

The Memetic Tribes Of Culture War 2.0

How their rise made in-fighting the norm — and how we can navigate the resulting culture war



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My friends, this election is about more than who gets what. It is about who we are. It is about what we believe, and what we stand for as Americans. There is a religious war going on in this country, a cultural war as critical to the kind of nation we shall be as the Cold War itself, for this war is for the soul of America.

— Pat Buchanan, August 17, 1992

Until the last few years, it made sense to talk in terms of a red tribe and a blue tribe when describing political affiliation in the U.S. The red tribe was right-wing, populist, nationalist, religious, concerned by terrorism, and valued sexual purity. The blue tribe was left-wing, globalist, internationalist, secular, concerned by global warming, and valued sexual freedom. They had fundamental disagreements about what America (or the

West) was, what it needed to become, and how to get there. They even had a culture war. However, the red/blue dichotomy no longer provides a sufficient map of the political territory we find ourselves in.

Enter memetic tribes. We define a memetic tribe as a group of agents with a meme complex, or memplex, that directly or indirectly seeks to impose its distinct map of reality — along with its moral imperatives — on others. These tribes are on active duty in the new culture war. They possess a multiplicity of competing claims, interests, goals, and organizations. While the red and blue tribes were certainly far from monolithic, any claim to unity between memetic tribes is laughable. An establishment leftist who squabbles with the right must contend with mockery from the Dirtbag Left. Meanwhile, the Dirtbag Left endures critiques from Social Justice Activists (SJA), who in turn are criticized by the Intellectual Dark Web (IDW). The trench warfare of the old culture war has become an all-out brawl.

Some have used the notion of “digital tribes,” which we might call pacifist memetic tribes, to understand why individuals sort themselves into online groups that share interests and beliefs. But historians will see the era of digital tribes for what it was: A brief blip before somebody said, “Wait, aren’t we forgetting something? We could be fighting other tribes right now!” Digital tribes could not sate a fundamental need for bloodshed. The internet, ostensibly an opportunity for greater understanding, communication, and collaboration, has instead become the central theater of the new culture war. Over the last decade, a boundless field for the diffusion of kitten pictures, image macros, and insular forums has transformed into a battleground for propaganda, doxxing, partisan podcasts, and public shaming campaigns. While digital tribes — the speedrunners, or the harmless furies — still exist, we have entered the age of memetic tribes.

Though many conflicts can still be analyzed in terms of disagreement between the right and the left, the conflicts *within* the red and blue tribe are as inflammatory, and will prove to be just as consequential. The Establishment Right vs. Trumpists. Gender-critical feminists vs. SJAs. The Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) vs. the Establishment Left. Some commentators have observed that the left is devouring its own. But this is only a selection from a broader phenomenon. All across the political spectrum, people are cloistering into tribes and defining themselves against the tribes that are most similar to them. Are you a grey wolf? Then establishment liberals probably bother you most. Are you Alt-Right? Then the Alt-Lite’s attempts to split the movement surely gall you.



Illustration courtesy of Peter Limberg and Conor Barnes

The new memetic tribes share, to varying degrees, a few characteristics. Most are “unscrupulously optimistic”: They see social problems as soluble through large-scale adjustment. They see themselves as spokespeople for larger groups, whether that be “regular people” or “the marginalized.” At the same time, they see their existence, or their prime value, as under threat. They do battle both online and off. And crucially, their memetic warfare is just as much about firing up members of their base and creating converts as it is about winning particular battles.

From the perspective of the tribal memplex, the ideal host exists in a state of permanent agitation and interprets all phenomena through the memplex’s filter. In short: a paranoid ideologue. Memplexes that have not agitated their hosts into reproducing them will lose to those that have. There is only so much room inside your head, and ideology expands to fill available space.

The memetic tribes all share a goal: To win the culture war — or at least, to not lose it. To paraphrase Buchanan’s definitive statement on the culture war, the new war is the brawl between memetic tribes for the soul of America and the West. We define a culture war as a memetic war to determine what the social facts are at the core of a given society, or alternatively, to determine society’s boundaries of the sacred and the profane. Political arguments have become indistinguishable from moral arguments, and one cannot challenge political positions without implicitly possessing suspect morals. This makes politics an exhausting and unproductive game to play, and it makes the culture war intractable. A further barrier to ending the culture war is its tendency to spread to previously apolitical interests, from football to coffee to rideshares.

At the end of this white paper, we explore ways in which individuals can navigate the culture war tensions. Along the way, we will explore the conditions that give rise to memetic tribalism and the history of the culture war. We also include a taxonomy of today’s memetic tribes. While it is useful to look at the battlegrounds upon which the memetic tribes fight, it is also useful (and entertaining) to peruse the myriad ways in which people have organized themselves.

The Six Crises

Memetic tribes are multitudinous, fractious, unscrupulously optimistic, and divide the world into allies and enemies. They are locked in a Darwinian zero-sum war for the narrative of the noosphere, the sphere of human thought. What conditions gave rise to the contentious environment of memetic tribes?

We argue that six phenomena are involved in their genesis: secularization, fragmentation, atomization, globalization, stimulation, and weaponization. These ingredients respectively engender six crises: the meaning crisis, the reality crisis, the belonging crisis, the proximity crisis, the sobriety crisis, and the warfare crisis. We will examine each ingredient and crisis in turn.

Secularization and the Meaning Crisis

“God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers?” In 1882, Friedrich Nietzsche published his famous epitaph, gesturing at the triumph of scientific rationalism over divine revelation. As Nietzsche recognized, this triumph is a Pyrrhic victory — the meaning system of Christianity cannot easily be replaced by evidence-based reasoning alone, a rationality devoid of narrative and role.

Religion provides meaning. Not only does it provide an understanding of how the world *is* for the believer, it also informs how the believer *ought* to exist in the world. Without God, the axiomatic foundation of the West’s historically dominant memeplex, religious oughts are in need of new

justification. According to Nietzsche, without a replacement, a slow slippage into nihilism is unavoidable. And the secularization of our institutions accelerates this collective transition.

Secularization theories predict that an untethering of religious authority from society would bring about the widespread embrace of a rational and scientific worldview. In the book *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor rejects this “subtraction theory” and claims that our modern age is instead becoming one of pluralism, where multiple viewpoints compete with Christianity for control over the social narrative. This society-wide secularization has given rise to the meaning crisis, which we define as a meaning famine where numerous contenders are competing to satiate our meaning hunger.

Nietzsche foresaw the freedom and danger that came with this situation: “We have gone further and destroyed the land behind us. Now little ship, look out! Beside you is an ocean...”. We argue that the noosphere has become this ocean, a vast reservoir of chaos and potential as people attempt to make sense of the world after the death of God. Memetic tribes are one solution, a raft to navigate the open seas.

Fragmentation and the Reality Crisis

Scott Adams often uses the analogy of two movie screens to explain how the Culture War is processed. Conservative media such as Fox News have a rosy Trumpist perspective, while liberal media such as CNN and MSNBC adopt a virulent anti-Trumpist perspective. Viewers of these networks experience the same reality, but watch impossible interpretations of that reality. Adams’s analogy can be expanded beyond the dichotomous right/left narratives embodied by legacy media. We not only have two movies available, we have Netflix.

Philosopher Jean-François Lyotard described this as “the postmodern condition” in 1979. The postmodern condition is not necessarily one of relativism, but of fragmentation. Lyotard defined postmodernism as “incredulity toward metanarratives,” which are narratives that totalize all knowledge and experience, such as religion, the Enlightenment, and communism. These grand narratives, once broken down, give way to what he calls little narratives.

Little narratives do not necessarily espouse relativism directly. They are localized by their contexts, are ostensibly independent from one another, and have different means of sensemaking. This fragmented array of narratives has caused a reality crisis, for without some semblance of a consensus reality, constructive cooperation becomes extremely difficult. This results in what Lyotard calls a *differend*, a situation where conflicting parties cannot even agree on the rules for resolution. Moreover, there is lack of agreement on what the conflict even is. Collective understanding problems of what reality is amplify collective action problems of what reality

should be.

Thanks to the internet, we are now fully in the postmodern condition, or as we call it, the reality crisis. Whereas previously traditional media provided a consensus reality, the decentralization of information-sharing technology allows individuals to document events, create narratives, and challenge perceptions in real-time, without heed for journalistic ethics. This revolution has not led to greater consensus, one based on a reality we can all see more of and agree upon. Instead, information dissemination is used in service of tribalism. Anybody can join a memetic tribe and will be supplied with reams of anecdotes to support that tribe's positions. Grassroots and underground media keep the tribes up to date on opinions, with wildly different perceptions of the same event. Memetic armadas are being crafted in neighboring ports. Fake news has only just begun.

Atomization and the Belonging Crisis

Atomization is the reduction of a thing to its elementary particles. It is the state of separateness. Social atomization, or social alienation, is the process by which individuals come to experience themselves primarily as separate individuals who are not part of a greater whole. The resulting freedom is accompanied by feelings of isolation, alienation, and depression. In an atomizing society, the roles and responsibilities that were the province of kith and kin are increasingly commoditized into transactions with strangers.

In *White Collar: The American Middle Classes*, C. Wright Mills argued that advanced capitalism has engendered a society dominated by a "marketing mentality." This is a mentality that encourages Frankfurtian bullshit, uses friendliness as a tool, and is ready to sell and service the other. This incentivizes individuals to treat one another as instruments. In Buberian terms, they engage in I-It relating. By doing so the individual transforms himself into an instrument, ready to be used by the other.

When the marketing mentality reigns supreme it indicates that a *Gemeinschaft*, a society of subjective binding, has been replaced by a *Gesellschaft*, a society of contractual binding. This leaves us in a new normal of alienation from self and other. As Hannah Arendt says, we are in a collective state of "homelessness on an unprecedented scale, rootlessness to an unprecedented depth." This social domicile and de-rooting makes us long for a place to call home and a group to call our own.

This is the belonging crisis. In Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, belongingness is the third innate need required for our psychological health and development. Without it we are bowling alone, longing for a team to play on. To mitigate loneliness, anxiety, and other adverse conditions related to lack of belonging, people are primed to fly into the arms of others. All they need is an offer of togetherness — and a few convincing memes.

Globalization and the Proximity Crisis

In his article, "How Tech Created a Global Village — and Put Us at Each Other's Throats," Nicholas Carr attacks the techno-optimist narrative that a more connected world leads to a better one. He homes in on Facebook as the central figure in this narrative, exploring how Mark Zuckerberg opened his 2012 letter to investors stating that "Facebook was not originally created to be a company. It was built to accomplish a social mission — to make the world more open and connected." In 2017 Zuckerberg introduced Facebook's new mission statement: "Give people the power to build community and bring the world closer together." It is clear he has not read Marshall McLuhan. If he had, it might have softened the utopianism of this mission statement.

In 1962, McLuhan's *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* was released. In it, McLuhan introduced the term "the global village" to describe the globalization of the mind, a process set in motion by electronic media's power to interconnect minds worldwide, ending in the compression of the globe into a village. McLuhan, a man ahead of his time, was no Pollyanna. He foresaw that the new media would have a retribalizing effect on man. "The global village," he wrote, "absolutely ensures maximal disagreement on all points."

Why is this? Philosopher Byung-Chul Han has an elegant answer: Distance, or lack thereof. In his book *In The Swarm: Digital Prospects*, Han states that "distance is what makes *respectare* [respect] different from *spectare* [spectacle]. A society without respect, without the pathos of distance, paves the way for the society of scandal." The internet pornifies our private lives, including our political views, leaving nothing to the imagination. When everything is laid bare, respect vanishes; our proximity exposes all of our ugliness. As Carr mentions in his article, this manifests in what psychologists call dissimilarity cascades (the more we know about someone, the less we like them) and environmental spoiling (proximity with those we don't like spoils the environment as a whole).

Thanks to the global village, mutually exclusive memeplexes, or "mutex" memeplexes, have no distance from one another. This is the proximity crisis. Good fences make good neighbors, and the power of media has flattened all social fences. McLuhan eventually favored a global theater analogy over the global village, to indicate that we are all becoming actors in a repertory of theatrical performances. Thanks to their mutual exclusivity, these performances are becoming increasingly warlike and less theatrical by the day. Twitter, a platform that lends itself to sharing propositional memes, has become a central battleground of the new culture war. It is where mutex memeplexes cannot escape from each other. It is where distance evaporates.

Stimulation and the Sobriety Crisis

Is the image of a beetle hopelessly attempting to have sex with an empty beer bottle the perfect metaphor for the state of humanity? In 2011 Darryl Gwynne and David Rentz won the Ig Nobel Prize for their research on the

male jewel beetle's proclivity to attempt copulation with littered Australian beer stubbies. They found that these discarded bottles greatly attracted the male jewel beetle because their size, coloring, and dimpled design were similar to the male jewel beetle's female counterpart. In fact, according to Gwynne, the male beetle found the beer bottle so attractive that they ignored the females and their "attempts to copulate with stubby beer bottles continue until they are killed by the hot desert sun or by foraging ants."

This phenomenon is known as an evolutionary trap: adaptive instincts turn maladaptive due to exposure to supernormal stimuli; magnified and more attractive versions of evolved stimulus. Nikolaas Tinbergen, the ethologist who coined the term supernormal stimuli, demonstrated that he could trick birds, fish, and insects into evolutionary traps using exaggerated dummy objects designed to trigger their instincts. In *Supernormal Stimuli: How Primal Urges Overran Their Evolutionary Purpose*, psychologist Deirdre Barrett points out that humans are just as fallible to these superstimuli. Whether it be junk food, laugh tracks, pornography, or likes on social media, these artificial triggers addict us and hijack our agency.

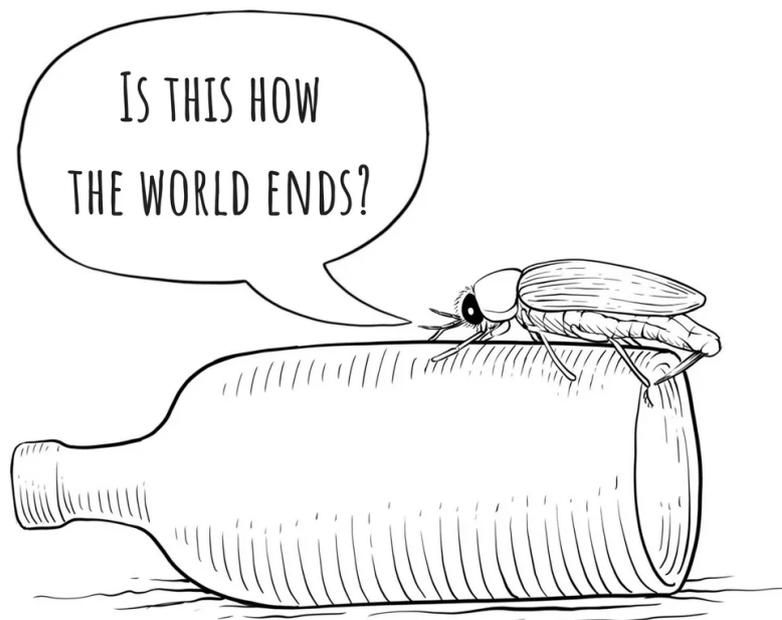


Illustration courtesy of Peter Limberg and Conor Barnes

Tristan Harris, a former Design Ethicist at Google and founder of the nonprofit Time Well Spent, makes the argument that there is an asymmetrical battle for our attention. On one side, we have evolved instincts suited to a bygone ecology. On the other is an army of high-IQ engineers, informed by Ivy League persuasion labs, who are tasked with creating algorithms aimed solely at capturing and holding our attention. To make matters worse, the targets of these campaigns aren't even aware this battle exists.

In the interest of appeasing shareholders, large social media companies battle over the attention economy, reducing our agency and turning us into

memetic addicts along the way. The pervasiveness of social media has created the sobriety crisis. Addiction, simply defined, is the compulsive engagement in pleasurable substances or behaviors despite their negative consequences. This is our new norm, and it leaves us highly vulnerable to the predation of self-interested actors. Like the jewel beetle being devoured by foraging ants, our reduced agency leaves us blind and defenseless to actors with misaligned agendas.

Weaponization and the Warfare Crisis

Aleksandr Dugin, touted as the most dangerous philosopher in the world, published *The Foundations of Geopolitics: The Geopolitical Future of Russia* in 1997, with one reviewer stating that it “reads like a to-do list for Putin’s behaviour on the world stage.” Used as a textbook in the Russian Academy of the General Staff, the book advises Russian operatives to “introduce geopolitical disorder into internal American activity, encouraging all kinds of separatism and ethnic, social and racial conflicts, actively supporting all dissident movements — extremist, racist, and sectarian groups, thus destabilising internal political processes in the U.S.” After the Cold War, Russia, no longer competitive with the U.S. in hard power, pivoted to aggressive soft power to regain their geopolitical influence.

If the 2016 American elections are any indication, Dugin’s strategy has been implemented. The U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence stated that the Russians interfered with the elections with the intent to “undermine public faith in the U.S. democratic process.” The Internet Research Agency, the source of Russia’s apparent sockpuppet troll army, sought to sow maximum discord throughout the United States. They disseminated fake news to support the campaigns of Donald Trump, Bernie Sanders, and Jill Stein, and targeted groups across the political spectrum, from Black Lives Matter (BLM) to far-right gun advocates. They even arranged pro- and anti-Trump rallies to occur at the same time, all in the service of destabilization.

Controversial cybersecurity commentator James Scott calls these campaigns “chaos operations.” They follow a basic formula: Understand the target audience through psychographic profiling, create messages that are attuned to the trigger points of the audience, seek out real or fake “incidents” to weaponize, and stoke outrage. A study by marketing professor Jonah Berger showed that anger increases the likelihood to share memes. This naturally selects for “outrage porn,” memes which provoke indignation and outrage and encourage receivers to spread them throughout the global village. Outrage porn is the supernatural stimuli of the culture war.

It is not only Russia who engages in information warfare. Other state actors, terrorist organizations, lone wolf hackers, and big data mercenary firms like Cambridge Analytica engage in memetic operations. Minds are being weaponized around the world, to advance agendas they may not support or even know about. We find ourselves in a warfare crisis. Without a Geneva Convention to govern how unfriendly actors must conduct themselves in

information warfare, we are in memetic anarchy.

To summarize:

- The meaning crisis weakened our collective understanding of what ought to be;
- The reality crisis fractured our collective understanding of what is;
- The belonging crisis took away a genuine feeling of community;
- The proximity crisis removed distance from conflicting views;
- The sobriety crisis reduced our agency and turned us into addicts;
- The warfare crisis transformed our minds into weapons for hidden wars in plain sight.

None of these crises alone created the new memetic tribes, but the combination of all six made them unavoidable. The meaning and reality crises created longing for a collective *is* and *ought*. The belonging and proximity crises put the existentially isolated in close memetic quarters with those they can love and hate. The sobriety and warfare crises turned us into memetic addicts, weaponized for the strategic aims of others. These crises set the stage for a new culture war we were severely ill-prepared for. The crises are dynamite distributed throughout the noosphere. All that was needed were some matches.

History of the New Culture War

It is worth noting that *kulturkampf* emerged as a term in the late 19th century to describe struggles to redefine the relationship between church and state in Germany and other European nations. While Europe was no stranger to religious and civil war, the *kulturkampfs* were largely bloodless, and were held between not just different religions but different ideologies.

By the time Pat Buchanan introduced the term “culture war” to America in 1992, the “struggle for the soul of America” had been ongoing for decades. This culture war, which we refer to as Culture War 1.0, was a bipolar affair, fought between a coalition of Christians and secular liberals over “the soul of America.” Battlegrounds included abortion, evolution, and the status of women and homosexuals. The culture war got presidents elected, polarized the country, and left the America of the past decade in a dramatically different position than the America of 50 years ago.

In international relation theory, polarity refers to the way power is allocated among nation states. There are three types of polarity commonly used to describe a historical period:

1. **Unipolarity:** One superpower exists that creates order, e.g. Pax Britannica or Pax Americana
2. **Bipolarity:** Two superpowers keep each other in check, e.g. the Cold War
3. **Multipolarity:** Multiple nation states have competing influence, which is potentially the most unstable of the three, e.g. the Concert of Europe, World War 1 and 2

This notion of polarity maps over to the culture wars. The bipolarity of Culture War 1.0 is analogous to the U.S. and USSR's distribution of power in the Cold War: Two opposing superpowers, maneuvering for influence, fighting brief skirmishes, and capturing dissent by forcing ideology into a binary (capitalism vs. communism, Christian morality vs. secular rights). But Culture War 1.0 is over. Thanks to the ongoing digital revolution and the crises that created memetic tribes, the conditions were set to radically change what culture war looks like. A bipolar war, with clear coalitions, clear enemies, front lines, and supply routes, the tension of two sumos, has become a multipolar brawl.

Multipolar distributions of power do not obey the logic of bipolarity. Agents do not see allies behind the line and enemies in front of it. Instead the lines surround them and are constantly shifting. Attacks can come from right or left, from state power or mob rule, from Twitter pile-ons to SWATting. Thus the conditions of today: strange alliances, rearguard action, unstable positions, flux and insecurity.

Four main events initiated the leap to what we call Culture War 2.0, whether by wrapping up old theaters of operations or initiating new ones. While other events contributed to it, such as the 2008 recession and the birth of BLM, we think these four were central to the emergence of the fragmentary, postmodern culture in which we now live. It is worth considering these seismic events to understand the insufficiency of the bipolar frame to describe the current situation.

Event One: The End of Occupy (November 15, 2011)

Simmering resentment toward the financial system after its 2008 collapse exploded into a new kind of protest. People gathered in public squares to express collective frustration and to explore a new form of justice. For two months, it seemed that questions of economic justice, the power of banks, and the class system would transform America.

Its time had not yet come. The police crackdown on Occupy was swift and decisive, dashing the utopic hopes surrounding it. We propose that the new anti-authoritarian activists baptized by it, disheartened by capitalism's invincibility, gravitated from class politics to identity politics. We cannot ignore the explosion of social justice activism post-Occupy, and the relative lack of anti-capitalist activism in its aftermath. Until Bernie Sanders and Jeremy Corbyn rose to prominence in 2015, economic justice took a backseat

to issues like racial justice, equal representation, and university culture.

Occupy did not just mark a transformation in content for the culture war, but more importantly, an end of a certain form. Occupy was an instantiation of a universalist politics — the people coming together to practice a communal form of life, forming a polis, speaking with one voice. This type of activism has a rich history in communist and anarchist organizing, but Occupy also contained the seeds of the left's memetic tribalism. It lived via memes, virality, and digital organizing. The activist groups that came afterward, like SJA and BLM, ran with these innovations, shifting from universalism to intersectional identity. Commentators have even argued that Hillary Clinton's campaign failed for pandering too much to identity politics, leaving space for Trump to capture the conversation on class.

We suspect that this was a recuperative process for capitalism; identity politics can be negotiated within the mainstream, relieving institutions of some radical pressure. Put another way: Corporations can be woke; they cannot be anti-capitalist. This corporate embrace helped accelerate the spread of identity politics throughout society, which in turn led to a backlash from an ensemble of people either taken aback by, or ideologically opposed to, the speed of change. It also served to neuter the anti-capitalist left by embedding issues of social justice into corporate policy through HR and PR departments. If corporations can be allies of social justice, then the radical leftist assertion that all oppression is intersecting has the ground torn out from under it. This helped fracture the left on questions of its goals, its methods, and its true enemies.

Event Two: Obergefell v. Hodges (June 26, 2015)

After Event One, social justice was in the air. The final chapter of Culture War 1.0 is the landmark decision by the Supreme Court to legalize gay marriage. Secular liberals emerged as victorious protagonists and the Religious Right suffered its final defeat. As Rod Dreher says, "Today the culture war as we know it is over. The so-called values voters — social and religious conservatives — have been defeated and are being swept to the political margins." The Religious Right was unable to reverse *Roe v. Wade*, unable to bring prayer back to schools, and was arguably complicit in nosediving church attendance. Its bluster and funding did not lead to any cultural power for the Right, beyond organizing votes for Republicans.

Obergefell v. Hodges was an event of consensus; a new social reality quickly took hold, with an ever-dwindling minority of dissenters. But the consensus around sexual politics was short-lived — riding the momentum of Event Two, Event Three burst onto the scene.

Event Three: Caitlyn Jenner (July 1, 2015)

While Event Two was closing a chapter in Culture War 1.0, the stage was being set for the first battle of Culture War 2.0: transgender rights. Though this front had been simmering for years, it was not a battlefield for Culture

War 1.0. It exploded into mainstream consciousness when *Vanity Fair*'s July 2015 issue featured Caitlyn Jenner on its cover. The "transgender question" brought with it a host of other issues. Bathroom bills. Non-binary genders and pronouns. The right of transgender people to serve in the military. Puberty-blocking pills for children. Trans women in women-only spaces. All of these points of contention have become culture war skirmishes.



Illustration courtesy of Peter Limberg and Conor Barnes

They also contributed to the formation of the new centrist tribes. Unlike the binary Culture War 1.0 paradigm of marriage equality, transgender rights follow Culture War 2.0 logic, whereby tribalism is multidimensional and attack can come from unforeseen angles. Faced with what they see as the excesses of the Left, but simultaneously wary of the viciousness of the right, new centrist tribes have emerged. Their members tend to agree with the left on some issues and not others, leaving them at odds with the more totalizing visions of the right and left. The most important figure on this front is, of

course, Jordan Peterson, who jumped into the culture war specifically in response to non-binary pronouns. Without the current cultural push for transgender rights, Jordan Peterson would not have become a culture warrior, and without his massive popularity, it is unlikely that the IDW would have taken its current shape.

Event Four: The Chaos President (November 8, 2016)

“I like chaos. It really is good.” — Donald Trump

Commentators will be analyzing Donald Trump’s election campaign and victory for years to come. What suffices for us is to understand how it shifted the landscape and the rules of the culture war. Trump sent the establishment right and left spinning, self-questioning and delegitimized. The culture war has only increased in fervor since his election: partially due to his own instigation and partially due to people abandoning the establishment right and left in favor of memetic tribes.

As Ross Douthat once tweeted, “If you dislike the religious right, wait till you meet the post-religious right.” Trump effectively captured the remnants of the Christian Right, transforming them into a nationalist right in the process. The radical right has re-emerged, armed for war with “meme magic,” unconcerned with civility, aimed only at victory.

Donald Trump’s focus on neglected workers has galvanized the radical left to refocus on economic concerns, as exemplified by the popularity of Chapo Trap House and the sevenfold growth of the Democratic Socialists of America. Movements like Antifa have seen a surge in popularity in response to a perception of authoritarianism. The skirmishes between Leftist tribes revolve, and will continue to revolve, around two central questions: Class or identity? Centrism or leftism?

Viewed in isolation, the implosion of Occupy and the loss of the Religious Right could be seen as closure for decades-old arguments. As observers from the other side of history, we know them to be kindling for the wars of new ideologies, and the attendant proliferation of memetic tribes. We turn our attention next to the taxonomy of the current memetic tribes.

Active Tribes

There is shared anatomy between memetic tribes. We posit that each tribe has a *telos*, an objective to obtain or a state to attain. They have *sacred values*, values which are non-negotiable and inviolable within the memetic framework. If these values are transgressed it will *trigger* the tribal member. These will also influence the prime *virtues* that the tribal member *signals*.

They have *master statuses*, the dominant identifying characteristic of the tribe as a whole. Each is persecuted or haunted by an *existential threat*, which necessitates tribal affiliation for survival. Other tribes are *combatants* in the noosphere. They have *campfires*, online or in meatspace, where they communicate and cooperate. Each tribe has *chieftains* who either direct the tribe, provide the theoretical foundation for the tribe, or are apologists for the tribe. They each have *mental models* by which they conceptualize and navigate reality. And each tribe has *forebears*, whether they be progenitors of the tribe or personal inspirations of the chieftains.

In presenting the following chart we are adopting a “view from nowhere” position, in order to demonstrate similar memetic anatomy. However, we do not believe that there is equivalence between the tribal claims to truth, morality, practicality, or even interestingness. This is for you, reader, to evaluate.

It is also important to note that this chart is not intended to be and cannot be exhaustive, complete, or final. Our aim is to create a launching point for further discussion on what and who constitutes memetic tribes. We are also aware of what Canadian philosopher Ian Hacking calls the “looping effect,” how the act of categorization can change those who are categorized. If you see yourself in one of these rows, perhaps this will inspire some reflection on how and why you came to your current beliefs and attitudes.

As well, depending on the context and flexibility of the tribal memplex, one individual can find themselves in multiple tribes, e.g. Sam Harris is a chieftain for both the New Atheists and the IDW. Furthermore, memetic tribes do not consist solely of memetically possessed humans. They consist of anything that produces and reproduces memetic content, from cultural institutions to bots. Memes do not care about the species or non-species of their hosts.

We have excluded tribes that meet our definition but are not currently participating in the culture war to a significant degree, such as Transhumanists, Modern Stoics, the Hotep Nation, and Anti-Natalists. We have, however, included some small tribes. Some, such as QAnoners, have influence discordant to their size, thanks to the media attention they’ve garnered. Others, such as the Optimists, are included in spite of size because they are currently growing.

One final note: In the spirit of charity, we have attempted to describe the tribes using terms that they would use to describe themselves. For example, the term “Social Justice Warrior” is a popular pejorative used by non-leftist tribes, but those who actively identify as activists for social justice only use the term ironically. In cases where tribes do not self-identify, we have christened them.

Antifa

Even without identifiable chieftains, Antifa has played an important part in the culture war and continues to benefit from people's fear of Trump and dissatisfaction with mainstream responses. Watch for the normalization of a violent offline culture war.

Occupy

The tribe that coalesced around radical leftism, hope, and physical presence has been shattered. Dormant, it lives on in the 99% meme and in the pages of Adbusters.

DSA and Dirtbag Left

The drama of the Bernie campaign and dissatisfaction with the lack of leftism in the Democratic Party has led to a surge in a radical wing of the American left. The ironic fringe still rests at the top of the podcasts, and the push for mainstreaming socialism has been growing ever since Trump's election. Watch for further infighting with Social Justice Activists.

Optimists

In reaction to the polarization and catastrophizing they see on both the left and right, this nascent tribe has coalesced around the idea that the world is in fact improving, and whatever challenges society faces can be solved through the institutions and values we currently hold. Watch for an increased presence as neoliberalism converts libertarians and shifts to be embraced as a contrarian ideology.

Establishment Left and Right

The zeitgeist of our times gives the palpable sense that the establishment left and right are dramatically on the decline, especially amongst millennials and Generation Z. Those in power within the establishment are experiencing increased pressure from rapidly rising elements within their parties. Democratic and liberal parties worldwide are contending with socialist and far-left elements. Conservative parties have seen populists and illiberal democrats take over. And everyone, everywhere, has been blindsided by the rise of white identitarian and nationalist elements. Watch for these tribes to make a last grasp at power during the 2020 elections.

New Atheists and Street Epistemologists

The atheist tribes are indirect participants in the culture war. Their shared objective is to attack the religious truth-claims and to plant doubt in the epistemic methodology of believers. The New Atheists lost the relevance they had during the Bush Era when the "Four Horsemen" had great popularity, but their impact has been felt in the noosphere. They contributed to the religious right's defeat in Culture War 1.0 by weakening it on philosophical grounds. The Street Epistemologists are the New Atheists' potential successor in Culture War 2.0.

Rationalist Diaspora

Incubated on Overcoming Bias and LessWrong, this is an observer tribe in the culture war. Though similar to the New Atheists in that they prize rationality, they do not define themselves in opposition to religion. Thanks to the strength of Eliezer Yudkowsky and Scott Alexander's writing, and the beliefs and epistemic virtues of the diaspora, they command increasing respect in the culture war. Watch for a popularity boost to Effective Altruism, a struggle with the downsides of increased attention, and possible pressure from the SJAs for the Rationalists to commit to progressive values.

Post-Rationalists

This is another observer tribe, and possibly the most interesting one. If the rationalist motto is "the map is not the territory, but it is important to create the most accurate map possible," then the post-rationalist motto is "the canvas is not the territory, but it is important to create the most interesting canvas possible." This observer tribe has the potential to generate innovative solutions to the seemingly intractable problem of the differend.

Integral Theorists

Ken Wilber, who lost some momentum in his "Wyatt Earp" incident, is steadily gaining a strong following amongst cultural influencers. Like the Rationalists and Post-Rationalists, Integralists are an observer tribe. Unlike them, they have a teleological narrative that instills existential hope. This will be a tribe to watch if it moves away from its observer capacity and becomes more active in the war.

Sorters and Intellectual Dark Web

Jordan Peterson is the common denominator of these two tribes. One of the most important figures in Culture War 2.0, his central message emphasizes free speech and the importance of truth-speaking. His following of mostly young men, which we dub the Sorters, are attracted to Peterson's style and message of personal responsibility. The "Intellectual Dark Web," coined by Eric Weinstein, consists of thinkers who have experienced what they view as thought-policing by politically correct elements of the left. With the ever-increasing popularity of Peterson's brand and related platforms such as Quillette, the Rubin Report, and the Joe Rogan Experience, watch for both of these tribes to gain members and make a strong push for a return to a classically liberal center in our culture.

Benedictines

With a religious right increasingly subservient to Trump, it is becoming incumbent for Christians who put faith first to organize collectively. This memetic tribe is aware of its own mortality and is putting survival before the culture war. Watch for a siphoning of disillusioned Christians and rightists.

Christian Right

The religious right is quickly transitioning into a nationalist right. The culture war goals of the Moral Majority have largely been set aside in favor of punishing the left via Trump. Unless there is a public evangelist revival,

watch for this tribe to dissolve into Trumpists and Benedictines over the next few years.

Tea Party

Since its decline following the 2013 government shutdown, this tribe has largely been subsumed by the Trumpists. Watch for a continued decline in libertarian activism as believers drift towards Trump or neoliberalism.

Trumpists

This new tribe makes up for a lack of experience and policy through power and “high energy.” They are engaged in a fight for control over the mainstream perception of conservatism with a blindsided establishment right. Watch for a push for votes from racial minorities and a scramble to stay in line with Trump’s thought.

Infowarriors and QAnoners

These are the conspiracy theory tribes of the culture war. Alex Jones and Infowars represent “established” conspiracies such as the New World Order and Illuminati. With his manic energy, Jones has successfully turned conspiracy into a profitable business. QAnon is a grassroots emergence of conspiracy theories originating on /pol/. Given the intense passion their reality tunnel engenders, we speculate that QAnon will grow amongst Trumpists and will be censored on social media platforms, which will only further fuel its growth.

Alt-Lite, Alt-Right, and Modern Neo-Nazis

These three tribes are concerned with issues surrounding white people and are often lumped together by the mainstream media, but they are actively fighting amongst themselves (“punching right”) in order to create distance and avoid conflation. The Alt-Lite would be quick to point out that they are less defined by white identity and more by western chauvinism, an unapologetic view that western culture is the best. Watch for massive fluctuations and changes in the composition of all three, and a continued fight amongst themselves to gain adherents.

Neoreactionaries

This semi-dormant tribe has partly been subsumed into the Alt-Right. Lack of public direction from its key figures has led to a decline in influence. Watch for Nick Land’s return to the blogosphere and keep an eye on Social Matter and the Hestia Society for a potential revival.

MRA, Manosphere, MGTOW

Like the dissident right tribes, these masculine tribes are usually lumped together. Like the far-right tribes, these masculinist tribes also signal to create distance from each other. The Manosphere, the largest of the three tribes, reached its peak around Gamergate and has lost momentum due to its lack of a non-hedonistic strategy, and due to men’s attention being divided by the competing message of Jordan Peterson. See a continued declined with

these three groups, unless new voices emerge.

Incels

These self-described involuntary celibates could be placed in the masculinist cluster if not for their view of themselves as having been “black-pilled” instead of “red-pilled.” They agree with most of the descriptive views of the masculinist tribes, but see their situation as radically hopeless and unfair. The more extreme adherents have a belief space that shares more with terrorist groups like ISIS than any of the memetic tribes listed above. Copycat attacks mimicking Elliot Rodger and Alek Minassian might grow in number unless a memeplex emerges that can inspire and provide meaning to sexually unsuccessful males in society.

Speculative Proposals

We conclude this white paper by offering speculative proposals that are not meant to treat the culture war as a solvable problem, but as an opportunity for personal and collective growth.

We view the noosphere as an emergent phenomenon, a consequence of globalization and digitalization. When Pierre Teilhard de Chardin introduced the term, he adopted a teleological perspective and saw the collective consciousness of humanity developing towards an “Omega Point.” While we are agnostic about whether there is an endpoint, we do think that looking at the noosphere as being in the process of evolution can help with regards to making speculative proposals. In this section we shift our focus from seeing memetic tribes as individual entities to viewing them as fragments of the larger noosphere.

Bruce Tuckman, a psychology researcher in group dynamics, established his famous “stages of group development” model in 1965. He believed that there were four necessary stages that newly formed groups need to progress through in order to tackle their shared challenges. The first stage is *forming*, when a team first comes together and individuals, mainly focused on themselves, operate with a degree of politeness. The second stage is *storming*, when comfort within the group allows for conflicting opinions to be voiced. Team members may wrestle for control of the group’s values and goals. The third stage is *norming*, when “resolved disagreements and personality clashes result in greater intimacy, and a spirit of cooperation emerges.” The fourth stage is *performing*, where, with “group norms and roles established, group members focus on achieving common goals, often reaching an unexpectedly high level of success.”

Not all groups are successful. Some abort during the storming phase — and if we apply this model to the noosphere, we see that all the memetic tribes are in the midst of it. The emergent collective consciousness of the internet began as the relatively innocent forming stage of Web 1.0. Now that we are in the storming phase, we are plagued by mobs, trolls, and doxxing.

If we are to survive as a species, we must address our collective challenges and existential risks — from rogue A.I. to environmental disaster. To do so, we're going to have to build the bridge from storming to norming. This norming phase may not involve feel-good utopianism, but it must involve deep negotiations and compromises between tribes, or alternatively, a peaceful geopolitical instantiation of the growing memetic divides.

These eight speculative proposals are meant as a launching pad for discussion. They are not proposals for government or corporate policy. Rather, they are ideas for readers to explore, small but meaningful steps to push against the overwhelming whirlwind of the culture war. It is our hope that interested minds and entrepreneurial spirits will take these proposals and advance them further.



Illustration courtesy of Peter Limberg and Conor Barnes

Hippocratic Oath of the Cultural War

The Hippocratic Oath was an oath that physicians were required to take before they began practicing medicine. Its modern iteration is a rite of

passage for graduates of some medical schools. While today the oath is not a binding contract, there is a degree of ritualistic magic in formally committing to ideals. Could there be a Culture War equivalent to the Hippocratic Oath? One that chieftains of the memetic tribes could affirm? It would prove beneficial if journalists, authors, bloggers, and professors alike took this oath, but any social media user could take the oath, by pledging their name and accepting some sort of e-badge. Promises can be broken, but breaking public promises can generate swift social feedback.

What would this Oath consist of? At the bare minimum: a commitment to good faith dialogue, the principle of charity, and intellectual humility. The last virtue is critical. A caveat of “I could be wrong” underlying strongly held beliefs helps even the most difficult conversations, a shared commitment to that caveat helps even more. If enough culture warriors take such an Oath, it could pave the way for a Geneva Convention of the Culture War.

Dirty Bias to Clean Bias

It is increasingly hard for media outlets to approximate “performative neutrality,” thanks to the perverse incentives of outrage porn and the need to appease dwindling subscribers for survival. Is there a way to satisfy the collective hunger for “unbiased news”? While we try to figure that out, cynicism spreads, as rightists increasingly find traditional media’s claims of neutrality laughable. Is there an alternative?

We could all start by putting our skin in the game, by being honest about our biases and tribal affiliations. We could abandon the pretense to neutrality and more honestly engage with each other, knowing where we stand. Arguments could go to our philosophical foundations more quickly, instead of expending themselves on object-level disagreement.

We call this “clean bias,” an admission of an epistemic framework and value structure. It is in contrast to “dirty bias,” unspoken and denied framework and values while purporting universality. Thanks to the reality crisis, we are shedding our faith in universally imposed and agreed-upon truths. Clean bias is a necessary part of a new peace in our fractured reality. A first step could be for memetic creators, from journalists to bloggers, to commit to including their foundational presumptions in their bios.

Reinventing Debate

Debate is broken. Nobody actually likes “gotcha interviews” or debates plagued with strawmanning, question-begging, bad faith, and side-stepping. Debate needs to be rebuilt. We suggest that debate currently tries to inhabit two contradictory roles. On the one hand, it is a source of entertainment through combat; On the other, it is an avenue for improved understanding and wisdom. We propose that these two roles should be formally separated into distinct types of debates: Sport Debates and Sensemaking Debates.

In Sport Debates, participants debate for combat and entertainment. This

would gamify the desire to engage in verbal combat for its own sake, with truth as a potential byproduct. They could be viewed as the UFC of the mind. While it may seem cynical to sponsor an avenue for the fiery and often toxic form debates can take, we think that diverting those urges away from sensemaking desires is a good harm-reduction strategy.

In Sensemaking Debates, participants debate for understanding and exploration. This would allow the purported values of debate to actually flourish. This can also include philosophical sandboxing, the adoption of ideologies as a method actor. Spaces could be made where participants take on ideological roles so as to better understand them, and to develop the skill to *take them off*.

David Brin's idea of "Disputation Arenas" and William MacAskill's "Anti-Debates" can map over to the two types of debates, with Bryan Caplan's "Ideological Turing Test" as another potential modality that falls somewhere between both types. Peter, the co-author of this white paper, has been experimenting with both of these debate modalities inside The Stoa. He welcomes suggestions and participants.

Disrupting and Emancipating Philosophy

Due to technological innovation, industries are being disrupted the world-over, from the sharing economy to AI developments. We suggest that it is time for philosophy to endure similar disruptions. In *Disabling Professions*, Ivan Illich argues that professionalization can have a damaging effect on society, as expert culture induces knowledge-distance, blindness, and reliance on experts by non-experts. While Illich's focus was the medical establishment, this also applies to philosophy, which has been inaccessible to most non-professionals for decades. This has in turn led to a sense of philosophy's irrelevance amongst non-academics.

But as practical philosopher Andrew Taggart points out, philosophy is much more than an academic discipline, it is as a way of life: "Philosophy is not theoretical discourse but a way of being. Philosophical discourse, accordingly, appears only when necessary and is always put in the service of leading a certain kind of life." Indeed, we are seeing the beginnings of a reclaiming of philosophy as a way of life in the new popularity of the longform podcast and of philosophies of virtue, such as Stoicism.

Our hope is that with these and other disruptions to the philosophical status quo, people will gain the tools to think critically and avoid being drawn into convenient and prepackaged worldviews. Philosophy could be a guard against the pressure to join an existing memetic tribe. R.J. Hollingdale's aphorism may come to fruition: "If we thought more for ourselves we would have very many more bad books and very many more good ones."

Memetic Mediators

A new role might be required in the Culture War, that of the Memetic

Mediator. This mediator would be a pan-tribalist participant who has the ability to communicate across tribes in a way that seems fair and reasonable to each tribe. They would have the mental agility, empathy, and wisdom needed to shift between a multitude of perspectives.

Memetic mediators could be called in for memetic battles where both participants prefer peace to continued civil decay, but cannot come to an accord without facilitation. These mediators would require a multitude of tools at their disposal. They would need to be fluent in multiple tribal paradigms and give the impression of fairness. And because each tribe has their own method and claims to truth, Memetic Mediators would have to be skilled at finding any common ground and building from it.

As we do not have an existing example to point to, we can only speculate that the role will emerge out of necessity in the coming war. They could even emerge as consultants for social media companies.

Grey Pills as Acid Tests

Venkatesh Rao has introduced the term “grey pilling,” which he views as the third pill in the blue-red pill dichotomy. Blue pills are unquestioned consensus realities we are socialized into. A red pill, as Venkatesh puts it, is:

a dose of information that awakens you to the existence of a world beyond the one you are unconsciously immersed in, like a fish being taken out of water. Red-pill moments sensitize you to the previously invisible boundaries and structural lies of the world you knew, and make you alive to astounding possibilities beyond it.

A grey pill, according to Venkatesh, is the process of “relearning the value of questioning and doubt after you’ve been seduced by answers and certainties; it’s leaving comforting ‘secret’ societies for continued intellectual growth.” Grey pills can engender an existential crisis, but at the right dose they can provide a confident unknowing and a sexy uncertainty, what Stephen Fry calls “passionate and positive doubt.” In a world of tyrannical certainty, grey pilling may be an ethical act.

In 1964, Ken Kesey, smitten with the experience that LSD provided him, drove around the country with his Merry Band of Pranksters and offered “acid tests” to anyone they could find with the intent to open minds and transform the consciousness of society. Some may argue that they were successful in doing so, as his adventures chronicled in Tom Wolfe’s book *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* are credited with giving birth to the hippie movement. What if we grey-pilled the way Kesey acid-tested?

This would be the return of Socrates, the original gadfly, who grey-pilled anyone who dared to converse with him. The method of the Street Epistemologists are instructive and may be repurposed for this proposal. Their conversational method of innocently starting dialog is well-structured,

but instead of atheists inquiring into the epistemic methodology of their “irrational” interlocutors, performative agnostics could inquire with the intention to get mutually, philosophically lost. This may be our most dangerous, and most fun, speculation.

Human Skills to Protean Tribalism

Management theorist Robert Katz made a distinction between three critical skills for professional success: technical skills, conceptual skills, and human skills. Technical skills are practical skill-sets that can be mastered.

Conceptual skills are effective ways of thinking about complex problems. And human skills can be understood as the ability to connect with what is “human” about another person. While the “marketing mentality” invokes the need for social skills, which are instrumental towards salesmanship or leadership persuasion, “human skills” invokes the framework of authentic relationships with other humans. It has the potential to lend itself to a non-instrumental view of relationships. In Buberian terms, this is a movement from an *I-It* way of relating to one of *I-Thou*.

The Authentic Relating and Circling Movement aims to cultivate WE Spaces, which are intersubjective I-Thou spaces where collective consciousness can emerge. For individuals concerned by their own culpability in the Culture War, these spaces give an opportunity to develop Human Skills. We speculate that if one becomes skilled at relating to another for its own sake, across tribal affiliation, it may allow people to bypass tribalistic affinities and a Protean Tribalism to emerge. One’s tribe would be fluid and context-based, in contrast to the increasingly rigid identities we currently find comfort in.

Workshops for Depolarization

The Culture War is a vicious cycle — those who suffer from it feel they have to perpetuate it. Initiating conversations about alternatives can be the start of a positive feedback loop. Individuals looking to improve the atmosphere in their communities could initiate workshops to that end.

A promising example to this end is the OpenMind platform. As per its [website](#), “OpenMind is a psychology-based educational platform designed to depolarize campuses, companies, organizations, and communities.

OpenMind helps people foster intellectual humility and mutual understanding, while equipping them with the essential cognitive skills to engage constructively across differences.” A combination of online program and workshop, OpenMind is one avenue to develop viewpoint diversity and diffuse political tensions in relationships. Any organized, good faith approach to repairing fraying communities is likely to have a positive effect.

These and other creative measures will be necessary to generate functional alternatives to the maladaptive solutions offered by memetic tribes for the six crises. If they are not taken, we expect Culture War 2.0 to slink closer and closer to kinetic warfare, whether '60s style showdowns or more dramatic escalations. The worst angels of our nature are leering from our shoulders. It's on all of us to refuse the easy solution of blind tribalism in favor of considered thought and embracing the unknown. If we do not, then Yeats's words will be our epitaph:

*Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.*

You can follow Peter Limberg on Twitter [@peternlimberg](#) and Conor Barnes [@ideopunk](#).

Politics

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The Stoa was once a covered portico where Stoics met to philosophize. Now it's a digital space, where we can gather and talk about what matters most.
