help to break down many different elements of fascist ideology, his list does not allow us to explain why fascism grows in some periods and not others. For example, in point five, he mentions fear of difference, but does not examine where that fear comes from or how it is promoted within a population. Instead he describes it as "natural," ignoring the role that the media, the education system, the criminal justice system, the military, and other institutions play in spreading and instilling fear of the "Other," long before fascist movements ever come to power. By evading the question of where fascism comes from, Eco downplays the extent to which fascism's roots lie within our own society, and the institutions of liberal democracy.

*Angela Nagle: Kill All Normies*

Angela Nagle's book *Kill All Normies: Online Culture Wars from 4chan and Tumblr to Trump and the Alt-Right,* has been widely hailed as one of the most important accounts of the Alt-Right released to date.[38] The book has also received its fair share of criticism, particularly from those farther to the Left.[39] Like Eco, Nagle tends to focus on surface-level dynamics while paying little attention to underlying structural issues. Nagle looks at the development of internet culture and the emergence of the Alt-Right and sees only "a response to a response to a response."[40] Although it's true that both the Left and the Right do respond and adapt to the tactics, strategies, and rhetoric deployed by their rivals, she misleadingly implies that the rise of the Alt-Right can be attributed simply to the prominence of their ideological opponents, namely Tumblr feminism and liberal "political correctness," as opposed to a more fundamental shift in social and material conditions.

Although Nagle begins with Obama's 2008 presidential campaign, she fails to mention the economic crisis, or the long recession that followed as potential factors in the growth of reactionary forces. She also avoids making any direct connection to fascism, instead preferring to take the Alt-Right at their word when they refer to themselves as an ideology that "supersedes liberal democracy, Marxism and fascism," presenting them as a rising form of counterculture that is fundamentally anti-establishment.[41] The fact that they have received, in many cases, funding and political backing from the establishment they claim to oppose[42] does not seem to bother Nagle, as she takes this more as a sign that the Alt-Right is winning through

its own inherent strengths, than a sign that they may be far less “countercultural” than they claim to be. Nagle argues that “the Alt-Right is, to varying degrees, preoccupied with IQ, European demographic and civilizational decline, cultural decadence, cultural Marxism, anti-egalitarianism and Islamification but most importantly, as the name suggests, with creating an alternative to the right-wing conservative establishment,”[43] however this alternative has proven to be less a radical departure than an intensification of various existing (and sometimes contradictory) beliefs.

Despite its shortcomings, Nagle’s book does provide a convenient introduction to some of the major currents and factions that exist within the Alt-Right, including the misogynistic manosphere, the anime-loving trolls of 4chan, the tech-fetishizing neo-reactionaries of the Dark Enlightenment, and white nationalist “intellectuals” like Richard Spencer. She also discusses “alt-light” figures like Milo Yiannopolous, who flirt with the Alt-Right and participate in pushing their views into the mainstream, while keeping just enough distance to maintain plausible deniability. For Nagle, the main thing that unites these disparate groups is their hatred of the Left and “PC culture,” a spirit of transgression,[44] as well as their rejection of the “conservative establishment.”[45]

But while it’s clear that the image of rebellion is an important part of the Alt-Right’s appeal, the white supremacist, misogynistic, transphobic, ableist core of the Alt-Right is very much a product of the institutions they are supposedly rebelling against. As J. Moufawad-Paul aptly puts it:

> The reason why people gravitate towards the Alt-Right is not because of the behaviour of leftists but because, primarily, racism is an organic option for a white male who has been taught to see any reform (no matter how paltry) [aimed] at creating a level playing field as a personal attack. These are people who do not like being told that they cannot be in control of everything, whose white identity is fragile when subjected to critique, and who thus seek to reinvigorate a sense of power by submerging themselves in a current that never went away in a colonial and imperialist social formation: white supremacy.[46]

In a similar vein, the victim-blaming rape culture and misogyny that pervades the “manosphere,” is a reflection of a society structured around the oppression of women. As I’ve mentioned elsewhere, patriarchy has been integral to the survival of capitalism, which relied on forcing women, often through threats of violence, into a subordinate role in order to suppress wages, keep the working class divided, and ensure high birth rates to keep up with capitalist expansion.[47] As Parenti notes:

> The patriarchy buttressed the plutocracy: If women get out of line, what will happen to the family? And if the family goes, the entire social structure is threatened. What then will happen to the state and the dominant class's authority, privileges, and wealth? The Nazis were big on what we would today call family values—though most of the top Nazi leaders could hardly be described as devoted family men.[48]

Although maintaining a steady supply of babies is no longer such a pressing issue, keeping women down while providing certain privileges to men is still useful not only to the capitalist class, but to the many men who benefit from this relationship.[49] The idea that women are inferior to men, that they are naturally suited to domestic labour, and that they are to some extent the sexual slaves and property of men may have largely fallen out of the realm of polite conversation (thanks to centuries of collective struggle), but they remain a part of the cultural undercurrent, reinforced in countless different ways through the workings of institutions that maintain the gender binary and accord more credibility and worth to men than women.

Prominent figures associated with the Alt-Right, including pick-up artists like Daryush Valizadeh (aka Roosh V), white nationalists like Richard Spencer, and neo-Nazi hackers like Andrew Auernheimer (aka weev), have simply absorbed elements of the dominant culture and taken them to their logical conclusion. This in itself is a type of taboo, as the liberal establishment would prefer to keep the brutality and violence of the system hidden, in order to maintain a kind of false peace, where portions of the population can continue to believe that they live in a fair, just, and "civilized" society. In this sense Nagle is correct that the Alt-Right is a reaction to liberalism, but it is also a product of its contradictions. The Alt-Right and Trump are "dangerous" only insofar as they expose the cracks in the system, making it clear that racism, sexism, and other forms of targeted violence have not disappeared altogether, as some would have us believe.

The appearance of transgression is further amplified by the Alt-Right's habit of appropriating the surface-level imagery of the Left to appeal to a broader audience, whether that's the remixing of communist propaganda by GamerGate,[50] or the strategic use of appeals to "free speech."[51] Nagle's account highlights what happens when the language and aesthetics of leftism becomes unmoored from its political foundations, allowing it to be more easily co-opted and deployed by the Right. Transgression against the status quo can mean anything and nothing when you refuse to define what you mean by the status quo. The result is a pleasurable power fantasy that offers release from social pressures and internalized norms, but without any sense of responsibility to others.

Far from being new, however, this process has happened repeatedly throughout the history of fascism, with many fascist movements making vague or explicit references to socialism early on in an attempt to grow their base, while rejecting the underlying political goals and analysis.[52] This does not mean, however, that the political movements they were appropriating from were invalid or somehow aligned with the politics of the Right, as Nagle seems to imply.[53] By failing to connect the Alt-Right to the history of fascism and white nationalism more generally, Nagle misses out on the many ways in which the Alt-Right is a continuation of historical patterns, as well a recombination of existing elements into a form that is at once new and yet intimately familiar.

As Jordy Cummings argues, Nagle's book also ends up reinforcing a politics of exclusion, punching left just as often as it punches right.[54] From Nagle's point of view, the Alt-Right would not exist if it were not for the left going too far with their "hysterical" callouts and their "anti-male, anti-white, anti-straight, anti-cis rhetoric."[55] At times she veers towards what is now commonly called "horseshoe theory," which equates the Far Left with the Far Right by framing both in terms of their distance from the (reasonable, rational) political centre.[56] In contrast to theories which position the Left and Right as polar opposites, horseshoe theory portrays the political spectrum as a horseshoe, highlighting the supposed similarities between the two "extreme" ends of the spectrum, which are assumed to be equally dangerous. The result is that Nagle ends up pinning much of the blame for right-wing violence on the very people who are being targeted.

*Hannah Arendt: The Origins of Totalitarianism*

Arendt's book *The Origins of Totalitarianism* is often cited in relation to fascism, and in many ways helped set a precedent for the arguments put forth by Nagle. While the book tackles a wide variety of topics, including anti-Semitism, imperialism, and the origins of racism, the part which tends to attract the most attention is the final section on totalitarianism.[57] Writing in the wake of World War II and during the early years of the Cold War, Arendt applies the horseshoe theory described above to Bolshevism and Nazism. This is particularly evident in the final section of her book, where she argues that they are both examples of mass movements that led to the establishment of a totalitarian regime. Arendt describes totalitarianism as a form of absolute evil, characterized primarily by the arbitrary, unrestrained use of violence and terror, deployed even in the absence of any real opposition or threat. Totalitarianism is a purely destructive phenomenon, detached from profit motives or rational self-interest, and has its origins in mass movements composed largely of "neutral, politically indifferent people who never

join a party and hardly ever go to the polls."[58] These masses, she claims, lack any common social, political or economic interest, and emerge from atomization and the breakdown of bourgeois-dominated class society. The only thing that ties them together is a set of convictions or sentiments which, she argues, are shared by "all classes of society," including anger and cynicism towards existing political parties, the feeling of being disposable, and the radical loss of self-interest.[59]

For Arendt, it makes little difference whether these masses are organized by communists or by fascists, as both cases ultimately lead to the same horrific conclusion. In this sense, her account aligns quite well with the anti-communist political climate of the Second Red Scare, which coincided with the publication of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, and may have accounted, in large part, for its popularity. Arendt provided an intellectual argument for stripping communism and fascism of their distinct political characteristics, and uniting them under the banner of a single, mass pathology. In doing so, she contributed to the demonization of communists, while also legitimizing the more general fear of democracy and mass organizing that underlies liberal elitism. For Arendt the masses are inherently dangerous, and must, for their own good, be restrained by a society governed by educated elites and state institutions. As Corey Robin points out,

> Arendt's account dissolves conflicts of power, interest and ideas in a bath of psychological analysis, allowing her readers to evade difficult questions of politics and economics. We need not probe the content of a particular ideology – what matters is not what it says but what it does – or the interests it serves (they do not exist). We can ignore the distribution of power: in mass society, there is only a desert of anomie. We can disregard statements of grievance: they only conceal a deeper vein of psychic discontent.[60]

This refusal to acknowledge the role that class or material interests play in creating and cultivating fascism places Arendt in direct opposition to materialist accounts of fascism, which argue that fascist groups are based in the middle class, and gain power thanks to the cooperation of the capitalist class. The middle class turns to fascism in order to preserve its own position in society and avoid being pushed down into the ranks of the working poor, while the capitalist class attempts to use fascist movements to crush working class rebellion and maintain their position of power. Fascism is therefore a perfectly rational, if short-sighted response to capitalist crisis, one which operates in favour of the powerful and against the interests of the oppressed. Communism, on the other hand, presents the greatest threat to the interests of the capitalist class and all the various, interwoven structures of power (such as patriarchy and white

supremacy) that allow capitalists to maintain their position of dominance. This is why communists and anarchists have historically been among the first targets of fascist violence, and the first to engage fascists in the streets and on the battlefield.[61]

## *Materialist and class-based definitions*

### *Clara Zetkin: Fascism*

Clara Zetkin's article "Fascism" was published in 1923, shortly after Mussolini had taken power in Italy in 1922. It represents one of the earliest attempts to define fascism in Marxist terms, and distinguish it from other forms of right-wing violence. Zetkin was one of the first to point out that fascism has its roots in the middle class, or what she calls the "petty bourgeoisie," a group that doesn't quite hold the wealth required to buy out entire political parties, but still benefits to some degree from private property and the exploitation of workers. This group is largely made up of small business owners, landlords, professionals, and former military personnel, who occupy a relatively privileged position compared to the working class.[62]

Threatened by both declining profits and political instability, the petty bourgeoisie form the core of fascist movements, while often recruiting people from the lower classes to do their dirty work.[63] Zetkin observes that fascists tend to position themselves as alternatives to socialist or communist parties, presenting themselves as a movement "for the people" while at the same time violently targeting society's most vulnerable groups. Because of their willingness to attack leftist and working-class movements, who are their main political enemies, they often receive funding and support from the capitalist class, who find themselves increasingly relying on fascist groups in order to maintain the sputtering capitalist system during an economic crisis.[64]

### *Leon Trotsky - Fascism: What It Is and How To Fight It*

Leon Trotsky's "Fascism: What It Is and How To Fight It" is a compilation of texts written mostly in the 1930s, during the rise of fascism in Germany. For Trotsky, as for Zetkin, the rise of fascism represents an important shift from "business as usual," signalling the inability of liberal democratic institutions to keep order as the capitalist crisis intensifies and inequality skyrockets. As he puts it,

> At the moment that the "normal" police and military resources of the bourgeois dictatorship, together with their parliamentary screens, no longer suffice to hold society in a state of equilibrium — the turn of the fascist regime arrives. Through the fascist agency, capitalism sets in motion the masses of the crazed petty bourgeoisie and the

> bands of declassed and demoralized lumpenproletariat — all the countless human beings whom finance capital itself has brought to desperation and frenzy.[65]

In Trotsky's view, fascism emerges thanks to the conditions created by capitalism itself, which gives rise to inequality and precarity by concentrating wealth in fewer and fewer hands. However, he also points out that there is nothing to guarantee that members of the middle class will automatically turn to fascism, and instead suggests that they can also be won over to the Left, assuming the Left is organized and effective in winning concrete material gains for the majority. To do this however, the Left must not only contend with the fascists, but also the capitalist class, who would, given the choice, prefer to see fascism come out on top.

*Michael Parenti: Blackshirts and Reds*

*Blackshirts and Reds: Rational Fascism and the Overthrow of Communism* by Michael Parenti also explains fascism in terms of class struggle, noting that the primary function of fascism was the violent suppression of communists, socialists, trade unionists, and other leftist groups and organizations, which, at the time of fascism's rise in Europe, threatened to overthrow capitalism and the ruling capitalist class.[66] In contrast to ahistorical accounts which attribute fascism's growth to the unparalleled charisma of Hitler, Mussolini, or other fascist leaders, Parenti argues that fascism came to power in large part thanks to the cooperation and material support of the financiers and industrialists, who benefited from and encouraged the fascists' unrelenting attacks on the anti-capitalist Left.[67]

Parenti makes it clear that the conflict between the Left and the Right isn't the result of a simple misunderstanding or mass delusion; rather it originates from real social contradictions.[68] Leftist movements do represent a challenge to the established social order. For those who derive at least some benefits from capitalism, patriarchy, white supremacy, imperialism, and other systems of domination and oppression, fascism can thus seem like a perfectly rational and reasonable option, allowing them to hold on to their position of privilege in the short term, even if most of them will wind up being betrayed by the movement in the long run. Fascists can never actually deliver on their promise of a return to an idealized past, since that past never existed in the first place. The best they can offer are privileges for a select few at the cost of imperialist expansion, war, and genocide.[69] The alternative, of course, would be to join other oppressed groups in challenging the rule of the capitalist class, a path which is almost unthinkable to generations that have grown up with a culture that is severely allergic to any discussion of class.[70] As Parenti makes clear throughout his book, anti-communism and the suppression of Marxism have resulted in a situation where fascism appears to be the only viable option for

those who are frustrated with the status quo. If disillusioned white men are so quick to jump on the anti-leftist, anti-feminist, and "anti-anti-racist" bandwagons, it may have more to do with the way our society is currently structured than with the special cunning or sophistication of far-right organizers.

*Robert Paxton: The Anatomy of Fascism*

Robert O. Paxton's *The Anatomy of Fascism* follows a similar route as Parenti and Trotsky, attempting to explain what fascism *does,* not just what it says. The book traces fascism's development through the 20th century, focusing especially on Italy and Germany. Paxton breaks down this development into five stages: "(1) the creation of movements; (2) their rooting in the political system; (3) their seizure of power; (4) the exercise of power; (5) and, finally, the long duration, during which the fascist regime chooses either radicalization or entropy."[71] Paxton also works to underline "the complicity of ordinary people in the establishment and functioning of fascist regimes,"[72] suggesting that the extreme violence of events like the Holocaust had its origins, not in the minds of deranged monsters, but in the day-to-day routines and banal choices of "members of the establishment: magistrates, police officials, army officers, businessmen."[73]

For Paxton, there is no "fixed essence" of fascism, only a "a series of processes working themselves out over time."[74] In other words, fascism must be understood historically, as a movement involving many different parts, not simply as a static, self-contained thing or set of ideas. As he notes in the introduction to his book, the idea that fascism is an ideology, first and foremost, is a view promoted by fascists themselves. This serves as a kind of trap, leading us to focus on their doctrines or propaganda, while neglecting the material and social conditions that accompany their emergence and rise to power. It also allows contemporary fascists to present themselves as harmless or at the very least deserving of constitutional protection—after all, they argue, it's just "ideas," and everyone is entitled to their ideas. Fascism privileges idealism over materialism, and expression over structural change. As Walter Benjamin famously puts it in the epilogue of "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," "Fascism attempts to organize the newly created proletarian masses without affecting the property structure which the masses strive to eliminate. Fascism sees its salvation in giving these masses not their right, but instead a chance to express themselves. The masses have a right to change property relations; Fascism seeks to give them an expression while preserving property."[75]

Paxton's account is particularly useful for three reasons. First, it helps to highlight the contradictions between fascist rhetoric and practice, using historical examples. For example, he

argues that despite an early commitment to anti-capitalism, fascist parties, once in power, mostly failed to act on their promises to the working class, as this would have alienated their wealthy supporters.[76] Secondly, it helps to demystify fascist movements, and suggests the need for different strategies and approaches that correspond to different stages of development. Dealing with Nazis in power is a very different thing from dealing with Nazis who are just beginning to build a mass movement. Third, it underlines the fact that fascists do not come to power on their own, but rely on building coalitions with established conservative and liberal forces. This presents an opportunity for anti-fascists, who can apply pressure on centrist organizations and parties that are concerned with preserving their public image, making it clear that any alliance with fascist groups or politics will not be accepted by the public at large.

## *Some important additions*

### *Zak Cope - Divided World, Divided Class*

Despite the strengths of the previous texts, none of them devote much time to analyzing the origins of racism and white supremacy within fascist movements—a serious oversight given the role white supremacy has played in the historical development of many fascist organizations and regimes. Zak Cope's book *Divided World, Divided Class: Global Political Economy and the Stratification of Labour Under Capitalism* focuses on the ties between racism and imperialism, and the creation of what Marxists call the "labour aristocracy," a relatively privileged segment of the working class that lives in rich, imperialist countries and benefits from the unusually high profits (also known as superprofits) extracted from the Global South.[77] Cope suggests that it is the global division of labour created by imperialism which, above all, accounts for the spread of racist ideology. As he states, "Racism does not occur within the confines of a hermetically isolated society, but within an international class system fundamentally structured by imperialism. The ethnic, 'racial' or religious composition of especially oppressed sections of the First World working class is intrinsically related to the geographic, military, legal, cultural and economic mechanics of imperialist national oppression."[78]

In other words, racism can be understood as an ideology that legitimizes imperialism and the creation of an uneven division of labour where the worst, most brutal forms of work are reserved for the people of colonized countries. It's the racialized people of the Global South who produce most of the world's commodities, which are then sold to the wealthier, majority-white residents of the imperial core, who maintain a quasi-monopoly over the best paid and least back-breaking forms of labour. The higher wages paid to workers in the Global North are made

possible by the slavery and starvation wages imposed on colonized people, producing superprofits for corporations based in countries like the US and Canada, some of which are directed back to the state through taxes in order to pay for our social services and infrastructure. The reason we are so well off with respect to workers in other regions isn't because we are especially good at fighting for our rights or wrenching capital away from the hands of capitalists, but because we are part of a global system that siphons wealth away from the periphery and towards the core. This makes it easier for capitalists to give up a portion of their earnings to reduce social tensions at home, while still maintaining a healthy rate of profit.

Racism works to naturalize this global division of labour. Instead of seeing global inequality as a product of history and the capitalist drive towards profit, we are encouraged to believe that white people are inherently superior, and that this is why countries inhabited largely by non-whites are so "underdeveloped." The fact that imperialist powers played an active role in underdeveloping colonized countries, by stripping them of their resources, fighting any attempt at self-determination or autonomy, murdering large numbers of people, and enslaving the rest in mines, plantations, prisons, and factories, is either downplayed or ignored. Instead, the people living in these countries are blamed for the violence, corruption, and poverty caused, to a great extent, by Western powers.

This pattern of racist scapegoating has recently crystallized in the image of the "migrant," a shadowy, heavily racialized figure who has no distinct country of origin, but is nevertheless assumed to be black or brown and probably Muslim. In both the mainstream media and far-right propaganda, the migrant is portrayed as a criminal, a parasite, and a threat to Western civilization itself.[79] As Yasmin Jiwani writes, drawing on the work of Teun A. van Dijk, "when the media report on issues of immigration, they invariably cite figures indicating how many of *them* are out there, and how many more are trying to get in," invoking an image of "invasive hordes that need to be contained and controlled."[80] In essence, the West projects all the violence it has inflicted on the rest of the world onto the bodies of those it has harmed. Images of refugees approaching the border are viewed with horror, like ghosts that have come back to haunt the imperialist core. The attempt to banish the migrant, both figuratively and through policy measures and the construction of militarized borders and concentration camps, becomes a way of rejecting any awareness of or responsibility for the centuries of imperialism that underlie First World privilege, and continue to drive the so-called "migrant crisis."

As Cope remarks, it's no coincidence that fascism first took root in Europe, the heartland of imperialism and colonialism, near the end of the First World War, when imperialist expansion was nearing its geographic limits, forcing the imperial powers to battle one another for control of

the colonies.[81] The extreme nationalism that marked the early fascist movements of the 20th century, and which persists today, is a consequence of the conflict of interests, not just between the Global North and the Global South, but also between rival imperialist nations, whose fortunes depend on competing with one another for unhindered access to the labour and resources of the colonies. Fascism, as it turns out, found its most fertile ground among the losers of this competition. As Cope notes, quoting the political scientist Richard Löwenthal:

> Fascism exemplifies the imperialism of those who have arrived late at the partition of the world. Behind this imperialism lies a huge need for expansionary opportunities, but none of the traditional weapons for realising them. It is a form of imperialism which cannot operate by means of loans, since it is so much in debt, nor on the basis of technical superiority, since it is uncompetitive in so many areas. It is something novel in history—an imperialism of paupers and bankrupts.[82]

This argument aligns with Robert Paxton's definition of fascism as "A form of political behavior marked by obsessive preoccupation with community decline, humiliation or victimhood and by compensatory cults of unity, energy and purity,"[83] as well as Josephine Armistead's claim that "the *fear of humiliation* [lies] at the root of fascism."[84] Fascism is the movement of temporarily embarrassed millionaires, of people for whom the desire to join the ranks of the imperialist elite outweighs the desire to work together to build a more just and humane society. While fascists themselves may not recognize it, the hatred they direct against immigrants, Indigenous people, Black people, and other colonized groups, combined with their promotion of "patriotism" and nationalism, all work to reinforce the global division of labour, at the expense of the international working class.

As Cope puts it, "geographically speaking, on its own soil fascism is imperialist repression turned inward."[85] When the imperialist core reaches the limits of its ability to extract wealth from overseas, it begins to eat itself, imposing the same hardships on certain portions of its people that it had originally applied to the colonized subjects of the Global South. For privileged white Europeans and North Americans, what is so shocking and disturbing about this process isn't the unique brutality of fascism—because it is not in any way unique. Rather, fascism is horrifying because it takes the dehumanizing violence that tends to happen far away, or behind closed doors, and brings it home, laying it bare for everyone to see. To quote Aimé Césaire's *Discourse on Colonialism*, what we "cannot forgive Hitler for is not the crime in itself, the crime against man, it is not the humiliation of man as such, it is the crime against the white man, the humiliation of the white man, and the fact that he applied to Europe colonialist

procedures which until then had been reserved exclusively for the Arabs of Algeria, the ‘coolies’ of India, and the ‘niggers’ of Africa.”[86]

*Josephine Armistead - The Silicon Ideology*

Josephine Armistead’s recent works, “The Silicon Ideology” and “The Silicon Ideology Revisited,” published in 2016 and 2017 respectively, provide a helpful counterpoint to Nagle’s assessment of the Alt-Right. Unlike Nagle, Armistead draws a direct connection between the Alt-Right and earlier fascist movements, while also providing a helpful breakdown of various theoretical approaches to fascism. After surveying the literature on fascism, she dives into the historical origins of neo-reaction, a 21st-century variant of fascism that combines calls for an authoritarian form of government (transforming the country into either a joint-stock corporation or a monarchy run by tech CEOs like Elon Musk), with ethnic nationalism, scientific racism, extreme misogyny, transhumanism, and absolute faith in the power of technology. According to Armistead, “There are two poles within neo-reaction, the ‘academic’ pole, exemplified in LessWrong and the blogs of the main theorists of the movement (Unqualified Reservations, More Right, Outside In), and the ‘alt-right’ pole, exemplified in 4chan (especially the /pol/ board), 8chan, My Posting Career, and The Right Stuff.”[87]

For Armistead, the origins of the Alt-Right lie in Silicon Valley, and the rise of a technocratic elite that has all but abandoned the communal ideals of early hacker cultures (which emerged in an environment where computer technology had not yet been fully commodified), in favour of an entrepreneurial spirit of individual empowerment. The title of her essays evoke Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron’s influential article “The Californian Ideology,” which describes the fusion of American libertarianism, technological determinism, 1960s counterculture, and reactionary neoconservatism that emerged alongside the growth of Silicon Valley and the dotcom bubble in the 1990s.[88] In contrast to the stereotype of the dim-witted, blue collar neo-Nazi skinhead, neo-reactionaries present themselves as tech-savvy, white collar intellectuals. The extreme concentration of power and capital in Silicon Valley, combined with the fallout of the 2008 financial crisis, climate change, and the “War on Terror,” has helped drive fascism into the 21st century.

*Summing Up*

To summarize, I would like to argue that the following points are essential for building a full-fledged understanding of fascism:

1) Fascism is a mass movement that emerges in periods of capitalist crisis, when liberal democratic institutions begin to collapse or can no longer maintain order
2) Fascism has its base in the middle class, which includes both the petty bourgeoisie (small business owners, professionals, landlords, etc.), and the labour aristocracy, i.e. the portion of the global working class that benefits from imperialism
3) Fascism is primarily a reaction to a loss of privilege, including threats to the existing social order caused by capitalist crisis and the rise of anti-oppressive movements from below
4) Fascism seeks to re-entrench existing hierarchies by terrorizing marginalized people and crushing the Left
5) Fascist movements often receive aid from the capitalist class, or their representatives (for example, the police,[89] or established political parties); for the capitalist class, fascism is preferable to allowing the anti-capitalist Left to take power
6) Fascism involves ideology but cannot be reduced to it; fascist talking points and symbols are often appropriated from the Left, but stripped of their political foundations, resulting in contradictions between rhetoric and practice
7) Fascism can be seen as a product of the various interwoven forms of oppression that exist in capitalist society; while fascists may try to overthrow the sitting government, they don't present an existential threat to the global economic system as a whole, rather they are its last line of defence

## Imperialism and Colonialism

Broadly speaking, imperialism is the process of building an empire and expanding its power, wealth, and influence through military, economic, political, and cultural forms of domination.

*Monopolies*

While imperialism is sometimes used in a general sense to refer to any form of empire-building, Vladimir Lenin defines imperialism as a specific stage of capitalism.[90] During this stage, competition between independent capitalist businesses gives way to monopoly, resulting in the extreme concentration of capital in the hands of a few major cartels, which effectively control large portions of the global economy. For Lenin, capitalism inevitably produces a tendency towards monopoly and the concentration of the productive forces, since the formation

of monopolies is the most effective way of increasing the rate of profit for investors. Banks play a major role in this process, as they allow for the creation, accumulation, and manipulation of large amounts of finance capital (i.e. money). “Finance capital, concentrated in a few hands and exercising a virtual monopoly, exacts enormous and ever-increasing profits from the floating of companies, issue of stock, state loans, etc., strengthens the domination of the financial oligarchy and levies tribute upon the whole of society for the benefit of monopolists.”[91]

*World Systems Analysis*

Immanuel Wallerstein makes a similar observation about monopolies in his work on world systems analysis and the core-periphery model.[92] Wallerstein argues that there are two types of production processes: core production processes that are controlled by quasi-monopolies and generate high rates of profitability, and peripheral production processes, which are characterized by high rates of competition and low profits. These two processes can be mapped onto different states or geographical regions, with quasi-monopolies concentrated in a small number of relatively strong states (such as those found in the Global North or First World), while peripheral production is concentrated in a much larger number of weaker states in the Global South or Third World. In between the two is the semi-periphery, which contains a relatively even mix of core and peripheral production processes.[93] Because the core regions are stronger both militarily and economically, they are able to extract surplus value from the periphery and semi-periphery, both through debt, unequal exchange on the global market, as well as plunder, which is highly destructive but results in immense, short-term profits for the plunderer. In this way the core-periphery relation reproduces itself over time, turning an initial advantage into long-term domination through the continuous extraction of wealth.[94]

*Imperialism and the State*

In *Imperialism and Unequal Development* Samir Amin argues that the super-exploitation of the Global South by the Global North is one of the defining features of the world capitalist system.[95] As a result, the Global South is a critical arena for anti-capitalist struggle. In Amin’s words, “Most important is the fact that the center of gravity of the exploitation of labor by capital (and, in the first place, by monopoly capital which dominates the system as a whole) has been displaced from the center of the system to its periphery. The mass of surplus value (in all its forms—absolute and relative, apparent and masked by price structures) extracted from labor in the periphery has been increasing steadily since the end of last century. This simple fact explains why the periphery plays an increasingly active role in the global socialist revolution.”[96]

This does not mean, however, that workers in the Global North are off the hook. As John Smith points out, the imperialist states play a crucial role in enforcing the interests of corporations and monopolies abroad, as well as controlling the movement of workers across national borders.[97] Although multinationals may operate in a number of different countries and often make use of global supply chains, they are typically headquartered in the Global North, where they enjoy the protection of the capitalist state and, in the case of the United States, privileged access to the supply of US currency.[98] In order to loosen the grip of giant multinationals on the global economy, workers here must also take a stand against imperialism and oppose the wars, sanctions, and other measures used to maintain the dominance of the US and its allies.

*Colonialism*

Just as capitalism gives rise to imperialism and monopolies, the drive for profit also produces a strong incentive for the colonization and subjugation of areas that have not yet been incorporated into capitalism. As Lenin remarks, “The more capitalism is developed, the more strongly the shortage of raw materials is felt, the more intense the competition and the hunt for sources of raw materials throughout the whole world, the more desperate the struggle for the acquisition of colonies.”[99]

Imperialism is often conflated with colonialism, since the two are closely related. However colonialism is a more specific term, and typically involves sending settlers to occupy a foreign territory, seizing the land and resources, and establishing a colonial system of rule aimed at enslaving, exploiting, or exterminating the indigenous population. Colonialism has played a central role in the development of global capitalism, providing access to an abundance of raw materials and cheap labour, and allowing colonial powers to amass huge quantities of wealth, which in turn created the foundations for the industrial revolution in Europe and the rise of monopolies.[100] While the European ruling class have painted colonialism as a “civilizing mission” carried out for the good of colonized people, these narratives are nothing more than veils aimed at disguising the underlying economic motive: profit. In *Discourse on Colonialism*, Aimé Césaire asks:

> What, fundamentally, is colonization? To agree on what it is not: neither evangelization, nor a philanthropic enterprise, nor a desire to push back the frontiers of ignorance, disease, and tyranny, nor a project undertaken for the greater glory of God, nor an attempt to extend the rule of law. To admit once and for all, without flinching at the consequences, that the decisive actors here are the adventurer and the pirate, the wholesale grocer and the ship owner, the gold digger and the merchant, appetite and

> force, and behind them, the baleful projected shadow of a form of civilization which, at a certain point in its history, finds itself obliged, for internal reasons, to extend to a world scale the competition of its antagonistic economies.[101]

*Racism*

Colonialism and imperialism create the material basis for modern-day racism and white supremacy, as well as the rise of fascism. The subjugation of one part of the world by another produces a need for narratives and attitudes that legitimize and/or naturalize this inequality. As Zak Cope argues, "racism is the ideological expression of a system of profoundly unequal economic and political relations. To oppose racist thinking means to render it inoperative by practically abolishing those social institutions which accord it significance."[102] This means not only opposing imperialist wars, but also working to dismantle monopolies and the transnational corporations and financial institutions that use debt, trade deals, and other economic mechanisms to disempower and exploit the periphery.

## Historical Materialism

Historical materialism is a particular approach to the study of human history and society that emphasizes social relations, material conditions, and class struggle, and is closely associated with the Marxist theoretical tradition. The basic principles underlying this methodology are described by Karl Marx in *The German Ideology*,[103] although Marx never used the term "historical materialism" himself. Marx was opposed to idealist conceptions of history that assume that ideas, or else some external, immaterial "will" such as God, are the main drivers of history and can be studied more or less in isolation from material realities.[104] In contrast, the materialist view of history is based on the premise that ideas are rooted in specific social relations and material conditions, and can only be properly understood in that context. Marx insists on not "setting out from what men say, imagine, conceive, nor from men as narrated, thought of, imagined, conceived, in order to arrive at men in the flesh; but setting out from real, active men, and on the basis of their real life-process demonstrating the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of this life-process."[105] In other words, historical materialism starts from the understanding that human beings must be able to live and reproduce themselves in order to make (or write) history. This means taking care of basic needs like food, water, clothing, and shelter. If we examine how people meet these needs, then we have a basis

for understanding the political organization and ideology of any given society at any given point in time. As Friedrich Engels writes,

> The materialist conception of history starts from the proposition that the production of the means to support human life and, next to production, the exchange of things produced, is the basis of all social structure; that in every society that has appeared in history, the manner in which wealth is distributed and society divided into classes or orders is dependent upon what is produced, how it is produced, and how the products are exchanged.[106]

Production almost always involves some amount of human labour, which is necessary in order to fulfill our needs and transform raw materials into useable goods. In order to make our labour more efficient, tasks are often divided up between different people. Through this division of labour, people enter into different relations with one another and with the materials, instruments, and products of labour.[107] As technology develops and the division of labour becomes more complex, the society may reach a point where its members can collectively produce more than they need to survive. This allows some people to stop performing labour altogether, and instead rely on the labour of others by appropriating the surplus (i.e. everything that is left over after the labourers' own basic needs are met). This situation is only possible however if one group or class gains control over the means of production, meaning the instruments and raw materials needed to make things, and is able to restrict access in such a way that the labouring class is forced to work for them and give up a portion of the surplus they produce in order to survive.[108] Once formed, these two classes, the owning (or ruling) class and the labouring class, have fundamentally different relationships to the means of production, which results in opposing interests. It's in the best interests of the ruling class to maintain control over the means of production and maximize the amount of surplus they appropriate because it allows them to live a life of leisure and plenty, while it's in the best interests of the labouring class to resist exploitation and seize back the means of production in order to improve conditions for themselves.[109]

According to the historical materialist approach it's these sorts of internal contradictions that animate history. While idealism often attempts to "bracket off" economic matters, separating the study of economics from the study of history, politics, culture, and society, historical materialists see these things as inherently interconnected. As Ellen Meiksins Wood argues, the ideological separation between economics and politics has a material basis, in the sense that capitalism has established a cooperative division of labour between capitalists, who serve as vehicles for the accumulation of capital through the extraction of surplus value (i.e. profit), and

the state, which provides the coercive power (in the form of police, prisons, and military) necessary to maintain the institution of private property and render this accumulation possible in the first place. In practice, however, this "separation" can best be understood as a symbiotic relationship that allows exploitation to be carried out more efficiently than under previous modes of production, such as feudalism, where economic and political powers were both invested in the feudal lord.[110] If we attempt to look at either the economic or the political in isolation, and ignore the relationship between the two, we will never be able to grasp how they function in relation to the "social whole," or totality.[111]

History is not an external entity that we study from afar; rather it's an ongoing process, and it's important that we understand our own work as part of this process. Like all forms of scientific study, historical materialism is "open to the future," in the sense that any claim put forward can be revised or rejected based on new evidence and historical developments.[112] But just because the process is aimed at developing a better understanding of an objective, material reality does not mean that the people involved in the process are inherently objective or "unbiased." We should be wary of historians that make false claims to objectivity and neutrality, while ignoring the ways that they themselves are enmeshed in social and material structures, as well as those that attempt to present certain facets of society as eternal or unchanging. There is no such thing as a view from nowhere, and any writing on history must in turn be historicized and put into context, with an eye towards identifying the various interests and political tensions involved. We are all products of the society we live in, and our interpretation of history is shaped by that society and our place within it. From this perspective historical materialism aligns well with feminist critiques of "scientific objectivity," by asserting that knowledge is always situated and connected to power.[113] As J. Moufawad-Paul argues,

> Historical materialism is limited by the historical periods in which it is practiced (which is why Marx and others can make mistakes) while also possessing the tools to critique this very thing. It is mediated by history and yet can also be abstracted from history to make this very point. It can comprehend the movement of history while still being within this movement —like the procedure of physics which establishes the historical moment of Newton's law of gravity but also transcends this moment with Einstein's transformed theory of gravity.[114]

In order to refine our theories, it's not enough to simply write about history or society—we need to put our ideas into practice, collectively testing them against material reality and assessing the outcomes. The concept of praxis synthesizes theory and practice, presenting them as two sides of the same coin, which reflect and inform one another in a mutually

dependent, dynamic relationship. If historical materialism is the methodology, then class struggle is the laboratory and the tools and strategies of mass organization are our instruments. By putting our theories to the test and examining what works, and what doesn't, we come closer to our goal of combating inequality and dismantling oppressive systems built on the exploitation of one class by another.

## Liberalism

The history of liberalism can be traced back to the decline of feudalism and the rise of capitalism as the primary mode of production. This shift in the economic and political order led to significant changes in the way people conceived of themselves in relation to the world around them, eventually giving birth to liberalism as the dominant ideology of capitalism.[115] While there are many different strands of liberal thought, in general liberalism is based on an idealist and individualistic conception of "freedom" and "democracy" oriented around private property and capitalist social relations.[116] While liberalism is, at least on the surface, committed to the principles of freedom and equality, it also works to legitimize and maintain systems of oppression, including the rule of the rich.[117] As Harold Laski put it in *The Rise of European Liberalism*;

> Liberalism has always been affected by its tendency to regard the poor as men who have failed through their own fault. It has always suffered from its inability to realise that great possessions mean power over men and women as well as over things. It has always refused to see how little meaning there is in freedom of contract when it is divorced from equality of bargaining power. It has never sought in any full measure to realize the consequences of the depersonalization of industry, the transformation—the phrase is a significant one—of the worker into a "hand."[118]

This is the core contradiction of liberalism, one which plays out time and again within liberal institutions such as the criminal justice system, the electoral system, the market, and the education system. This contradiction is not just conceptual but social in nature, reflecting the divergent interests of the capitalist class on the one hand, and the oppressed working class on the other. Liberalism can be seen as a compromise between these two forces, incorporating some of the demands of the oppressed in order to reduce social unrest to manageable levels, while still largely representing the interests of the capitalist class.[119] The point of compromise is constantly shifting however as different groups gain and lose political power, resulting in changing social norms and attitudes, as well as different institutional practices and policies. In

order to understand liberalism, we not only have to examine its ideological contradictions, but also the historical context that produced them.

*Individualism*

*"None of the so-called rights of man, therefore, go beyond egoistic man, beyond man as a member of civil society – that is, an individual withdrawn into himself, into the confines of his private interests and private caprice, and separated from the community. In the rights of man, he is far from being conceived as a species-being; on the contrary, species-life itself, society, appears as a framework external to the individuals, as a restriction of their original independence. The sole bond holding them together is natural necessity, need and private interest, the preservation of their property and their egoistic selves."*[120] (Karl Marx, "On the Jewish Question")

The liberal framework assumes that individuals are, in their natural state, separate from society. As Marx suggests in the quote above, society is seen as something which is imposed from the outside, rather than something that is essential to our survival and an integral part of who we are as individuals. This atomistic understanding of human beings as individuals first, and members of a social body second, is embedded in many contemporary liberal institutions, such as the criminal justice system, which tends to treat crime and punishment as individual affairs. Like other aspects of liberal ideology, this institutional and legal commitment to individualism is rooted in the social transformations brought about by the transition from feudalism to capitalism.[121] As Craig Haney notes, "In transforming economic and social relations, capitalism produced a new psychology. Social arrangements were no longer based on collective units like the family or the guild. Instead, the individual assumed a new causal significance: now 'he alone was primarily responsible for determining his own economic, social, political, and religious roles.'[...]Collective doctrines of legal culpability that had flourished under feudalism were replaced by ones locating primary responsibility in individuals."[122]

Haney goes on to argue that the individualistic view of human behaviour largely ignored social context as well as the specific traits of real, embodied persons, and instead relied on an abstract model of the individual, which was presented as a universal given. Although Haney focuses largely on legal doctrine, he also notes that this conception of the individual emerged in many other institutions and social policies as well:

> Psychological individualism provided the behavioral core of laissez faire economic theory and political liberalism. It had profound implications for the way in which societies went about solving social problems. Specifically, it implied three basic scientific "facts"

> about human behavior and human problems: (1) individuals are the causal locus of behavior; (2) socially problematic and illegal behavior therefore arises from some defect in the individual persons who perform it; and (3) such behavior can be changed or eliminated only by effecting changes in the nature or characteristics of those persons. These "facts" became basic assumptions in a wide range of social policies.[123]

Liberal individualism makes it much more difficult to identify, discuss, and therefore alter how concepts like crime and criminality are socially constructed and ascribed to individuals, masking the way that seemingly neutral institutions may contribute to upholding systemic oppression and the interests of the ruling class.

*Reason and Mind-body Dualism*

A recurring theme in liberal thought, particularly during the Enlightenment, is the notion of individual reason as the guiding force behind morality and good conduct. John Hallowell argues that, "Not only were individuals thought to be equal entities, equal in moral worth by virtue of God-given souls, but also they were thought to possess a reason, divine in origin, that was capable of restraining passion and emotion through the realization of a potential, rational, universal order. Just as the period of the Middle Ages was 'an age of faith, based upon reason' so the modern age has been 'an age of reason, based upon faith.'"[124] Faith in the individual's capacity for reason is a prerequisite for faith in a rational, objective state and legislature, and therefore plays an important role in legitimizing the modern, bureaucratic, capitalist state and the rule of law. Hallowell points out that the modern liberal conception of reason is tied to the social transformations that took place in Europe between the 15th and 18th century. This period saw the downfall of the Roman Catholic Church from its position as the dominant political and economic institution, which coincided with a shift away from orthodox interpretations of Christianity, and towards a more individualistic form of religious worship.

> Liberal Protestantism "tended to brush aside all intermediaries—priests and prelates; sacred images and sacred relics; saints, angels, archangels, and even the Blessed Virgin herself—and so set God and the individual immediately in one another's presence"[...]As one contemporary theologian has expressed it: "The Reformation had granted to the individual the 'right of private judgment' upon the meaning of the authoritative scriptures; the Enlightenment went further, and made the individual reason and conscience the final court of appeal, supreme over all external authorities."[125]

These transformations were accompanied by the Scientific Revolution of the 16th, 17th, and 18th century, which saw the emergence of modern science and rapid developments in fields

such as mathematics, astrology, physics, chemistry, biology, and anatomy. As Anthony Brewer points out, the scientific revolution "was closely linked to military and mercantile needs" brought on by the rise of capitalism, the expansion of European trade routes, and the colonization of what is now the Global South.[126] He notes that, "astronomy and the measurement of time, critical to navigation, were at the heart of Newtonian physics, and thus of a wholly new view of nature."[127]

Laski makes a similar argument for the decline of the Church and religious authority, which had sought to limit commercial enterprise and the acquisition of wealth:

> The very scepticisms of the philosophers help [the commercial classes] to emancipation. They throw doubt on the authority of the church, the utility of aristocratic privilege, even, though with caution, the case for a despotic monarchy. And the background of these scepticisms is always rational utility. Voltaire shows them how costly is the monastic system of the church, how expensive to industry are its feasts and fasts, how wise it is to live in the kind of society where a man can cultivate his own garden.[128]

Reason and rationality became closely associated with the maximization of profit and the expansion of industry, serving as an intellectual cudgel that the business man could wield against the old feudal classes and its institutions, which they saw as standing in the way of progress and human development.

It took roughly three centuries for the pursuit of wealth for its own sake to become the dominant organizing force within society, but while it may have had a liberating effect for the owners of capital, the transition to an "Age of Reason" was much less kind to workers. As Silvia Federici points out, "One of the preconditions of capitalist development was the process that Michel Foucault defined as 'the disciplining of the body,' which...consisted of an attempt by state and church to transform the individual's powers into labor-power."[129] This drive to discipline the body and increase the productivity of the nascent working class led to a reconceptualization of the individual as a site of struggle between reason and passion—a reframing of medieval Christian stories about clashes between angels and demons battling over the possession of human souls. As Federici puts it,

> On the one side, there are the 'forces of Reason:' parsimony, prudence, sense of responsibility, self-control. On the other, the 'low instincts of the Body': lewdness, idleness, systematic dissipation of one's vital energies. The battle is fought on many fronts because Reason must be vigilant against the attacks of the carnal self, and prevent 'the wisdom of the flesh' (in Luther's words) from corrupting the powers of the mind.[130]

In short, the new mode of production required the creation of a new, “rational,” disciplined individual capable of performing menial tasks for long periods of time under someone else’s direction. The practice of selling one’s own labour power on the market, and treating the body as a form of capital alienated from the self, was not a natural given but something that had to be cultivated and, at times, violently enforced. Federici argues that the mind-body dualism promoted by philosophers such as René Descartes, which presented the body as a machine and granted control over the body to the individual will, guided by reason, provided the

> theoretical premises for the work-discipline required by the developing capitalist economy. For the mind's supremacy over the body implies that the will can (in principle) control the needs, reactions, reflexes of the body; it can impose a regular order over its vital functions, and force the body to work according to external specifications, independently of its desires.[131]

It’s no accident that reason and the mind also came to be associated with masculinity and whiteness, an association that still exists today in the form of stereotypes about women and people of colour that portray them as more emotional, more sexualized, less intelligent, and less rational than white men. Federici notes that the disciplining of the working class required the subjugation of women and colonized peoples, both of whom played a major role in resisting capitalist expansion and enclosure. This in turn required the construction of a system of meaning—an ideology—that could justify these acts of violence. It was through this process that the witch hunts and the enslavement and genocide of Indigenous peoples, which marked the bloody transition to capitalism, came to be presented as the cost of bringing the “light of civilization and reason” to the savage, uncivilized masses—a narrative that is still used to legitimize the imperialist wars of today. Putting the scale of this ongoing violence into perspective, Michael Parenti states that,

> In the name of freedom, U.S forces or U.S supported surrogate forces slaughtered 2,000,000 North Koreans in a three-year war; 3,000,000 Vietnamese; over 500,000 in aerial wars over Laos and Cambodia; over 1,500,000 million in Angola; over 1,000,000 in Mozambique; over 500,000 in Afghanistan; 500,000 to 1,000,000 in Indonesia; 200,000 in East Timor; 100,000 in Nicaragua (combining the Somoza and Reagan eras); over 100,000 in Guatemala (plus an additional 40,000 disappeared); over 700,000 in Iraq; over 60,000 in El Salvador; 30,000 in the “dirty war” of Argentina (though the government admits to only 9,000); 35,000 in Taiwan, when the Kuomintang military arrived from China; 20,000 in Chile; and many thousands in Haiti, Panama, Grenada,

> Brazil, South Africa, western Sahara, Zaire, Turkey, and dozens of other countries, in what amounts to a free-market world holocaust.

These numbers throw into stark relief the enormous gap between the stated goals and values of Western liberal democracies like the United States, and the material consequences of the "liberal world order" they aim to enforce.

*Political Rights and Equality before the Law*

Although liberalism has been complicit in colonial and imperialist projects, it has also played a progressive role in some respects, reflecting its contradictory nature as an expression of competing class interests. At a time when many people could expect to live their entire lives under the oppressive thumb of a feudal lord or monarch, liberalism declared the need for individual political rights, enshrined in law, including freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, the right to a fair trial, the right to be governed by a body of elected representatives, and above all, the right to own private property. Far from being arbitrary, these particular rights were selected because they represented the political interests of the emerging capitalist class during their rise to power, and helped to facilitate their revolt against absolute monarchy (a system of rule common in 17th and 18th-century Europe which granted absolute power to the monarch). As Hallowell points out,

> In order to realize their conception of individual autonomy and in order to carry on their struggle against absolutism, the rising commercial classes needed freedom to express their views, to assemble freely, to be free from arbitrary arrest and imprisonment, and to have a voice in the shaping of governmental policy. But their espousal of individual natural rights was more than a convenient doctrine; they espoused civil liberties and representative government because these things were essential if absolutism was to be defeated.[132]

It's telling that in their initial conception, these rights were only extended to European, Christian, property-owning men above a certain age. Although the revolutions that toppled absolutism required cooperation between the working class and the capitalist class, it was the capitalist class that ultimately came out on top.[133] While on the one hand upper-class liberals promoted equality before the law and argued that all men had an inalienable right to "life and liberty,"[134] many also profited from social institutions that were based on inequality, exploitation, and genocide, such as wage labour, slavery, colonialism, and patriarchy. In order to maintain this state of affairs, while still holding on to the core tenets of liberalism, large numbers of people had to be reduced to subhuman status—in effect, excluding them from the category of "all

mankind." One answer to liberalism's internal contradiction between a stated commitment to equality and universalism, and a structural commitment to exploitation, was chauvinism—the belief that some groups are inherently better than others—which provided the basis for the development of scientific racism and eventually fascism.[135]

*Liberal Racism, Slavery, and Colonialism*

Given that liberal ideology is so explicitly concerned with the concepts of universal freedom and liberty, it might seem paradoxical that liberal capitalism also played an important role in promoting and expanding the institution of slavery. But as Losurdo notes,

> Slavery is not something that persisted despite the success of the three liberal revolutions. On the contrary, it experienced its maximum development following that success: 'The total slave population in the Americas reached around 330,000 in 1700, nearly three million by 1800, and finally peaked at over six million in the 1850s'. Contributing decisively to the rise of an institution synonymous with the absolute power of man over man was the liberal world.[136]

Many prominent liberal thinkers, particularly those who profited from the exploitation of enslaved Black and Indigenous peoples, were prone to making racist statements intended to justify and naturalize the institution of slavery. In *The Spirit of the Laws,* Charles-Louis Montesquieu, a French judge and liberal intellectual, argues "one must not be surprised that the cowardice of the peoples of hot climates has almost always made them slaves and that the courage of the peoples of cold climates has kept them free. This is an effect that derives from its natural cause."[137] Although Montesquieu called for a legal code that would impose certain limits on the absolute power of masters over slave, countless statements such as the one above make it clear that he aimed to reform rather than reject or overthrow the institution of slavery. Although liberals might have argued, at times, for less severe, more "humane" forms of punishment or exploitation, they still by-and-large accepted the basic premise that people from other regions were "naturally" inferior to Christian, property-owning, European men.

Assumptions about the inherent inferiority of non-European peoples also played a role in justifying colonial land grabs and capitalist enclosure. This is evident in the writings of the liberal philosopher John Locke, particularly the fifth chapter of the *Second Treatise of Government*, entitled "On Property." At various points in this chapter Locke refers to the increased productivity of land in England, comparing it to "wild," "untamed" land in America:

> An acre of land that bears here twenty bushels of wheat, and another in America which with the same husbandry would do the like, are, without doubt, of the same natural

> intrinsic value; but yet the benefit mankind receives from the one in a year is worth £5, and from the other possibly not worth a penny if all the profit an Indian received from it were to be valued and sold here.[138]

Locke's argument was based in part on the assumption that the land occupied by Indigenous people was entirely uncultivated, despite the fact that many of today's staple crops, including corn, potatoes, squash, many varieties of beans, sunflowers, and so on, were first domesticated by the Indigenous peoples of the Americas, who were engaged in agriculture long before the arrival of Europeans.[139] In "Savagery and civilization: From terra nullius to the 'tide of history" Bruce Buchan and Mary Heath argue that "Colonial discourse established that industry and rationality were tied to a specific, European form of cultivation and enclosure, as well as to a capacity for specific forms of commerce, including a money economy, and the protection of private property."[140] Locke insisted that allowing land to exist in an uncultivated, unenclosed state ran counter to God's will, who gave land "to the use of the industrious and rational...not to the fancy or covetousness of the quarrelsome and contentious,"[141] and that "land that is left wholly to nature, that has no improvement of pasturage, tillage, or planting, is called, as indeed it is, 'waste'; and we shall find the benefit of it amount to little more than nothing."[142] Indigenous groups were therefore "wasting" land that could otherwise be put to good use. Although the chapter is largely presented as a justification for private property, Locke is framing his argument in terms that clearly serve colonial interests, revealing the interconnectedness of capitalism and colonialism.

Although Locke may not be calling explicitly for the genocide, dispossession, and displacement of Indigenous people, he is providing a legitimizing narrative that paves the way for colonial violence. As Buchan and Heath note,

> The colonization of Australia was justified by denying that Indigenous peoples possessed recognizable societies, law, property rights or sovereignty. This denial, in turn, rests upon the supposition that Indigenous Australians were living in a "savage," pre-civilized state: the state of nature of liberal theory. Such concepts, deeply embedded in western political thought, informed the view that Australia was a terra nullius or unowned land.[143]

Locke's writing is indicative of a general pattern within liberal discourse, in which violence and exclusion are generally implied rather than explicitly stated. This tends to obscure the material basis of liberal ideology, a trend that is made worse by contemporary accounts that leave out many crucial historical details. As the political scientist Uday Singh Mehta remarks, "The fact that most British political theorists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were deeply

involved with the empire in their writings and often in its administration is seldom given any significance or even mentioned in the framing of this intellectual tradition."[144] Many of these men also came from wealthy backgrounds and either directly or indirectly profited from European colonialism, which might help to "account for how a set of ideas that professed, at a fundamental level, to include as its political referent a universal constituency nevertheless spawned practices that were either predicated on or directed at the political marginalization of various people."[145]

*Political Correctness and Recuperation*

Although neoliberalism has marked a return to classical liberal economic theories, contemporary liberal ideology has also been deeply impacted by popular struggles and the rise of socialist states during the first half of the 20th century. Competition with the Soviet Bloc and the threat of communist uprisings both at home and abroad forced the United States and other capitalist countries to give in to at least some of the demands of the radical Left. Social welfare programs were adopted to provide for struggling workers, voting rights were extended to disenfranchised groups, and new legislation was enacted to protect the rights of vulnerable minority groups.[146] Although many of these social welfare programs were only implemented by capitalist states within the imperialist core, where superprofits ensured that capitalists would still receive a sizeable rate of return on their investments despite rising tax rates, this was nevertheless presented as a sign of capitalism's capacity to "lift all boats."[147]

During this period liberalism changed substantially, incorporating elements of leftist critiques and political practices while also stripping them of their radical, anti-capitalist foundations. This process resulted in what is today often referred to as liberal identity politics or "political correctness," both of which reflect capitalism's (and by extension liberalism's) incredible capacity to absorb, recuperate, and distort opposing ideologies and political tendencies. What began as a radical rejection of imperialism, colonialism, patriarchy, and the capitalist world system as a whole, has now been watered down, individualized, and commodified in order to make it compatible with the continued existence of capitalism. In the introduction to *Materialist Feminism: A Reader in Class, Difference and Human Lives*, Rosemary Hennessy and Chrys Ingraham tie the process of recuperation to shifts in the global balance of power:

> During the 1990s, as capitalism triumphantly secures its global reach, anticommunist ideologies hammer home socialism's inherent failure and the Left increasingly moves into the professional middle class, many of western feminism's earlier priorities—

> commitment to social transformation, attention to the political economy of patriarchy, analysis of the pervasive social structures that link and divide women—have been obscured or actively dismissed. Various forms of feminist cultural politics that take as their starting point gender, race, class, sexuality, or coalitions among them have increasingly displaced a systemic perspective that links the battle against women's oppression to a fight against capitalism. [...] As feminism has been absorbed into the mainstream of advanced industrial societies and incorporated into the professions, its dominant voices have grown to disparage ways of making sense of women's lives that connect the oppressive construction of difference and identity to capital's drive to accumulate.[148]

This is not to say of course that liberal identity politics has not achieved some important reforms and concessions within capitalism, but it has largely done so on the backs of and often at the expense of more radical movements that directly threaten the status quo.

While liberal identity politics may still be preferable to more open forms of chauvinism and oppression, it is also incapable of effectively confronting fascism or the current capitalist crisis. As Zak Cope remarks,

> Liberal perspectives on racism, by ignoring not only structurally-grounded power and privilege but also underlying processes of capital accumulation, have invariably bolstered the notion that racism and ethnocentrism are products of personal bias. The left-liberal theory of justice (as formulated under the rubrics of multiculturalism, pluralism, consociationalism and communitarianism) no less than its classical “liberal” opponent—which is now content to blame “multiculturalism” for the alleged failure of certain ethnic communities to integrate into mainstream First World society—has been unable to effectively challenge bigotry.”[149]

The political polarization that we are witnessing today is a sign of the breakdown of liberal ideology, which is confronting its own inability to explain the current state of affairs or provide a viable alternative. As we’ve seen, however, liberalism is nothing if not adaptive. Whether liberalism is capable of reinventing itself once again depends on whether the economic system that produced it survives the current crisis, or if something new will come to take its place.

## Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism refers both to a set of economic and political policies, and an ideology that aims to justify these policies and solidify the power of financial elites. Neoliberalism involves a

return to the “laissez-faire” approach advocated by British liberals in the 19th century, which sought to remove restrictions on the movement and investment of capital.[150] In *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, David Harvey writes that the neoliberal policies enforced since the 1980s have focused on eradicating state regulations and limits on international trade, undermining unions and labour laws, replacing permanent full-time jobs with temporary part-time contracts, privatizing public resources, diverting more state funding to the police, prisons, and the military, and cutting social services.[151] The implementation of these measures, first in the Global South and later in the rich imperialist countries of the Global North, has resulted in spiralling levels of debt, the impoverishment of workers, growing levels of monopolization, environmental destruction, and the further enrichment of the wealthiest portions of the capitalist class.[152]

While initially a niche position, neoliberalism gained widespread support from governments and major economic institutions in the wake of the capitalist crisis of the 1970s, replacing Keynesianism as the dominant political and economic doctrine. Couched in the language of “economic recovery,” neoliberalism largely served to reverse the gains made by workers in the previous decades.[153] If the anti-colonial and civil rights movements that rocked the political establishment in the 50s and 60s were the beginnings of a world revolution, then neoliberalism was the counter-revolution, aimed at crushing popular resistance and re-entrenching the power of the elite in the face of declining profit rates and greater political participation from the masses.[154] Neoliberalism did lead to economic recovery for the rich, but it did so by increasing inequality, intensifying exploitation, and reducing living standards for the working class, particularly in the Global South.

Despite positioning themselves in opposition to “big government,” supporters of neoliberalism are not actually opposed to *all* forms of state intervention—only those that run against or do not directly benefit the interests of big business and finance. As Lisa Duggan notes in *The Twilight of Democracy,*

> This rhetorical universe in no way matches the “really existing” policies of neoliberal politicians, who often advocate government support for “private” industries, regulated economic competition to soften the effects of “free” market discipline, and a range of welfare state programs (especially those that benefit more affluent, voting populations)...When the state acts to support “private” business interests—providing subsidies and bailouts for instance—that can be good. But when the state acts in the “public” interest—providing housing for the poor or protection for the environment—that can be intrusive, coercive, and bad. The proper range for debate over government action is understood as relatively narrow, covering monetary, fiscal and trade policies,

infrastructure maintenance, and “night watchman” property protection, law and order measures.

The end goal of neoliberal reforms isn’t to eliminate the state, which is a necessary component of capitalism, but to undermine democracy and public oversight. Tax cuts have resulted in the decline of public infrastructure and high levels of government debt, granting more power and control over public affairs to wealthy lenders, corporations, and financial institutions. These private entities have in turn used that power to extract even more concessions, demanding enormous subsidies for large corporations, the elimination of environmental regulations, and the expansion of the military, prison system, and police state, to name just a few examples.[155]

Neoliberalism is not just a matter of government policy, however. The term also refers to broad changes in the way private businesses are run and the global economy as a whole is organized. The shift to a neoliberal economic model has resulted in the decreasing significance of traditional wage work, alongside the decline of unions and labour protections. As Eva Swindler observes, unpaid internships, prison labour, and independent contracting have become much more prominent over the past few decades, allowing businesses to extract free labour from workers and avoid the responsibilities associated with hiring full-time employees.[156]

As competition for stable, permanent jobs intensifies, college and university degrees have become all but a requirement, while tuition rates have skyrocketed. Gentrification is also on the rise, leading to higher costs for housing, particularly in major urban centres. To compensate, many households have taken on unprecedented levels of debt, a trend encouraged by profit-hungry banks. Student debt in the US, for example, reached $1.5 trillion dollars in 2018.[157]

While these measures have produced sizeable profits for capitalists, they’ve often been met with substantial resistance from workers. As Alfredo Saad-Filho and Deborah Johnston remark, “the expansion of ‘market relations’ tramples upon rights of access to food, water, education, work, land, housing, medical care, transportation and public amenities.”[158] In many cases there is no way that neoliberal reforms can be passed through even nominally democratic means. The solution, then, is to impose these policies by force, either through foreign military intervention (for instance the 2003 US invasion of Iraq), coups (such as the CIA-backed coup against Salvadore Allende in Chile in 1973), or internal state repression and the militarization of the police force (for example the Mexican government’s repression of the Zapatistas in Chiapas, or the attacks on Indigenous water protectors at Standing Rock in the United States).[159]

Wealthy countries and corporations, working through global financial institutions like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, have also used economic power to

apply pressure on poor, indebted nations, forcing them to implement neoliberal measures and privatize their resources in order to receive necessary loans or financial aid. This tactic is often deployed in the wake of a debt crisis or major natural disaster such as the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, capitalizing on the destruction and chaos to push through unpopular reforms.[160] Countries that cannot be coerced by other means may face economic sanctions and embargoes (for example the US sanctions against Venezuela, Cuba, and North Korea), crippling the local economy and potentially leading to widespread food shortages and other hardships for the majority of the population. These brutal imperialist tactics—typically led or funded by the United States and backed by other wealthy nations—have been the driving force behind neoliberalism's global expansion.[161]

In the Global North, the election of Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom (1979) and Ronald Reagan in the United States (1980) marked the beginning of an unrelenting neoliberal assault on organized labour and the welfare state, including efforts to claw back social reforms, cut taxes, and eliminate government regulations. These policies were generally carried forward by both liberal and conservative politicians who followed in their wake; a bipartisan consensus that continues to this day. But while the negative impacts of neoliberalism were felt almost immediately in poorer nations, the effects have been blunted in the Global North, thanks to the continued extraction of superprofits (i.e. profits that exceed average profit rates) from the periphery. These superprofits have helped to prop up the declining welfare state, while also massively inflating the pockets of the rich. In his book *Divided World, Divided Class,* Zak Cope observes that, "Even as the Keynesian social contract was systematically disman-tled under neoliberalism, the massive proletarianisation and super-exploitation of Third World labour in the final decades of the last century provided that unprecedented standards of living and the widespread introduction of supervisory and circulatory occupations further insulated metropolitan labour from the intrinsic conflict be-tween capital and labour."[162] In other words, as long as wealth continued to flow from the periphery towards the advanced capitalist countries, the middle classes in those countries could still maintain a relatively high standard of living in comparison to the rest of the world, despite stagnating wages.

However as capitalism pushes global wealth inequality to ever greater extremes, conditions are beginning to decline, even in the richest countries. The 2008 financial crisis provided an excuse for a new wave of neoliberal assaults on the welfare state, leading to a permanent state of austerity. The erosion of social support structures, combined with the shift towards poorly paid, "flexible" (aka precarious) work, have pushed the contradictions of capitalism to a breaking point, driving more and more people, including former members of the

middle class, towards poverty and debt. In this sense neoliberalism helps to lay the foundations for fascism, which preys on the insecurities of the more privileged segments of the working class. But while support for leftist parties is also on the rise, the lingering effects of neoliberal ideology and decades of state repression have worked to hinder organizing efforts and drive more people towards far-right movements.

*Neoliberal Ideology*

Though it's difficult to trace when exactly neoliberalism, as an ideological program, was first developed, contemporary neoliberal theory is most closely associated with the Chicago School, which emerged in the 1940s at the University of Chicago's School of Economics.[163] As the name implies, neoliberalism revitalized some of the main tenets of classical liberalism, including an attachment to the idea of individual freedoms, calls to remove state regulations that would restrict the flow of capital, and the notion of a rational, self-regulating market.[164] David Harvey argues that neoliberalism is "a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade."[165] With the help of major figures like the famed economist Milton Friedman, as well as corporate-funded think tanks like the Heritage Foundation and the Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA), this theory gradually came to dominate political, economic, and social affairs from the 1980s onwards.

The appeal to individual freedoms served as a cover for a project aimed at restoring power to the upper echelons of the capitalist class. In the place of imperialism and austerity, proponents of neoliberalism chose friendlier terms like "free trade,"[166] "small government," and "trickle-down economics," while making regular appeals to notions of individual merit and responsibility.[167] This framework was applied not just to individual people but to entire nations, so that "Third World" countries were assumed to be singularly responsible for the widespread poverty and underdevelopment caused by centuries of colonial pillaging. By stripping away the historical context, organizations like the IMF and the World Bank could then present themselves as benefactors, stepping in to provide loans and economic reforms that would supposedly lift these sad, backwards nations out of poverty.[168]

Harvey argues that neoliberalism exploited the contradiction between the desire for individual freedoms expressed most clearly by the student movements of '68, and the social solidarity and collective discipline required for effective political action and long-term organizing.[169] By emphasizing the former at the expense of the latter, neoliberalism worked to

fracture, coopt, and undermine social movements, allowing individual interests to dominate over collective concerns. The concept of individual freedoms had long been compatible with consumer choice and market relations, and could just as easily be used to demonize unions or decry any form of government intervention, regardless of whether these interventions helped or hindered workers' well-being.

The emphasis on individual agency also turned attention away from political structures and institutions, promoting individualistic solutions to problems that were deeply social in nature. The rise of the contemporary self-help industry,[170] "green capitalism," and New Age spirituality[171] are all symptoms of a general shift away from collective organizing and towards personal transformation, which is more often than not tied to consumption. Whether we're buying healing crystals, attending a lecture by Jordan Peterson, going to a yoga class, or purchasing "eco-friendly" electric cars, the cure for what ails us can almost always be provided by the market.[172] These trends also tie into the neoliberal drive towards globalization, which opens up new pathways for capital and market exchange, while at the same time limiting the movement of human beings through the militarization of borders and the establishment of ever more invasive forms of surveillance and policing.[173] New Age spirituality in particular often draws on orientalist tropes, appropriating the collective labour of people in the Global South and repackaging it into a more palatable and easily consumable form that actively reproduces white supremacy for white, Western audiences.[174]

Overall neoliberal ideology operates through a vague progressivism that hints at broader social causes, such as sexual liberation, environmental sustainability, or freedom from the repressive influence of traditional religious institutions, without fundamentally threatening the balance of power or the global capitalist system.[175] The glorification of the entrepreneur, for example, gestures towards class mobility while disguising the fact that entrepreneurialism ultimately just serves to reproduce the domination of the capitalist class. After all, every large corporation, from Amazon to Monsanto to Disney, began its life as a small, scrappy startup. Yet thanks to the embedded idealism of the self-help industry and the cult of personality surrounding celebrity figures like Elon Musk, many disgruntled workers have been tricked into believing that they too could be the next Bill Gates or Jeff Bezos, if they simply invest their time and efforts wisely, work hard, and maintain a positive attitude. According to the mythology of neoliberalism, it is an individual's character, mindset, or merit that decides whether they succeed or not, not their class position or access to resources. And if they do come out on top, then it is not just the individual but all of society that benefits.

Neoliberal ideology projects an image of a united, globalized society that has moved beyond class, history, race, gender, ideology, and politics—a beautiful world where the old struggles and hierarchies have faded away in a cornucopia of consumption—even as it also works to further solidify social divides.[176] Within this framework, anyone who complains about social injustice or inequality is simply failing to take responsibility for themselves or their individual actions, and should be dismissed accordingly. The obsession with reporting and performance metrics in today's universities is the concrete manifestation of this doctrine of individual responsibility.[177] Similarly videogames often rank players according to their individual performance in the game, rewarding success and punishing failure in ways that are deeply ideological and implicitly tied to the concepts of merit and skill.[178] By measuring and quantifying everything we do, these systems help to naturalize market relations, making it seem as if it is only normal to have our personal worth (and our chances of survival) tied to a number on a screen.[179]

Neoliberalism encourages us to see competition not as a necessity imposed on us by capitalist markets, but as a virtue in and of itself. According to neoliberalism's evangelists, it's because businesses compete with one another that we have access to the best possible goods at the lowest possible prices. While this seems to make sense in theory, the reality is much more complicated. History has shown that there is a tendency within capitalism for open competition to give way to monopolies as those companies with the most money and resources fight to eliminate or absorb their rivals in order to maximize profits. These emerging monopolies are then in a position to dominate the market, drive up prices, and manipulate the political system in their favour.[180] By forcing small, local businesses to compete with big, transnational corporations and weakening antitrust laws and other regulations, neoliberal reforms have ironically worked towards increasing the rate of monopolization.

This is not to say that open competition is necessarily good for us either. Competition pushes companies to externalize or socialize costs whenever possible. For example, many capitalist firms fail to account for the costs associated with cleaning up the pollution created by heavy industry, instead relying on the state to do it for them or allowing the problem to go unaddressed, destroying local ecosystems.[181] Many industries also externalize costs by overworking employees to the point of burnout and laying them off when they can no longer perform their jobs, damaging their health and emotional well-being, and putting a strain on both public and private support systems (such as family or friends who care for them when they come home from work).[182] The game industry, for instance, has a particularly bad reputation for high rates of turnover and employee burnout, with many game industry workers reporting

adverse health effects as a result of overwork.[183] The competitive pressure to reduce wages also places a significant burden on workers, who must find additional sources of income or fall back on what remains of our social safety net in order to make ends meet. For instance, large corporations such as Amazon and Walmart have been criticized for paying employees such low wages that some are forced to rely on food stamps and other forms of social assistance to survive.[184] Even when companies are not struggling financially, competition ends up incentivizing actions which benefit investors while harming everyone else.

*The Neoliberal Crisis*

Whereas traditionally the state has often played the role of mediator, balancing different class interests, as well as the competing interests of individual capitalists, neoliberalism has tipped the scales of power in favour of the financial elite, to the point that the state may no longer be able to contain the contradictions of capitalism. David Kotz describes the financial crisis of 2008 as a crisis of neoliberalism, pointing to the unsustainable nature of this economic model.[185] Since the crisis more public figures and institutions have come out against neoliberalism. Even researchers at the IMF have finally admitted that the neoliberal policies the IMF promoted may not have been quite as "beneficial" as they made them out to be.[186] But as neoliberalism has transformed into a dirty word, it has also become a scapegoat for problems which are in fact linked to capitalism as a whole.

While the neoliberal consensus may be breaking down, it's important to recognize that the roots of the problem go back much farther than the late 1970s. Unless we can clearly tie neoliberalism to the internal workings of capitalism, it will be difficult if not impossible to develop a viable alternative. As climate change and a fascist resurgence drive the planet farther down the path of self-destruction, we need to reject the neoliberal, Thatcherite belief that "there is no alternative." To escape neoliberalism we desperately need to expand our horizons, both back in time and forward into a potential, post-capitalist future.

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[1] Karl Marx, *Capital Volume 1: The Process of Capitalist Production,* ed. Friedrich Engels, trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling (Moscow: Progress Publishers 1887), 412-413.
[2] Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 2004); Chris Harman, "From Feudalism to Capitalism," *International Socialism* 2, no. 45 (Winter 1989): 35–87; Marx, *Capital Volume 1,* 508.
[3] Karl Marx, *Wage Labour and Capital*, trans. J. L. Joynes (New York: International Publishing Co., 1899).
[4] Harman, "From Feudalism to Capitalism"; Marx, *Capital Volume 1.*

[5] Marx, *Capital Volume 1;* Karl Marx, *Capital Volume 2: The Process of Circulation of Capital*, ed. Friedrich Engels, trans. I. Lasker (Moscow: Progress Publishers 1956 [1893]).
[6] Note that capital can take many forms, whether it's money, credit, infrastructure, machinery, vehicles, raw materials, and so on. Because of this, it's best to think of capital less as a specific object than as a type of social relation or process that exists under capitalism. Capital is that which is invested on the market with the goal of producing a profit. Money or objects that are exchanged or consumed for personal use are not considered capital. Marx, "Part 7: The Accumulation of Capital," in *Capital Volume 1,* 400-505*;* Marx, "Chapter 33: The Modern Theory of Colonisation," in *Capital Volume 1,* 543.
[7] Marx, *Capital Volume 1.*; Marx, *Capital Volume 2;* Karl Marx, *Capital Volume 3: The Process of Capitalist Production as a Whole,* ed. Friedrich Engels (New York: International Publishers, [n.d.] [1894]).
[8] Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World System, Volume 1: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World Economy in the Sixteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).
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[34] The fact that some of the most misleading definitions of fascism are also among the most popular is not an accident, but a reflection of the dominant interests in our society. It’s in the best interests of the capitalist class to disguise the origins of fascism, which is why it’s crucial to approach the literature on the topic with a critical eye.
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# Appendix

## Against Grading

When we grade our students, we teach them that their worth is based on how well they obey orders and please people in positions of authority.

I have been teaching at Concordia for three years now, and every year the one part of my job that I dread the most is grading. I don't hate it because of the work involved, but because I know it contributes to everything I despise about late capitalism. Grading reinforces classism, racism, sexism, ableism, and other forms of oppression by obscuring the very real differences in privilege and access that affect how students perform, how much time they're able to dedicate to their schoolwork, and how connected they feel to the material covered in class. Are they a single parent trying to work a full-time job while also studying full-time? Are they suffering from mental health issues as a result of past trauma or abuse? Are they a recent immigrant in the process of learning the language as well as new cultural norms?

Instead of acknowledging these differences and the forces that divide and oppress us, we tell our students that they are being ranked according to their "merit" or intelligence. In doing so, we mystify the structures that play such a fundamental role in determining our opportunities in life.

In a capitalist society, the less money you have in the bank, the less your life matters. By assigning students a grade, we prepare them for, and also normalize, a system that ranks some human lives above others. We may think we are teaching our students about math, or science, or history, but we also must acknowledge the way we are teaching them to think of themselves.

When we grade our students, we teach them that their worth is based on how well they obey orders and please people in positions of authority. We teach them that competition with their peers is normal and natural, and that it is never okay to fail. Grading is billed as a way to "motivate" students to succeed, and yet we ignore that this usually only works for people who were already predisposed to succeed in an unfair system.

Academics have some of the best tools available to access and develop critiques of meritocracy and capitalist ideology, and yet our institutions continue to reproduce the same old hierarchies and structures. We ought to know better. If we actually want to encourage learning and experimentation, we have to directly challenge and resist the systems that render us complicit. That means fighting for diversity in our schools and universities, demanding the necessary resources to provide our students with the qualitative feedback they deserve, and pushing for the abolition of grades and GPAs in favour of a more just and holistic system.

Some schools have already experimented with alternative models to grading. A high school in New Hampshire,[i] as well as a variety of both private and public colleges and universities like Evergreen State College in Washington[ii] and Hampshire College in Massachusetts,[iii] replace grades with written evaluations detailing each student's progress. Rhode Island's Brown University offers a pass-fail option for all of their classes. [iv] Montessori schools also do away with grades while providing an education based on self-directed, hands-on, project-based learning.[v] Unfortunately, these options are typically only available to the select few who can afford private schooling. These models also do not necessarily challenge the underlying role of the education system, which is to create docile workers who are ranked according to their expected productivity.

For more radical alternatives, we can look to the autonomous Zapatista schools in Chiapas, where teachers are democratically elected and education is based around the pillars of democracy, freedom, and social justice, and tailored to the specific needs of each community.[vi] We can also learn from the revolutionary schools in Rojava, where top-down learning is replaced by collective problem-solving, and disciplinary silos are rejected in favour of a well-rounded education.[vii] Importantly, both systems teach indigenous histories and languages, rather than simply reproducing a colonial ideology.

The fact that these alternatives are typically only able to exist in areas where people have fought for independence from governments and private interests should not be ignored and is indicative of just how deeply intertwined the education system is with capitalist economic and political structures. In order to change one, we must change them all. As Paulo Freire puts it, "the critical and dynamic view of the world, strives to unveil reality, unmask its mythicization, and achieve a full realization of the human task: the permanent transformation of reality in favor of the liberation of people." [viii]

## Capitalism, games, and diversity work

Below is a transcript of the lightning talk I gave at the Pixelles Cookies n' Cocoa Social on January 23, 2016.

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I want to start with a quote from an amazing piece by Mattie Brice called "Our Flappy Dystopia": "There is something unspoken, that of COURSE we're all run by money. But to say it outloud is taboo, and it's seen as rudely airing someone's dirty laundry. That we are aware that the methods of how many institutions make money are unethical but are okay with keeping it just below the surface since we know others are doing it is a cause for extreme alarm."

One thing I hear over and over and over again in games is "Don't burn bridges." This becomes especially important when there are other people depending on those bridges, when you're running a non-profit, for example, or mentoring marginalized creators.

We're forced to balance the desire to speak critically about the things we see and hear and experience, against the work we do as organizers. The same goes for marginalized people working in the industry. Do I call out this injustice, do I try to stop it, knowing full well that I'll never work in games again? It's an impossible position to be in, and an emotionally draining one. Fighting for change is hard work, but often it feels like the hardest part is not being able to fight, not even being able to acknowledge that we're fighting.

There is no such thing as money that comes with "no strings attached," whether it's a paycheck, a space, or a grant, there are strings EVERYWHERE, even if those strings are never explicitly mentioned. While I can't speak for everyone, I think many of us, myself included, feel pressure to perform our gratitude for even being allowed to exist in this space, and the less privilege we have, the more pressure there is.

We feel pressured to justify ourselves in terms of how capitalism values us, not as complex, fallible human beings, but as potential profit, as untapped markets, as innovators, as positive PR, as productivity, as a more "dynamic" workforce.

We feel pressure to repeat these stories about how diversity is good for business, even if we don't believe them, because that's what gets the attention of the higher ups, the people that run this city, run the industry, and run the world.

But in doing so we paint ourselves into a corner. We accept, implicitly, that profit comes before people, that diversity is good and just and worth fighting for only so long as someone, somewhere, is making money.

People also repeat these stories because it's considered impolite not to. None of us wants to be labelled as "difficult," "overemotional," "trouble-makers," "attention-seekers," or "wet blankets."

We need to appear calm and rational but also supportive and non-threatening—friendly, but not too friendly—or else no one will take us seriously.

I worry constantly about the day that I step over the invisible line, about what happens when I do. I also worry that I'll never have the courage to step over that line.

I wonder how Mattie Brice felt, publishing that article. I wonder why it still feels so difficult to name the system.

Mattie was one of the first people writing about games that I encountered who really did that, and while she's far from the only one, her work still inspires me. I'm going to finish with another quote from the same piece, but I strongly encourage you to read the whole thing:

"Capitalism is informing what creations are considered good and of value, and what are bad form and derivative. Gamers and others see quality in games that show high production value, and defame games that seem to be a waste of money in this model, EVEN IF THEY ARE FREE GAMES. The idea of success outside the conventional method of capitalism, which is intersectional in its effects, is met with contempt. 'Success' is also very dubious and misguided; simply having a lot of attention for a period of time is considered successful, even if all that attention is harassment and you are not better off personally or economically for it. As much attention as the DIY ethos had in the past few years, minority creators are still impoverished while indie games that incorporate marginalized themes and design philosophies into the acceptable model receive praise like pets at dog shows. It's not necessarily their fault, it's that the system chooses what looks like it from the margins to seem adaptive. In the end, the system is perpetuating itself, only allowing games and people complicit with how things are going to thrive."

## Demystifying Activism – A 101 guide to getting involved

The US elections have made it increasingly clear to many of us that things need to change, and fast, before they get a hell of a lot worse. But while you may have heard plenty of calls to “take action” and “organize,” it’s not always obvious what that means. Not only that, but I know from experience that activism can seem scary and intimidating when you’re on the outside looking in, especially when all you really have to go on are stereotypes and sensationalized media reports. If you’re going to take a chance by getting involved, it helps to know what you’re signing up for, so in the spirit of demystifying activism, I thought I’d share a bit of what I’ve learned in the last few years. Just to be clear, I’m hardly a seasoned veteran, and while I’ve spent a fair bit of time studying social movements of various sorts, I still have large gaps in my knowledge. So please take what you’re reading here with a grain of salt, and definitely read other things about activism and organizing if you can. But for those who feel like they’re grasping at straws, hopefully this is a start, at least.

1. Pick an issue. This can be switched up with step number two, but if you haven’t already joined or formed a group with people who share some common ground, then the first step is figuring out which issues take priority for you. The most important thing to remember here is that you can’t do everything at once, so don’t try to—you’ll only burn yourself out. A good rule of thumb is to start with the issues that have a direct and immediate impact on your life, because those are also the areas where you’re likely to have the most amount of influence and the most enduring motivation to make some kind of positive change. Your personal experiences will help you figure out what needs to be done, and also build connections with people who are in a similar position.

That doesn’t mean that if it doesn’t affect you, it doesn’t matter of course. Solidarity is really important, because all issues are interconnected on one level or another. But you can show solidarity when it really matters, while still focusing mainly on the things that impact your day-to-day life. For example, two of the major things that impact me and make my life harder as a mixed race cis woman are sexism and racism. I also work in digital games, which is why most of my organizing efforts have been focused around combating racism and sexism in games and/or tech, and making games more accessible. I didn’t pick this issue because I thought it was THE MOST IMPORTANT ISSUE EVER or that everyone should care about it as much as I do; I settled here because it’s an area where I’ve managed to build up a sense of community and a knowledge base, and where I have some amount of social capital that I can use to try to make things just a little bit better. There are lots of other areas where I could potentially make a difference, but this is the place where I feel like my words and actions have the most impact, at least for now.

If this doesn’t really speak to you, here are some other things to consider. Are you unhappy with your working conditions or pay? Do you live in an area where they are planning to build a pipeline or other destructive infrastructure project? Are you a student being affected by cuts to university funding or high levels of student debt? Are you an immigrant struggling to be allowed to stay in a country that you consider home? Are you and your neighbours being driven out of

your neighbourhood by high rent and gentrification? Are there industries nearby that are poisoning your air, soil, or water? Are you dealing with barriers related to a disability or your mental health? Do you have family members or friends in jail who are being mistreated? Are you a sexual assault survivor trying to reclaim your life? Are you a visible minority worried about getting beaten up by fascist thugs? All of these are issues you can organize around. If you're just starting out though, I recommend picking just one–whichever feels the most urgent or the least scary to you–and going from there.

2. Form a group, or join one. If you live in a larger centre, chances are that there are already lots of groups out there, from established non-profits to grassroots community groups to reading clubs, political parties, and artist collectives. If you happen to live in a smaller town, or if the groups that exist aren't tackling the issues that you care about, try starting your own. We'll get into the specifics of this a bit later, but first I want to mention some things that I think are important to consider when choosing or creating a group.

a. Is it not-for-profit? Many of the problems that exist in the world today can be traced back to one thing: profit. The transatlantic slave trade was started for profit. Fossil fuels continue to be exploited for profit. Wars are fought, more often than not, for profit. In a capitalist society, profit takes priority over people, and the people who make the most profits are the people who call the shots. No matter how much effort for-profit companies put into branding themselves as progressive, or "green," or socially conscious, as long as they were created to serve the bottom line, they cannot be trusted to make decisions for the benefit of anyone other than their owners/shareholders (note that the situation is slightly different for workers' coops, where the workers are the owners and can make decisions for themselves, although even they have to deal with market pressures).

b. Is it beholden to corporate backers? Unfortunately, corporations and banks control the vast majority of the world's capital, which means that even non-profit organizations often need to turn to them for cash. Sponsorship deals almost always come with strings attached, but those strings can range from "you have to include our logo on your website" to "we control the direction of your entire organization." Figuring out how much power private interests have over your chosen group is very important, because it will affect pretty much everything about what they can or cannot do or say. For example, I once worked for a national non-profit environmental organization that prevented its staff from writing or saying anything about climate change or corporate destruction of the environment, because they were afraid of scaring away their major donors, which included oil companies. By the time I finished working there, it was fairly clear to me that this organization was doing more harm than good, providing a large scale greenwashing service for the very same companies that were directly responsible for damaging the environment in the first place.

c. Is it inclusive and welcoming to marginalized groups? While no group is ever going to be perfectly inclusive, groups that perpetuate classism, racism, sexism, ableism, and other forms of oppression (even if it's through silence or inaction), and refuse to change when they're called out on it, are likely going to fall apart or make themselves irrelevant in the long run. Why?

Because the people who are the most invested in progressive social change, and who can teach us the most about how to move forward, are the groups that are harmed and marginalized by the status quo. By playing into the divisions created by capitalism and other forms of oppression, we only make ourselves weaker. That means all groups that are striving for social change should be making at least some effort to include marginalized people who aren't already well-represented within their group, unless there is some obvious reason not to. For example, a women-only group might not include men of colour at some or all of their events, because that's not what they were created for, and that's fine, but they should be open to working class women, women of colour, trans women, and disabled women. What's the difference? Well men, as a group, have systemic power over women (even if class, race, and other factors complicate how the power relations actually work out on an individual level), meaning they have certain kinds of advantages that women, as a group, don't enjoy. Excluding men is a temporary measure meant to make it easier for women to organize or do certain activities until we manage to eradicate patriarchy forever. Trans women, however, do not have power over cis women, just as women of colour do not have power over white women, and so excluding them is a matter of bigotry rather than practical necessity.

d. Are the people who are directly affected calling the shots? Lots of organizations claim to "help" people, while never directly involving them in the organization or decision-making. Sometimes there are practical reasons why the affected groups can't be present at every meeting (for example, a solidarity group working with people abroad, or people who are imprisoned in institutions), but at the very least you should be consulting with them about major decisions, including questions about where resources are directed. Most environmental groups, for example, should prioritize the needs and experiences of the people who are most directly and negatively affected by climate change and environmental destruction, including indigenous people, people living in the global South, farming communities, etc.

3. Talk to people around you. The best way to figure out what needs to be done is to talk to other people who care about the same issues you do. These conversations can happen in person, online, over the phone, or whatever else works for you, but they need to happen. All organization depends on communication, and while you don't want to spend ALL of your time talking, you also don't want to rush ahead and just do something for the sake of doing it, without knowing if it will be effective or if you have the necessary support to pull it off. Collective action often comes with costs attached, including time, energy, and material costs, so unless everybody involved is fully onboard, it's not going to happen. That means you'll probably need to spend a lot of time listening to and sharing concerns, coming up with possible solutions, and potentially convincing those who are on the fence.

If you're playing any kind of leadership role, self-criticism is SUPER important here, because whatever you do will have an impact on other people's lives and welfare. Make sure you are clear with yourself and with others about where your interests really lie, what you have to lose and what you have to gain, and how far you're willing to go to achieve your goals. If other people have power over you and might influence your actions, that needs to be discussed too. Learn about anti-oppressive practices like active listening, and don't dismiss concerns out of

hand, especially if they make you feel guilty or uncomfortable about your own privilege—chances are those are the things you most need to hear. Collective action can be incredibly powerful, but once you've broken someone's trust, it can be very, very difficult to win it back, which is why communication and consent are so essential.

4. Dream big, but don't forget to participate in the little things. A lot of activism and organizing work is thoroughly unglamorous. If you want to have a meeting, someone needs to send an email or notify people, someone needs to find and book a space, someone needs to bring food if there's going to be food, and someone needs to clean up the dishes and garbage afterwards. All of this takes work, and while it may seem boring and mundane, it's important that everyone participate in these little tasks, and try to share the labour equally (for example, make sure it's not just the women or people of colour who are cleaning up and doing the dishes!). Capacity-building takes time, so have patience. It's also worth noting that even if you don't have major goals in mind right away, building up a community of people that can look after one another and support each other still has a lot of value. People tend to turn to fascism when they have nowhere else to go, and if you can provide an alternative, one that promises to make a real difference in their lives, it can make a huge difference. While direct action is an important piece of the puzzle, not all activism involves chaining yourself to heavy equipment or marching on city hall, and behind every dramatic, headline-grabbing event that happens, there are countless people working behind the scenes trying to keep the wheels turning. If putting your body on the line is scary or inaccessible, there are still plenty of other things you can do that are just as valuable.

5. Apply pressure. Only the rich and powerful get what they want just by asking (or paying) for it. Unless you're a member of the elite, the people who have the power to make the changes you want to see in the world are going to take some convincing, because as far as they're concerned the status quo is working just fine (for them). While it would be nice to think that a well-reasoned argument that's supported by strong evidence would be enough, that is almost never the case. That's where pressure tactics come in. Protests, strikes, occupations, media campaigns, petitions, boycotts, and acts of sabotage are all ways to apply pressure to groups that can tip the scales in your favour. It's all about making sure that the perceived costs of continuing with the status quo are greater than the perceived costs of giving in to whatever demands you're making. This is ultimately how companies and governments function, and it's also why protests, strikes, and other actions usually have to be as disruptive as possible in order to work. The people who complain about sitting in traffic because protesters are blocking the streets often aren't aware that this disruption is the main thing that makes protests effective. Yes, they can raise awareness about an issue and help get more people involved, but if they aren't causing problems for someone, no one (other than the people who are already invested) will pay attention to them, including the mainstream media. In order for progressive change to happen, you need to make it impossible for corporations and governments to continue with business as usual, even if it's just for a few hours. This may lead some people to get angry and dismiss protesters, and it may even turn "public sentiment" against them, but often it's a choice between doing that, or having no impact at all. It's also worth noting that direct action, meaning

occupations, strikes, sabotage, etc., is almost always a last resort, something that happens after “official channels” have already proven to be dead ends.

6. Don’t let them divide you. One of the best ways to bring an organization down is to turn the more moderate members of the group against the more radical members. Attempts to demonize people who engage in direct action, or refuse to compromise with people in positions of power at the expense of marginalized groups, are widespread and, in many cases, incredibly effective. It’s helpful if you can recognize this tactic, understand where it’s coming from, and try your best to keep this from happening within your own group.

7. Find a balance. Burnout is a big problem in activist communities. The work can be exhausting, all-consuming, and very unrewarding at times, especially if you’re facing major setbacks. Remember that every project has its ups and downs, and just because things aren’t going as planned, doesn’t mean you’re failing. Also try to keep in mind that you won’t be able to help anyone if you’re too sick or depressed to get out of bed. There are lots of guides out there to help you identify and deal with burnout (for e.g. here, and here)—make sure to take some time to look them over, not just for your own sake, but also for the people around you. Activism isn’t a competition, so try to avoid comparing yourself to others or feeling bad about yourself for “not doing enough.” Remember that there’s nothing wrong with just surviving—for lots of people, that’s a full time job. While projects can be more rewarding if you stick with them for a long period of time, there are also times when you may need to let go and move on, or step back for awhile, and that’s ok too. Just because you’ve spent the last 5 years working on something, doesn’t mean you have to spend the rest of your life there, and in some cases you may actually learn more and be more productive if you switch to something new.

8. Learn from the past, plan for the future. The best thing about organizing is that you don’t have to do it alone. Not only is it by definition a collective activity, but it’s also something that has been around for a really, really long time. That means that there are lots of great books and other resources out there for you to learn from, like Howard Zinn’s A People’s History of the United States, so please don’t stop here!

Do you have other suggestions, stories, or tips that I haven’t mentioned here? Do you have fears or concerns that I haven’t addressed? Please feel free to leave a comment and I’ll try my best to incorporate them.

## Fighting Fascism

I've said it before and I'll say it again. Fascism is on the rise. It's more than just the Orange Menace in the White House, it's a global movement that's growing in the cracks left by the capitalist crisis, and it's threatening to tear us apart. If we really want to stop it, our best bet is to study fascist movements, develop an understanding of how they work and where they come from, and learn from the people who have confronted fascism in the past.

From what I've been able to gather after several years of research, there are 2 strategies that are effective against fascists. One is to disrupt their ability to organize by shutting down their meetings, rallies, shows, conferences, message boards, and anywhere else that fascists get together to talk to one another, spread their views, attack or terrorize marginalized people, or recruit new members.

Recently there's been a lot of uproar over the protest that forced authorities to cancel Milo Yiannopoulos's scheduled appearance at UC Berkeley. Whatever you think of Milo Yiannopoulos as an individual, there's no doubt that his speeches are serving as a recruitment ground for fascists. While Milo repeatedly tries to distance himself from the more extreme elements of the far-right, he still welcomes their presence and legitimizes their views. If you actually pay attention to the content of his speeches, they're all about painting white men as the victims of a leftist conspiracy called "political correctness" (also known as cultural Marxism in more anti-Semitic circles), and delegitimizing the grievances of oppressed and marginalized people. It's a message that's particularly appealing to the disaffected white men that his speeches tend to attract, and it plays directly into the hands of the fascists, who similarly argue that white men as a group are under attack and must band together to defend themselves from the invading hordes. Fascists also hate SJWs (social justice warriors), liberals, and leftists, and people like Milo and his entourage provide a convenient cover for their activities, as well as a rich recruiting ground.

No one is going to change Milo's mind. Trust me, people have tried. But his softcore white supremacism—rebranded as edgy anti-establishment conservatism—is working extremely well for him, providing all the fame and money he could ask for. He's found his niche, and he's going to run with it (same goes for Richard Spencer, Steve Bannon, Matthew Heimbach, and others). So you're left with two options: 1) try to convince everybody that attends his talks that his views are wrong (good luck with that), or 2) shut them down. If you're currently assembling an army of rhetorically-gifted people to follow Milo wherever he goes then great, but there are other people who don't have the luxury to wait for well-meaning liberals to get their act together. These are the people who are directly targeted by the violence Milo legitimizes and tacitly encourages, people like the transgender student he singled out and mocked at his talk in Milwaukee, people who have been harassed and doxed by his followers online, people who are racialized or disabled and have to deal with both state violence and racist vigilantes.

The second strategy that works against fascists is providing a viable alternative to fascism by directly confronting the conditions that produce it in the first place. That means more than talk,

or ideas about tolerance; that means real, concrete alternatives to capitalism, which brings with it the gradual collapse and privatization of public infrastructure and social services, unprecedented levels of economic inequality, ever-expanding prisons and the militarization of police, ongoing wars and bombings carried out in the service of corporate interests, climate change, and the eventual destruction of the biosphere.

The only effective way to fight fascists, other than confronting them in the streets, is to organize to address the very real needs and inequalities that make fascism appealing in the first place. Instead of accommodating racism or protecting it under the guise of free speech, we need to make racism irrelevant by ensuring that everyone has access to basic necessities and that no one is in a position to systematically dominate, oppress, or exploit others. Racism, sexism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia, and other forms of oppression are tools used by the ruling class to maintain and protect their position of power. The seeds of fascism were planted long before Trump became president, and until we take the fight directly to the capitalists and their institutions, fascists will keep popping up and demanding a platform. We not only have to deny them that platform, but also pull out the carpet from under their feet. In short, we have to fight capitalism if we’re going to fight fascists.

## GamerGate and the Right

For the last month and a half, most of what I have read, watched, or listened to on the Internet has been either directly or indirectly related to GamerGate.

If you haven't been following the chain of events, GamerGate started in late August when Eron Gjoni released a blog post alleging that his former girlfriend, game developer Zoe Quinn, had slept with a journalist in return for positive coverage of her free interactive fiction game, Depression Quest (this was later proven to be false). This resulted in a sustained harassment campaign targeting Quinn, as well as her family, friends, and supporters, and inspired the creation of the GamerGate hashtag on Twitter. The stated purpose of the hashtag was to raise awareness about corruption and ethics in game journalism, but it also served as a marshaling ground for people who had a bone to pick with "feminist ideologues." Other feminist critics and game developers were targeted, many of whom had already been subjected to both online and offline harassment, including Anita Sarkeesian, Mattie Brice, Jenn Frank, and Brianna Wu. Supporters of GamerGate have repeatedly tried to distance themselves from the harassment, doxxing, and threats, but thanks in part to the disorganized and decentralized nature of the "movement," they have had little success thus far. As many critics of GamerGate have pointed out, GamerGaters have largely focused on the activities of small indie developers and critics, rather than large companies, which are far more likely to have access to the resources necessary to influence and manipulate the gaming press, though some supporters have succeeded in pressuring advertisers to pull their ads from websites that have published articles criticizing the movement.

gg_sjwlistAside from a public discussion I hosted about a month ago, this is the first time I've sat down to write something that maybe will be seen by more than one or two people. I feel a bit badly for not speaking up earlier, not so much because I feel I have something especially important to say that hasn't already been contributed by somebody else, but because I think that numbers matter. It's part of how we measure "public opinion," but it's also a way of resisting the silencing tactics used by some of the more vocal (and violent) anti-feminist supporters of GamerGate. No one is obligated to read this, but the very fact that it exists is my way of saying "You may have succeeded in scaring the shit out of me, but I'm not going to back down."

Still, it's hard to know where to start. The impact on the gaming community I'm a part of has been tangible, but I also think it has, and will have, impacts far outside of that. This is because GamerGate is part of several broader trends, the most obvious of which is the polarization that follows in the wake of (or occurs as part of) economic, political, and cultural crises. By crisis I mean a sudden shift in the status quo, which occurs in any unsustainable system, and leads to a struggle over a limited supply of material and symbolic resources. Think of a house of cards, or a Jenga game, and the inevitable collapse. It's the dramatic release of tensions that have been built up over a period of time, as a result of contradictions or oppositions that can't be reconciled: the very act of playing the game and expanding the system, of adding cards or pulling out and restacking blocks, increases the instability of the system as a whole, until eventually it can no longer expand, and something has to give. In Jenga, this marks the end of

the game, but in reality, life goes on, and people are forced to deal with the (often unpleasant) consequences of the collapse.

Capitalism, particularly in its current form, is a highly unstable, and ultimately unsustainable system based on private property and the endless pursuit of profit. Overall profit goes in one direction, from those who have less wealth (the employees) to those who have more (the investors), and this produces ever-greater inequalities. However the rich can only get so rich before people, infrastructure, economies, and other things that depend on the continuous circulation and redistribution of wealth, start to give way. The 2008 financial crisis is the product of the instability created by the push for endless growth (of markets and fortunes) in a finite world. The effects of this crisis are still being felt today, and it is partly because of this that we've seen waves of large-scale protests and conflicts emerging in countries around the world: Tunisia, Greece, China, Turkey, Venezuela, Brazil, Ukraine, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Iceland, Egypt, the United States, Syria, Canada, Spain, Libya, Portugal, and the list goes on.

(At this point you're probably wondering what all this has to do with GamerGate, but bear with me, I'm getting there).

In a crisis it becomes increasingly difficult to maintain a "middle ground," as people are pressured to identify with one side of the conflict or another. As time goes on and the conflicts continue, both of these sides will tend to diverge, separating themselves from both the representatives of the old status quo (the liberals, centrists, and moderates, who present themselves as the "natural," "normal," and "neutral" middle ground), and the other side. This is what I mean by polarization. Historically, these two "sides" are what we call the Left and the Right. The Left is egalitarian and progressive, while the Right is hierarchical and reactionary.

Often the Right adopts surface-level terminology and symbolism from the Left, as was the case with the "National Socialists" or Nazi party, which can fool people into supporting them, something that would be difficult if fascists were honest and open about their real motives. While the Left is pushing for greater inclusivity and equality, the Right is focused on protecting their turf from "outsiders." This turf can be a nation, or it can be a medium like videogames. The outsiders can be Muslims, or Jews, or they can be feminists and "cultural Marxists" (a recycling of the term cultural Bolshevism, which was widely used by the Nazis during the Third Reich). Often this is wrapped up in language that emphasizes purity versus corruption, tradition versus change, strength versus weakness, order versus chaos. Class is almost never mentioned. Instead, the focus is on race, ethnicity, ability, gender, "merit," sexuality, and ideology. In right-wing ideology, employees and bosses, rich and poor, are united against a common enemy.

The goal of the Right is to eliminate "difference" in order to return to an imaginary, and heavily idealized past, a past where the power and privilege of the dominant race was unthreatened and unquestioned, a past where men were "real men" and women knew their place, a past that was morally, racially, and culturally "pure." Everything and anything that is wrong with the current state of society can then be blamed on the outsiders, the invaders who have infiltrated your turf and who are responsible for its decline. All of your problems, all of your insecurities, all

of your fears, can be channeled into hatred of the Other. This is called scapegoating, and it provides a simple solution to the difficulties that you've encountered throughout your life but have never been able to name. It provides comfort, a certain degree of safety (as a privileged insider), and a sense of community. You may not have much power, but at least you're better than "they" are, at least you're not one of "them."

The Left, unfortunately, represents a threat to all of that. The Left wants us to change our whole society around, the Left wants to upset hierarchies and disturb the "natural order of things," the Left paints you as a bully even though you're certain that you are the underdog. The Left represents everything that is wrong with the world, and it needs to be fought, tooth and nail. The Left is weak, corrupt, cowardly, and illogical (i.e. feminine), but we are strong, brave, rational, and valiant (i.e. masculine), and we are going to prove this by crushing the Left, and anyone else that dares to oppose us, because that's how masculinity works. We're the winners, not the losers, and we'll do whatever it takes to win.

In order to achieve this, we may claim to represent certain underprivileged groups, but deep down we can never accept them as equals, because as much as they try, they will never be real, white, heterosexual men. Never mind that they provide the basis of support that allows us to carry out some of our more extreme activities, never mind that they, like us, are simply looking for answers, and a sense of security, and belonging. This is, after all, the appeal of hashtags like #NotYourShield, which invites women and minorities to support and identify with GamerGate. It's the feeling of being a part of something bigger than yourself, of feeling included, and welcomed, of having a clear purpose. It's the same feeling that has united so-called "social justice warriors" on the Left, and activists of various stripes.

The thing that is rarely understood about the Right, and its more extreme variant, fascism, is the extent to which it thrives on crisis. Crisis is what produces the anxiety, the uncertainty, and the desperation that pushes people to look for answers, to look for security, in whatever form. Crisis, which also brings with it the potential for change, the potential for a dramatic redefinition of the status quo, threatens those who currently occupy a position of power or privilege, particularly when they are faced with a strong and organized Left. In order to prevent the Left from gaining ground during the crisis, the old guard will start to support (or at least fail to prevent) the activities of the extreme Right, of the fascists, who at this point may be the only ones who seem capable of putting down the Left. The fascists are not afraid to use violence, whether that means beating up and killing Leftist activists or harassing feminist critics and game developers online. The elites, meanwhile, are perfectly happy to let somebody else do their dirty work, even if publicly they will denounce the violence, or pretend to take a neutral stance. Up until now they have had to put up with constant criticism from the Left, but no more. From their point of view, fascists are actually preferable (an enemy of my enemy is my friend).

The point I'm trying to make is that you do not have to be a fascist to act as a basis of support for fascism. You do not have to be actively harassing women and minorities to provide a cover for those who are. Not everyone in Germany was a Nazi, and not every Nazi was necessarily a xenophobic sociopath, but that didn't stop them from committing genocide. The Nazi party

emerged in a moment of crisis, initially supported by members of the Western ruling class who feared the spread of communism and its promise of a global revolution more than anything else, just as the fascist parties of today are slowly but surely gaining ground, alongside the rise of movements like Occupy and Idle No More.

This is why I find anti-feminist sentiments and references to “cultural Marxists” in GamerGate videos and texts so absolutely terrifying, because I know where those things come from, and I know what they can produce. Anders Breivik repeatedly decries the corrupting influence of “cultural Marxist” in his manifesto, which he published not long before massacring 77 people in Norway. Elliot Rodger blamed women for his suffering, and for his inability to live up to the impossible standards of patriarchy, before killing 6 people and himself. Marc Lépine claimed he was “fighting feminism” when he murdered 14 people and committed suicide at École Polytechnique.

These might seem like isolated cases, but they all fall back on the same old myths about women and minoritized groups that are perpetuated by the mainstream media and supported by structural oppression. Every time we use a sexist slur, or dismiss the experiences of women and minorities, or make a crack about “feminazis,” or dehumanize someone who is struggling with poverty, or blame unemployment on immigrants, we contribute to a toxic culture that serves as a breeding ground for hate groups and right-wing extremism. People on both sides are suffering, but it is ultimately the people who are already disempowered, who are already vulnerable, that will bear the brunt of it, regardless of which side they identify with.

## Merit is a Myth

When people talk about the “myth of meritocracy,” they’re usually referring to the fact that so-called meritocracies rarely work as promised. These arguments claim that instead of doling out rewards and punishments based on someone’s merit, i.e. their inherent abilities, decisions are made on the basis of race, gender, class, and so on. However these critiques, as much as they can be helpful for pointing out existing inequities built into the system, often assume that something called “individual merit” really exists, and that it can be separated from other aspects of a person’s identity, background, and social context. They assume that a “true” meritocracy is the ideal, and that the current system is a broken and dysfunctional version of that ideal, a pale shadow of the perfect form. Few arrive at the conclusion: “What is merit, exactly, and do we really want merit to serve as the basis of our imagined, ideal society? Is this really what we should be striving for?”

In their article, The Meritocracy Myth, Stephen McNamee and Robert Miller state that merit is “generally viewed as a combination of factors including innate abilities, working hard, having the right attitude, and having high moral character and integrity.” They then go on to examine each of these qualities in turn, questioning what, if anything, is inherent, innate, or individual about abilities, hard work, having the “right” attitude, or having high moral character and integrity. Aside from pointing out that these qualities are often vaguely defined—what do we mean by the “right” attitude, exactly?—the authors also note that each of them is ultimately inseparable from the social context and experiences of the person whose abilities are being “measured,” as well as those of the people doing the measuring. Talents, attitudes, and morals are never recognized or developed in a void; they are as much a product of the society we live in as anything else in this world.

At this point, many people fall back on biological arguments—the idea that some people are “naturally” better at performing certain tasks thanks to genetics or other biological factors. This argument is flawed in two ways. First, it relies on an artificial division between “nature” and “culture,” human society and the natural world. Just because we treat biology and sociology as two separate fields of study, organizing them into disciplines and departments, doesn’t mean that this separation exists in reality. Even a person’s physical characteristics are influenced by socially-conditioned factors, such as their mother’s diet, stress levels, and access to quality care during pregnancy, which is in turn tied to issues like poverty, food sovereignty, working conditions, the chronic underfunding and privatization of healthcare institutions, and so on.

Secondly, even if we accept that there are certain biological differences that are “natural” and therefore outside the realm of human influence, we’re still left to wonder why we would want to accept a social order that discriminates on the basis of genetics or other biological traits, particularly given the bloody legacy of so-called “scientific racism.” Referring to something as natural, and then using that as a basis for normative arguments about how things “ought” to be, is known as the naturalistic fallacy, and is often used to reinforce the status quo.

Morals, meaning socially-held assumptions and norms that separate people, objects, or behaviours into categories such as right and wrong, good and bad, are also a product of our society. While McNamee and Miller stick to debunking the myth that moral integrity and wealth are closely aligned, pointing to corporate ethics scandals and white collar crimes like insider trading and tax fraud as evidence, the argument that the rich are not so noble or pure as they're often made out to be is hardly a revolutionary idea at this point, even in the birthplace of the American dream. Instead, we could go one step farther and say that morals are themselves the product of a society disproportionately controlled by and organized in favour of the rich and the powerful. This is how you end up in a world where ultra-rich capitalists like Bill Gates are put on a pedestal and praised for "giving back," while their "charities" buy shares in Monsanto and Cargill, companies responsible for innumerable human rights violations and widespread environmental destruction. This also explains why Black Lives Matter activists are criminalized and imprisoned for protesting police brutality and racism.

What we consider to be right and wrong, good and bad, has been shaped over generations. Far from being natural or universal, these values and morals are the product of our collective interactions with institutions like schools, the criminal justice system, the Church, the job market, and the media. Together these institutions create a system of rewards and punishments that we internalize over time. Eventually we no longer need to be told that failing a test is bad, or that arriving to work on time is good. We learn that our survival is dependent on pleasing those people who have power over us, the people in positions of authority, whether they are our parents or teachers or bosses or bureaucrats. We also learn to suppress the fact that we ever learned these lessons in the first place. From a young age we're told that it's considered rude, taboo, or just plain depressing to talk about power, inequality, and social control in any direct sense. In order to get by in this environment, we unconsciously accept the things that are rewarded as good/right, while rejecting the things that are punished as bad/wrong. This allows us to continue believing that we're free, even when we have very little power or autonomy, while still conforming to social norms: "I didn't clean the kitchen because my mother told me (and demonstrated through her actions) that that's what women are expected to do in our society, I cleaned it because it was dirty and I wanted it to be clean," or, "I did it because it was the right thing to do."

Of course saying that the elite have a disproportionate influence on the rest of society isn't the same as saying that they're the only influence. If that were true, critiques of racism would probably never have developed or become part of our moral landscape. People who are exploited, enslaved, and oppressed have a tendency to push back, and in the process, morals shift and change, becoming a site of struggle and resistance. You can see this happening right now in the debates over sexual assault on college campuses, which include arguments about what "counts" as sexual assault, and who should be held responsible. Similar to the fight to include non-consensual sex with a spouse (i.e. marital rape) under the legal definition of rape in 1983 in Canada, this push to establish new moral (and legal) norms is coming mostly from people who are harmed and disempowered by the status quo.

Perhaps one of the most deeply ingrained moral norms that exists today is the importance of hard work. Insults like “a waste of skin” and “good-for-nothing” often connect a person’s value as a human being with their productivity, while terms such as industrious, entrepreneurial, active, and diligent are considered compliments. There’s nothing worse than being seen as lazy or unable to work in a society that valorizes hard work, particularly if you’re poor or racialized. Aside from the fact that it’s often difficult, if not impossible, to determine exactly how “hard” someone is working, there’s also the question of why hard work is so valuable, and for whom. What exactly are we working for, and who benefits from all this hard work? Most people need to work to survive, but when we start to see the act of working hard as valuable in and of itself, such that working hard becomes a central part of our identity, we open ourselves up to whole new forms of exploitation.

It’s no coincidence that the notion of a “strong work ethic” has emerged and developed within a capitalist system that depends on maximizing profits through lowering pay, increasing productivity, and extending the length of the working day. While it’s possible to coerce people into working harder through threats of violence or deprivation, it’s even more effective to encourage workers to self-police, especially in industries that rely heavily on intellectual and creative labour. Teach people to think of “hard work” as a positive trait, as something they can brag about to their friends or carry around as evidence of moral fortitude, and you no longer need to hold a gun to their head.

This isn’t to say that arguments for the value of certain forms of labour aren’t useful when they’re made strategically. Care work and domestic labour have historically been devalued alongside the women and people of colour who most often perform these tasks, and it makes perfect sense to fight back against that trend. But problems arise when we stop connecting these arguments to actual, material conditions, such as when we fail to recognize that people are working harder and longer for less pay, because the joy of working at a job you love is assumed to be its own reward.

And where does merit fit in all of this? In some ways, merit functions as a smokescreen for the social and material relations that make up our society and determine our place within it. Merit is the simple story that we tell ourselves to explain away all the societal factors and influences that authority figures refuse to account for directly. The reason we have so much trouble separating merit from “non-merit” factors is because there is no separation, not really. And yet throughout our school years and our working life, our value is constantly being measured and quantified in relation to something called merit. If we fail to get the job, get a low grade, or get paid less than other people, we’re told that it’s because we just don’t have what it takes—we lack merit—which also implies that we don’t deserve to have what other people have: we don’t merit it. Since merit is supposedly the property of an individual, we’re told it’s our own responsibility if we fail according to these measures. Merit, by focusing the gaze inwards rather than outwards, both naturalizes the status quo and cuts short any attempt to examine the collective effect of these structures and systems that determine who is rewarded, when, why, and how. It becomes about our own personal failure, our own inadequacies, rather than the inadequacy of a system that values some lives above others.

Merit is a constant source of insecurity, stress, and anxiety, but it can also act as a source of pleasure for those who find themselves on the winning side. I work in videogames and academia, two areas where the concept of merit is very deeply embedded. In mainstream gaming culture, competition and demonstrations of skill are highly valued, often under the assumption that what distinguishes games from “real life” is that games present players with an even playing field. Equal opportunity is seen as an essential component of any “real” meritocracy, however it’s unclear where exactly the equality begins and ends. If the only thing distinguishing players is their skills, then should players not also have an equal opportunity to acquire those skills? If one player has 60 hours a week to practice, and the other only has 5, can it still be called an even playing field? What about players who have different physical abilities due to an accident of birth or circumstance? What about players who don’t speak the language or are bullied or harassed due to their race, sexuality, or gender presentation? Who exactly is this “even playing field” for, and who is being invisibly excluded by our reluctance to challenge the concept of merit?

You might expect academics to “know better,” however academic institutions have the dubious honour of being both the source of many of the critiques of meritocracy, and a place where the concept of merit is systematically reinforced through grades and performance metrics, honorifics and degrees, grant committees and various other forms of gatekeeping.

In the case of academia, it can be tempting to replace merit with “intelligence” in an attempt to dodge the issues I’ve raised above, however the concept of intelligence also needs to be unpacked. There is a long history of separating the body from the mind (or soul) in Western philosophy and science that I won’t get into here, except to say that the process of assigning the body to a lower status has served to naturalize a social order where the ruling classes, who are free to engage in “higher” pursuits like education, politics, and the arts, are viewed as innately superior, while the lower classes, who are typically forced into manual labour and are more likely to be preoccupied by basic, bodily needs like food and shelter, are seen as inferior, crass, vulgar, and unfit to govern their own affairs. The concept of the mind, and everything that follows from it, has important social and political implications, lending power to some groups while disempowering others; however it is also, itself, shaped by those relations of power. This comes through in the devaluation and erasure of indigenous knowledge by colonial powers, as well as the selective application of terms like “genius” and “madness,” concepts which are closely linked to prevailing social norms.

The argument that intelligence is not about what you know, but about your ability to learn, does not erase the fact that the development of any skill, learning included, is highly dependent on free time and access to resources, something that is rarely taken into account by academic structures. When I’m grading students, I’m asked to assess them based on the work that they’ve produced, without giving any consideration to the context in which the work was created, or the background of the student who made it. To give you an idea of just how much this leaves out, here’s a partial list of some of the things that instructors aren’t expected to think about when giving grades to undergraduate students:

Were they working full time? Do they have children or other dependents they need to care for? Are they sick and/or suffering from mental health issues but won't reveal this to me because of social stigma? Do they have a safe and quiet place to work? Are they taking the class simply because they need the credit and the structure of the university left them with no other options? Are they put off by the fact that my course outline consists entirely of work by white men, which doesn't reflect or even directly discounts their experiences? Is the content forcing them to relive past trauma, which is affecting their ability to work? Is English their first, second, third, or fourth language? Has their attendance dropped because they were abused by other students in the class? Are they living with high levels of debt and stressing out about their future? Are their family or friends supportive of their decision to go to university? What else is going on in their lives?

There's no room for any of these questions in a system dominated by GPAs (grade point averages), especially when that system is also expanding the size of classes, reducing the number of staff, demanding more work for less pay (often under precarious conditions), eliminating essential support structures like health services and benefits, and generally screwing teachers and students alike in the name of "cutting costs" and "improving efficiency." In this context it's difficult—if not impossible—for instructors to provide the individualized attention and care that students need. Students are reduced to a series of letters and numbers on a page, as are the instructors, and most of us are too tired to do anything about it.

Despite these obvious problems, many people work to protect and reinforce the status quo, because they've come to identify their own self-worth with that system of letters and numbers. Whether it's gamers protesting the "casualization" of their favourite series or genre while pining over the "good old days" when games were really, really hard and only real men… ahem, I mean real gamers, could rise to the challenge, or professors reminiscing about the sleepless nights they spent desperately trying to get through the 5 million books they were expected to read as graduate students, the old guard vigorously defends the rituals and barriers to access—the "rites of passage"—that also function as the source of their own legitimacy. "Why should they have it easy, when I suffered so much?" "I worked hard to get where I am today." "This generation is so coddled and self-centered." This is the inevitable outcome of a system organized around the concept of individual merit. When your own worth depends on the exclusion of others, on your capacity to succeed where others fail, then equality and access will appear to work against your personal interests, rather than for them. This is why we are so hostile to the notion of privilege, because it runs counter to the idea that we worked hard and suffered for what we have, that we "deserve it."

Merit is ultimately about deserving, and about legitimizing private ownership and inequality. It is ideological through and through, perhaps even more so than the things we typically think of as "ideological," because it often works subconsciously and involves strong emotional responses. When we've invested so much in the current system, through our own blood, sweat, and tears, it can be hard to let go. I think we must let go, but to do it, we also need to support each other, to find new ways to invest in one another and in ourselves. We can't strip away a person's sense

of self-worth, replace it with nothing, and expect them to simply let it happen. That void needs to be filled, somehow.

We can start by telling the people around us that we care about them, that they matter to us, that they are worth so much more than their productivity or their ability to “succeed” in a fucked up system based on “merit.” We can start by guiding each other through the process of deconstructing that system, helping each other to ask the tough questions, and standing by each other in moments of despair and desperation. We can start by questioning our own investments, and the way we punish or reward people based on their behaviour. We can start by listening to the people challenging inequality, wherever it exists, and instead of tearing them down, recognize that all our struggles are connected. We can start by organizing new systems and new structures that can replace the old, and by changing the ones we currently occupy. We can start by imagining something better than a “genuine” meritocracy. We can start by practicing solidarity. We can start by believing that another world is possible, and that we have what it takes to get there.

## The Limits of “Free Speech”

The claim that free speech is under attack is everywhere. Given how important the concept seems to be, you’d think people would be more concerned with carefully explaining what free speech is and why it matters in the first place. Instead, you tend to get vague remarks about a “free society,” or hypothetical scenarios that have no bearing on actual reality. Most of us have been raised to believe that free speech is a good thing, and we tend to take this idea for granted, so maybe it’s not surprising that we rarely ask ourselves more fundamental questions like “What does free speech mean?”, “Why is free speech important?”, and “Who is benefiting from the support of free speech?”. In an effort to clear up some of the confusion around free speech, who has it and who doesn’t, and how it’s being used, I’m going to tackle some of these questions head on.

What is free speech?

What do we mean when we talk about free speech? Free speech laws such as the First Amendment in the United States are supposed to protect individuals and organizations from government censorship and repression—they have nothing at all to say about how ordinary people treat one another. This distinction is important, in part because most governments, even those that are supposedly democratic, are in practice run by and subservient to the interests of the rich and powerful. With corporate lobby groups and private donors wielding so much power, the state can’t be trusted to regulate speech. Even hate speech laws, which are supposed to protect marginalized groups, tend to be abused. For example, in 2015 the Canadian government used hate speech laws to criminalize protests against the Israeli state’s occupation of Palestine by equating criticism of the Israeli state with anti-Semitism.

There’s also a big difference between having the right to speak, and having the right to a platform. While social media has made it easier for ordinary people to share their views with an audience outside their immediate friends and family, most of us don’t have access to large, established platforms, which include things like TV appearances, articles in widely circulated newspapers or magazines, popular YouTube channels, public speeches, etc. These platforms significantly magnify the effects and reach of a person’s speech, granting them a disproportionate amount of power and influence, and so it makes sense that this person’s views should be subject to some degree of scrutiny and public oversight. When someone like Milo Yiannopolous is invited to speak at a university, he is making use of resources provided by the student body and, through government grants and subsidies, the public at large. When members of the public decide that they don’t agree with how those resources are being used, and show up to protest the event (usually after trying to go through official channels and being repeatedly ignored), they are not only exercising their free speech, but also asserting democratic control over the use of public resources. This kind of public accountability is essential to any real democracy, since it helps to prevent abuses of power.

The only way you can support Milo’s right to “free speech” in this situation is if you have a very broad interpretation of free speech, and a very narrow interpretation of democracy. In other

words, you have to see free speech laws as applying to everyday interactions between ordinary people (which, legally speaking, they do not), while at the same time arguing that democracy is limited only to procedures involving the government, and is not about ordinary people acting collectively or making decisions about things that affect them on a day-to-day basis.

In theory, free speech is a right available to everyone; in reality, it's a function of power. The more power you have, the more freely you're able to speak, the larger your platform, and the less likely you are to be silenced by the threat of violence. Because of widespread inequality and differences in power, some speech also prevents other speech. When a cop tells you "stop talking or I'll have you arrested," chances are you're going to shut up. Similarly, you probably aren't going to tell your boss that the joke they just made was racist if you think they might fire you because of it, but you will be careful not to mention that you support Black Lives Matter in front of them. And when someone's YouTube video containing copyrighted materials is taken down because of a DMCA (Digital Millennium Copyright Act) complaint, people rarely say that the corporation that owns the intellectual property and/or YouTube is infringing on that person's free speech. The point is that the broad definition of free speech doesn't actually hold up in the real world, because very few if any people are free to say whatever they want whenever they want without consequence. It takes a whole lot of power, money, and privilege to have that kind of latitude, and most of us aren't Donald Trump.

Why is free speech important and who is benefiting from the support of free speech?

Free speech can play an important role in preventing government abuses or empowering people who are typically disempowered. However it can also be used to hurt people and reinforce existing hierarchies, which is why it's essential not to talk about free speech in the abstract, but instead look at how the concept of free speech is actually being used, and to what effect.

Because we're taught that free speech is automatically good, we also tend to think that anyone "attacking" free speech is automatically bad. This knee-jerk reaction can be used against us, and so we need to be able to recognize when arguments in support of free speech are being used selectively to benefit certain groups, while dismissing or demonizing others.

For many, free speech only seems to be an issue when it affects people in positions of power or authority. One of the reasons we're seeing so much talk about free speech these days is because groups that are historically silenced and denied access to public platforms are making use of tools like social media and collective action to speak up and share their experiences and criticisms with the rest of the world. Critical discussions about race, gender, capitalism, policing, borders, and so on are becoming more mainstream as different voices enter the public arena for the first time. This situation makes people in positions of power, people who aren't used to being challenged or held accountable for their actions, uncomfortable and defensive. But we should be asking ourselves, why are these people's comfort more important than the well-being of the people who are being hurt by the systems of oppression and exploitation that these discussions are trying to address?

Strangely enough, some of the staunchest “supporters” of free speech, are also the ones terrorizing Muslims, people of colour, and other marginalized groups. White supremacist and neo-fascist groups have discovered that rallying under the banner of free speech is an effective way to push their far-right views into the mainstream, while benefiting from the protection of well-meaning liberals. Often these groups will tone down their language, re-frame their views, or use humor and irony in order to appeal to a broader audience and maintain plausible deniability (for example saying “I didn’t mean it that way” or “it was just a joke” when called out), knowing all the while that their arguments are a stepping stone to more extreme and violent forms of racism, misogyny, transphobia, etc.

This is why the white supremacist website Daily Stormer celebrates Pewdiepie, a famous YouTuber with over 50 million subscribers who has recently taken to making anti-Semitic jokes, for his “normalization of Nazism and Jew hatred.” Fascists understand the importance that a large platform plays in growing their movement and achieving their long-term goals.  Pewdiepie, Donald Trump, Marine Le Pen, Milo Yiannopolous, and other relatively well-known figures may not be fascists themselves, but they play a crucial role in creating the conditions that allow fascism to take hold.

Free speech is a means to an end, not an end in and of itself. It’s essential that we learn to think about free speech in critical terms, especially when the mainstream media is stoking fears about “social justice warriors” and “political correctness,” as a way to avoid deeper discussions about the role our institutions play in maintaining and justifying systems of oppression.

# MRGS Community discussion guidelines

## PREAMBLE

The present set of rules and guidelines are intended to ensure that community discussions within the Mount Royal Game Society (MRGS) are welcoming to all, and provide value for those taking part.

In this context, “community discussion” refers to all public, shared content, including:

- Facebook wall posts
- Announcements at meetups and events
- etc.

## GENERAL RULES

First and foremost: *All discussions are subject to the MRGS Safer Spaces Policy.*[1]

There are also more general rules for discussions:

- No advertising
    - Announcements made for purely marketing purposes -- or to otherwise increase a product’s visibility -- without directly engaging the community (e.g., soliciting feedback, inviting to play sessions, etc.), are not welcome.
- No spam
    - Repeat announcements of the same topic or product are not welcome.
- Relevance
    - Announcements and posts should be relevant to game creation or game appreciation, and the community of such enthusiasts in Montreal.

RULES FOR JOB POSTINGS

- No unremunerated, for-profit job postings
    - If you are a for-profit company, and the job you’re advertising is unpaid and does not involve a co-ownership agreement, please refrain from posting. This includes unpaid internships.
- Be clear about the terms
    - All posts for paid positions, including contract work, should include a wage or salary range OR details about co-ownership agreements.
- Not-for-profit postings welcome
    - Unpaid positions or calls for volunteers are welcome provided the work is not-for-profit.

[1] http://mrgs.ca/safer-space/

## INTERPRETATION

The above rules have been left intentionally vague to accommodate the wide range of content and contexts possible in community discussions. Moderators reserve the right to remove or otherwise block posts and/or announcements at their own discretion, should they be seen to be in violation of the rules.

For more information on these guidelines, and/or to understand why your post may have been removed, please send all inquiries to bakedgoods@mrgs.ca.

*“Keep in mind that you are posting to a community, not a target audience, and we will remove posts that make no attempt to acknowledge the difference.”*

# Safer Space Policy Guide

By members of the Mount Royal Game Society
mrgs.ca

## About Safer Spaces :D

Safer spaces are a strategy for mitigating structural oppressions such as, but not limited to: patriarchy, racism, ableism, colonialism, heteronormativity, and more. As such, safer spaces look different depending on context, geography, and who the people in the space are.

In a way, we're already used to adapting to different environments and adjusting our behaviour to better communicate and relate with other people. A safer space policy is a concrete acknowledgement of a group's commitment to creating a community space which prioritizes the accessibility and safety of marginalized people. It's also a space in which people aspire to act with intentionality (where we understand that actions speak louder than words) and with compassion.

> "A safer space is a supportive, non-threatening environment that encourages open-mindedness, respect, a willingness to learn from others, as well as physical and mental safety. It is a space that is critical of the power structures that affect our everyday lives, and where power dynamics, backgrounds, and the effects of our behavior on others are prioritized. It's a space that strives to respect and understand survivors' specific needs. Everyone who enters a safer space has a responsibility to uphold the values of the space.
> ...
> Issues like hurtful language and behavior (both within the space itself, and in patterns extending beyond activities of the space), violence, touching people without their consent, intolerance of someone's religious beliefs or lack thereof, and just straight-up being creepy, sleazy, racist, ageist, sexist, heterosexist, transphobic, ablebodiest, classist, sizist, or exhibiting any other behavior or language that may perpetuate oppression, may be addressed with a safer space policy."
>
> Text from: https://saferspacesnyc.wordpress.com/

The safer space policy currently used at all Mount Royal Game Society events is available here: http://mrgs.ca/safer-space/

## Enforcing Safer Space Policies

Principles for dealing with conflicts

1) Safer spaces are not about proving who is right and who is wrong. The people who make reports under a safer space policy are not responsible for “proving” that something bad happened to them.

2) Do whatever you can to avoid discouraging people from reporting issues. Victim blaming is very common in our society and this needs to be recognized and mitigated against by organizers. Rather than asking someone “are you sure this happened?” or “aren’t you overreacting?” start by saying “how can we help?” and go from there.

3) Context matters! There is no “one size fits all” solution to dealing with safer space reports. While it can be useful to give examples of harmful behaviour, make sure to emphasize that what is or is not harmful depends on lots of different factors, and will change from one situation, and person, to the next.

4) Empower marginalized people and make sure that they have agency in deciding how the situation will be resolved. DO NOT make any decisions or take any actions without first consulting the person who made the report. Let them decide for themselves what will make them feel safe, and act on those decisions.

5) Confidentiality is extremely important. One of the major factors that prevents people from reporting oppressive behaviour is the fear of backlash. Make sure never to publicly identify someone who has made a report, or give away any information that might lead someone to guess their identity. This includes discussing the details of the incident with the person or people who prompted someone to make a report in the first place. It should be up to the person who made the report to decide what information is shared.

6) The point of safer spaces isn’t to educate people who engage in problematic behaviour. While it’s always nice if someone is able to learn from the experience, be aware that this learning often comes at the expense of marginalized people who are forced to “educate” the people that have done them harm.

7) It doesn’t matter where or when it happened, what matters is that someone is feeling unsafe. Often institutional harassment policies exclude or fail to take into account violence that happens outside the boundaries of that institution. However, just because it happened “somewhere else” doesn’t mean it doesn’t have an impact on our communities, and safer spaces should take this into account. For example, someone who was stalked in the past may not feel safe around their stalker, even if the stalking itself has stopped.

8) Sometimes it’s not possible to resolve a situation such that both people are still able to participate and occupy the same space safely. Usually when this happens, it means that the person who is the most marginalized within that space will be forced to leave, because the space is no longer safe for them. An all-too-common example of this is when an employee is asked to leave by her employers because she reported that she

was sexually harassed by another employee.

Safer spaces, on the other hand, prioritize the needs of marginalized people, recognizing that most spaces in daily life systematically exclude and marginalize them by default. This means that you may have to ask someone to leave because they are making one or more marginalized people feel unsafe. Be aware that this is the part of safer space policies which usually generates the most backlash, especially if you aren't able to provide an explanation for why the person is being asked to leave because that would break confidentiality. This is why it's important to be aware of the principles above, and how safer spaces operate as an alternative to a system that produces numerous inequalities and injustices on a daily basis. What may seem unfair in a given context to a given person, is often simply correcting for existing inequalities that unfairly disadvantage certain people on the basis of factors that they cannot control, such as their racial or gender identity.

9) Never advertise that your event or organization has a safer space policy if you have no intention of enforcing it. Doing so only misleads marginalized people, potentially putting them in a more dangerous and vulnerable position by creating false expectations.

Common Arguments against Safer Space Policies

1) The policy might be abused/You're putting too much trust in the people who report to you. Any policy can be abused, including traditional justice systems. Typically systems are abused by those with the most power and privilege. By automatically placing decision-making power in the hands of marginalized people, we're running against the grain of how most institutions operate. We're also reducing the power that organizers have to make wrong, arbitrary, or self-serving decisions, significantly reducing the risk of some of the most common forms of abuse. Even with a safer space policy in place, making a report can be very risky. For example, there have been multiple recent, high-profile cases of women who have reported incidents of rape, sexual assault, and harassment, and have been dismissed, mocked, blamed for "bringing it on themselves", and further harassed as a result. Many will never make reports in the first place, either because they are afraid of the backlash, or because they have internalized the message that they are personally responsible for anything that happens to them. One of the results of sexism and rape culture is that women, especially racialized and working class women, are less likely to be believed or taken seriously than men, even by other women. This also has an impact on reporting.

2) You're not placing enough trust in the community/We're all good people. Safer space policies emerged because even communities oriented around feminist and anti-oppressive principles aren't immune to the effects of structural oppression, differences in power and access, and the ingrained, often unconscious prejudices that are passed down to us through mainstream culture and media. Rather than categorizing people into good and bad, safer space policies recognize that everyone has the potential to cause

harm to another human being. Often this harm is unintentional, but we still need a way to address it. A failure to address these issues is one of the main ways that marginalized people are systemically excluded from or pushed out of community spaces, even ones that supposedly exist “for them.”

3) Safer spaces discriminate against straight, white (cis) men. Similar to the arguments about “reverse racism” (i.e. discrimination against white people) and “reverse sexism” (discrimination against men), this argument fails to take into account existing structural inequalities and forms of oppression. It either assumes that a) these inequalities do not exist or b) that they have no bearing on individual interactions. While there are plenty of statistics and studies that indicate otherwise, these arguments are difficult to counter because they are often put forward by people who have already made up their mind and will only accept evidence that reinforces their worldview. Only engage if you have both the energy and time to do so, and don’t go into it expecting a positive outcome. This is especially true if the person making this argument calls you a feminist ideologue, a cultural Marxist, or an SJW (social justice warrior), terms which are often used by GamerGaters.

Who should enforce safer spaces?

There are two major considerations when making this decision:

1) Ideally the majority of the people involved in enforcing safer spaces should themselves be members of marginalized groups, and have a strong understanding of structural oppression (or at least a willingness to learn more). However, this is in tension with point number 2.
2) Enforcing safer spaces may put you in a position where you are forced to “burn bridges.” It’s best to try to avoid a situation where someone is afraid or unwilling to act on a safer space report because there are people within the community who have power and influence over them. While it may not be possible to avoid this situation entirely, make sure that everyone is aware that there are personal and/or financial risks involved.

If possible, it’s a good idea to involve an independent third party composed of people who aren’t affiliated with the organizers. This way people have someone to report to in the case where an organizer is the one making them feel unsafe.

Try to avoid contacting police whenever possible. If you decide to include contact info for police in your written policy, consider that people who are racialized and criminalized, particularly those who are victims of police brutality, may avoid reporting issues because they’re afraid of what will happen to them if law enforcement is involved. These concerns are valid and should be respected by organizers.

Announcing Safer Spaces policies

If possible you should always do a verbal announcement at the beginning of the event that highlights the existence of the safer space policy, provides a brief summary of how the policy

works, and lists ways that people can make safer space reports. Don't rely on people reading the policy, especially if it is only available online. Posting printed copies of the policy is also recommended.

Here is an example of a safer space announcement script:

Because [your event/organization name here] aims to be an inclusive space, we have a Safer Space Policy which establishes a zero-tolerance attitude to sexism, racism, homophobia, transphobia, (dis)ableism, or any other form of discrimination or harassment. The goal of Safer Spaces is to create an environment where people who are normally discriminated against or excluded feel both safe and welcome. This is a collective effort, so we ask that all of you participate in helping us make this space safer, while considering the ways that differences in power and privilege affect our daily interactions.

If you feel or observe something that makes you feel uncomfortable or unsafe in any way, speak to one of the organisers [*identify organisers*]. A full copy of our Safer Space Policy is available online, [or in printed version if available]. You can also contact the organizers by email at [email address] or by phone at [phone number]. If you don't feel comfortable contacting the organizers, we also have an email for an independent third party (not the organisers), who can address any issues discreetly and anonymously.

Strategies for intervening before a report is made
As an organizer it's possible that you'll witness behaviour that you know is potentially harmful. Even if no one has made a report, it's still possible to intervene in ways that can help to make the space safer.

1. If it sounds like the conversation is taking a bad turn, try and change the topic of the conversation. This is useful if people might need to cool off.
2. If possible, take someone aside and explain to them why their behaviour is problematic or harmful. This is often referred to as "calling in" a person, as opposed to "calling out" which is usually done publicly. Try to find a quiet place where you will not be the centre of attention. While public call-outs are sometimes necessary, they also tend to put people on the defensive and can sometimes worsen attitudes towards a discussion.
3. If the person reacts negatively or is being aggressive feel free to involve other organizers in the conversation. Sometimes it's good to have backup.
4. If they refuse to cooperate ask them to leave and tell the venue staff what's going on. Remember that your safety is important too!

## Common oppressive behaviours and patterns to look out for

Mansplaining: When men explain things to women or femme-presenting people based on the assumption that they know little or nothing about the subject under discussion because of their

gender. For example, a man may explain basic concepts in engineering, programming, physics, or other male-dominated fields, even if the person they are talking to has more experience in that area than he does. Mansplaining can be easily avoided by simply asking someone whether they are familiar with the subject before launching into a detailed explanation.

Taking up space: Keep an eye on who is speaking the most and “taking up space” in a room. If some people are repeatedly talking over others, intruding on their personal space, or dismissing their point of view, try to encourage them to think about how much space they’re taking up, and how little space they’re leaving for others. If you’re participating in a conversation, suggest that everyone take a moment to pause and see if anyone who hasn’t had a chance to speak yet would like to add to the discussion.

Bad jokes and slurs: Jokes and slurs aimed at marginalized groups, or jokes that make light of oppressive behaviour and attitudes (for example rape jokes) may seem funny to someone who doesn’t have to deal with the experience of being oppressed or marginalized in that way, but for those who do, these words can cause real psychological harm, and may contribute to someone feeling unwelcome in a given space. Bad jokes not only reinforce stereotypes and prejudiced beliefs, but also send the message that the feelings and experiences of those who are the butt of these jokes don’t really matter. Sexist, racist, homophobic, transphobic, and other targeted slurs can be equally harmful, especially for survivors of trauma and abuse, and are easily replaced with other words that don’t carry the same history of violence and discrimination.

Unwelcome advances: Women in particular often have to deal with unwelcome and unexpected advances from men who feel entitled to their attention and time simply because they’re women. One of the effects of rape culture is that wearing makeup or “sexy” clothing is viewed as an invitation to men rather than as something women do for themselves. It also means that women are often punished both for being “too friendly” (“she was leading me on”) and for not being friendly enough (“she’s a cold-hearted bitch”). Many women have also experienced aggressive or violent reactions from men they have turned down in the past, which makes it that much more stressful to be put in a situation where they have to say no. While it’s not always easy to know when or if to intervene, keeping an eye out for signs of discomfort and distress, or checking in with people if it’s a small event, can help to prevent these situations from occurring or escalating.

Islamophobia: Islamophobia is discrimination or prejudice against Islam or Muslims. Because Islam is widely associated with certain geographic regions and races, Islamophobia is often targeted at people who are assumed to be Muslim on the basis of their skin colour, their accent, their dress, or other features of their appearance. Despite arguments that Islamophobia is not racist because Islam isn’t a race, but a religion, it is a) still a form of discrimination and b) most often targeted at racialized groups, including Arabs, blacks, and South Asians. It also has a gendered dimension, since Muslim women who wear the veil are particularly likely to be subjected to harassment and violence, including forced unveilings.

Microaggressions: “Microaggressions are everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, which communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership. In many cases, these hidden messages may invalidate the group identity or experiential reality of target persons, demean them on a personal or group level, communicate they are lesser human beings, suggest they do not belong with the majority group, threaten and intimidate, or relegate them to inferior status and treatment.

*Racial Microaggressions:*

- A White man or woman clutches their purse or checks their wallet as a Black or Latino man approaches or passes them. (Hidden message: You and your group are criminals.).
- An Asian American, born and raised in the United States, is complimented for speaking "good English." (Hidden message: You are not a true American. You are a perpetual foreigner in your own country.)
- A Black couple is seated at a table in the restaurant next to the kitchen despite there being other empty and more desirable tables located at the front. (Hidden message: You are a second-class citizen and undeserving of first-class treatment.)

*Gender Microaggressions:*

- An assertive female manager is labeled as a "bitch," while her male counterpart is described as "a forceful leader." (Hidden message: Women should be passive and allow men to be the decision makers.)
- A female physician wearing a stethoscope is mistaken as a nurse. (Hidden message: Women should occupy nurturing and not decision-making roles. Women are less capable than men).
- Whistles or catcalls are heard from men as a woman walks down the street. (Hidden message: Your body/appearance is for the enjoyment of men. You are a sex object.)

*Sexual Orientation Microaggressions:*

- A Young person uses the term "gay" to describe a movie that she didn't like. (Hidden message: Being gay is associated with negative and undesirable characteristics.)
- A lesbian client in therapy reluctantly discloses her sexual orientation to a straight therapist by stating she is "into women." The therapist indicates he is not shocked by the disclosure because he once had a client who was "into dogs." (Hidden message: Same-sex attraction is abnormal and deviant.)
- Two gay men hold hands in public and are told not to flaunt their sexuality. (Hidden message: Same-sex displays of affection are abnormal and offensive. Keep it private and to yourselves.)”

Text from: https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/microaggressions-in-everyday-life/201011/microaggressions-more-just-race

Misgendering: Referring to someone, especially a transgender or non-binary person, using a word such as a pronoun (he/she/they/ze) or form of address (Mr./Mrs./Ms./Mx.) that does not correctly reflect the gender with which they identify. This harms people by invalidating their experiences and their identities, and can be easily avoided by simply asking people which pronouns they prefer to use, and making an effort to use those pronouns.

## Important Concepts and Terms

Structural Oppression: Structural oppression refers to the way that cultural, political, and economic structures systematically oppress and discriminate against particular groups of people. Because structural oppression is systemic and involves large groups, as well as institutions, it isn't always visible at the level of the individual. For example, even if an individual woman makes more money than an individual man, statistics indicate that overall men are still paid more than women. It's only by looking at these broader patterns in our society, and taking into account widespread cultural beliefs and attitudes, laws and policies, and distributions of wealth and resources, that we can really grasp how different forms of structural oppression, such as racism and sexism, work.

Structural oppression also has historical roots; for example the history of racism in the United States is closely tied to the legacy of colonialism, the transatlantic slave trade, and the (ongoing) genocide of Native Americans. Because structural oppression is built up and reproduced over a long period of time, it also takes a long time to dismantle. Even after slavery was outlawed, "Jim Crow" segregation laws, racial prejudice, and generational poverty still made life very difficult for the majority of black people living in the United States. Racism against black people did not disappear simply because the North won the war.

Intersectionality: "Intersectionality (or intersectional theory) is the study of overlapping or intersecting social identities and related systems of oppression, domination or discrimination. The theory suggests that—and seeks to examine how—various biological, social and cultural categories such as gender, race, class, ability, sexual orientation, religion, caste, age and other axes of identity interact on multiple and often simultaneous levels. This framework can be used to understand how systemic injustice and social inequality occur on a multidimensional basis. Intersectionality holds that the classical conceptualizations of oppression within society—such as racism, sexism, classism, ableism, biphobia, homophobia, transphobia, and belief-based bigotry—do not act independently of each other. Instead, these forms of oppression interrelate, creating a system of oppression that reflects the 'intersection' of multiple forms of discrimination."
Text from: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Intersectionality

Power dynamics: Refers to the complex ways that power works in a given situation. (See intersectionality)

Ableism: “Ableism is discrimination against people with disabilities, including the expression of hate for people with disabilities, denial of accessibility, rejection of disabled applicants for housing and jobs, institutionalised discrimination in the form of benefits systems designed to keep people with disabilities in poverty, etc.”

Text from: http://disabledfeminists.com/2010/11/19/what-is-ableism-five-things-about-ableism-you-should-know/

Classism: “Classism is differential treatment based on social class or perceived social class. Classism is the systematic oppression of subordinated class groups to advantage and strengthen the dominant class groups. It’s the systematic assignment of characteristics of worth and ability based on social class.
…
Classism is held in place by a system of beliefs and cultural attitudes that ranks people according to economic status, family lineage, job status, level of education, and other divisions.

Middle-class and owning- or ruling-class people (dominant group members) are seen as smarter and more articulate than working-class and poor people (subordinated groups). In this way, dominant group members (middle-class and wealthy people) define for everyone else what is “normal” or “acceptable” in the class hierarchy.”
Text from: http://www.classism.org/about-class/what-is-classism/

Marginalization: When groups are pushed to the “margins” of a particular society and thus do not have the same access to opportunities and resources as dominant groups who occupy the “centre.” Marginalized groups are often viewed as “other” or as outsiders. Effects of marginalization may include:

- Exclusion from positions of power or influence
- A lack of voice or representation in media
- Stereotyping and homogenization (“you people are all the same”)
- Precarious living and working conditions, and reduced access to essential services and support networks
- Increased pressure to conform to social norms and expectations
- Increased levels of stress and anxiety, and increased likelihood of exposure to trauma

Victim blaming: “Victim blaming is a devaluing act that occurs when the victim(s) of a crime or an accident is held responsible — in whole or in part — for the crimes that have been committed against them. This blame can appear in the form of negative social responses from legal, medical, and mental health professionals, as well as from the media and immediate family members and other acquaintances. Some victims of crime receive more sympathy from society than others. Often, the responses toward crime victims are based on the misunderstanding of others. This misunderstanding may lead them to believe that the victim deserved what happened to them, or that they are individuals with low self-esteem who seek out violence. As a

result, it can be very difficult for victims to cope when they are blamed for what has happened to them."
Text from: http://www.crcvc.ca/docs/victim_blaming.pdf

Survivors: Those who have lived through traumatic experiences such as rape or child abuse.

Trigger warnings: Trigger warnings "are designed to prevent unaware encountering of certain materials or subjects for the benefit of people who have an extremely strong and damaging emotional response (for example, post-traumatic flashbacks or urges to harm themselves) to such topics.

Content which is widely agreed by feminist blogs and fandom writers to be warned for:

- Actual descriptions of war, like the Vietnam war, or the US operations in Afghanistan.
- graphic descriptions of or extensive discussion of abuse, especially sexual abuse or torture
- graphic descriptions of or extensive discussion of self-harming behaviour such as suicide, self-inflicted injuries or disordered eating
- depictions, especially lengthy or psychologically realistic ones, of the mental state of someone suffering abuse or engaging in self-harming behaviour
- discussion of eating-disordered behavior or body shaming"

Text from: http://geekfeminism.wikia.com/wiki/Trigger_warning

Rape culture: "Rape culture is a term that was coined by feminists in the United States in the 1970's. It was designed to show the ways in which society blamed victims of sexual assault and normalized male sexual violence."

Examples of rape culture include rape jokes (making light of rape), reporting that presents rapists in a sympathetic light and ignores the experiences of survivors, marketing and media that objectifies women, rape prevention tactics that focus on teaching people (usually women) how to avoid being raped rather than teaching people about the importance of consent, the common belief that rape only happens to "promiscuous" or "stupid" women who bring it on themselves, or the promotion of the idea that men are naturally aggressive and incapable of controlling their sexual urges.
Text from: http://www.wavaw.ca/what-is-rape-culture/

White fragility: "A state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves. These moves include outward display of emotions such as anger, fear and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence and leaving the stress-inducing situation.
…
Racial stress results from an interruption to what is racially familiar. These interruptions can take a variety of forms and come from a range of sources, including:
• Suggesting that a white person's viewpoint comes from a racialized frame of reference (challenge to objectivity);

• People of color talking directly about their racial perspectives (challenge to white racial codes);
• People of color choosing not to protect the racial feelings of white people in regards to race (challenge to white racial expectations and need/entitlement to racial comfort);
• People of color not being willing to tell their stories or answer questions about their racial experiences (challenge to colonialist relations);
• A fellow white not providing agreement with one's interpretations (challenge to white solidarity);
• Receiving feedback that one's behavior had a racist impact (challenge to white liberalism);
• Suggesting that group membership is significant (challenge to individualism);
• An acknowledgment that access is unequal between racial groups (challenge to meritocracy);
• Being presented with a person of color in a position of leadership (challenge to white authority);
• Being presented with information about other racial groups through, for example, movies in which people of color drive the action but are not in stereotypical roles, or multicultural education (challenge to white centrality)."

According to Robin DiAngelo, who coined the term, white fragility is the result of the way that white people in North America are, as a whole, typically insulated and protected from race-based stress.

Text from: http://libjournal.uncg.edu/ijcp/article/view/249/116

Heteronormativity: "A set of lifestyle norms, practices, and institutions that promote binary alignment of biological sex, gender identity, and gender roles; assume heterosexuality as a fundamental and natural norm; and privilege monogamous, committed relationships and reproductive sex above all other sexual practices."
Text from: http://lgbtqia.ucdavis.edu/educated/glossary.html

LGBTQIA (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual): An umbrella term used to refer to these communities.

Intersex: "People who naturally (that is, without any medical intervention) develop primary or secondary sex characteristics that do not fit neatly into society's definitions of male or female. Many visibly Intersex people are mutilated in infancy and early childhood by doctors to make the individual's sex characteristics conform to society's idea of what normal bodies should look like. Intersex people are relatively common, although the society's denial of their existence has allowed very little room for intersex issues to be discussed publicly. Hermaphrodite is an outdated and inaccurate term that has been used to describe intersex people in the past."
Text from: http://lgbtqia.ucdavis.edu/educated/glossary.html

Asexual: "A sexual orientation generally characterized by not feeling sexual attraction or a desire for partnered sexuality. Asexuality is distinct from celibacy, which is the deliberate abstention from sexual activity. Some asexual people do have sex. There are many diverse ways of being asexual."

Text from: http://lgbtqia.ucdavis.edu/educated/glossary.html

Genderqueer / Gender non-conforming / Non-binary / Genderfluid / Agender:
“Genderqueer is a term that may be used to describe those with non-normative gender, either as an umbrella term or a stand-alone identity, typically encompassing those who are in one, or more, of these six categories:

1. both man and woman (example: androgyne)
2. neither man nor woman (agender, neutrois, non-gendered)
3. moving between two or more genders (gender fluid)
4. third gendered or other-gendered (includes those who prefer “genderqueer” or “non-binary” to describe their gender without labeling it otherwise)
5. having an overlap or blur of gender and orientation and/or sex (girlfags and guydykes)
6. those who “queer” gender, in presentation or otherwise, who may or may not see themselves as non-binary or having a gender that is queer; this category may also include those who are consciously political or radical in their understanding of being genderqueer”

Text from: http://genderqueerid.com/what-is-gq

Our society has historically been structured around a rigid gender binary that divides human beings into the categories of male and female, men and women. Many people, however, do not identify as either one or the other. Gender is a social construct, meaning it is defined by culture, and is distinct from biological sex (think of all the stereotypes and learned behaviours associated with women, many of which have nothing to do with biology). Other societies have more than two genders, and as our society develops and changes, it is possible we may eventually move beyond a binary system, which can be quite limiting and even harmful for those who don’t conform to the unrealistic standards and norms that it generates (for e.g., when boys are bullied and teased for being too “girly”).