Hating Theory: "Cultural Marxism," "CRT," and the Power of Media Affects

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Conservative media outlets have recently turned a great deal of attention to an improbable topic: critical race theory (CRT). This article draws on historical sources and content analyses to show that recent attacks on CRT build on well-established narratives about "cultural Marxism." It further argues that, to attach the antipathy that familiar enemies inspire to new subjects, conservative CRT experts perform *hate-reading*, a mode of communication that defines messengers and their audiences in contradistinction to the content they reject. Rather than an aberration, I propose that hate-reading is a longstanding communicative practice and urge disinformation scholars to attend to how specific discourses and technologies afford such *media affects*.

Keywords: critical race theory, critical theory, conservative media, disinformation, conspiracy theory, media genres, affect, libidinal economy

On July 11, 2021, around 8:05 PM ET, a man misspoke. Or did he? The man was Mark Levin, host of the third most widely syndicated radio show in the United States and of a weekly *Fox News* show, *Life, Liberty, and Levin* (Scott, 2018–present). He was speaking on *Life, Liberty, and Levin* about a subject that had become newly popular over the preceding months: critical race theory (CRT). And he was offering a preview of his book *American Marxism* (Levin, 2021a)*,* which would be published two days later. In his opening segment, Levin said, "Throughout our culture, whether it's newsrooms, whether it's entertainment, whether it's academia, the Democratic Party, this ideology, what I call American Marxism, has been spawned from Marxism" (Levin, 2021c, para. 8). Levin continued, "You had to go back to the German émigré philosopher Herbert Marcuse: "He's the Big Daddy behind Critical Theory. That whole Franklin School" (Levin, 2021c, para. 8). Levin repeated this claim on the next week's show. "The Marxist has decided to use whatever they possibly can in America," Levin (2021b) said:

> So, they developed this theory, Stanford Law School, Harvard Law School, a guy by the
> name of Derrick Bell and he stole it or modified it from a Marxist by the name of Marcuse

who came out of Berlin, the so-called Franklin School, and they developed critical theory,
which started in our law schools. (para. 126)

An attentive viewer might notice inconsistencies here, even if they are not familiar with the
Frankfurt School or CRT. For instance, Levin asserts that American Marxism both "came out of Berlin" and
"started in our law schools" (Levin, 2021b, para. 126). By the summer of 2021, CRT had become a familiar
target for his audience. Conservative media outlets and think tanks had repeatedly denounced its influence.
A study by UCLA's Critical Race Studies Program found that in 2021 and 2022, federal, state, and local
legislative and governing bodies introduced 563 anti-CRT measures (Kelley, 2023). For its part, Levin's book
quickly ascended to first place on the *New York Times* bestseller list. It sold 700,000 copies in its first three
weeks and over 1 million copies by September 2021, eventually becoming the bestselling book that year.

Levin's success attracted the attention of people who did not watch *Fox News* regularly but knew
the work of Herbert Marcuse. On Twitter, they shared clips from Levin's show and screenshots of his book
with gleeful derision. "This is the state of the absolute pinnacle of right-wing intellectualism," one user
tweeted over a screenshot of a passage reading "Marcuse… was a German-born Hegelian Marxist ideologue
of the Franklin School" (Hoadley-Brill, 2021). On August 20, *Salon* published an article summarizing Levin's
errors. "Hothead Fox News host keeps calling the Frankfurt School the 'Franklin School,'" the headline read
(Petrizzo, 2021). "Does he mean the Franklin Mint?" (Petrizzo, 2021) Levin responded on his radio show.
"In the book I called it, he came from the Franklin School," he acknowledged (Levin, 2021d). "It's the
Frankfurt School. I think once or twice on TV I referred to it as the Franklin School. I don't know why. It
stuck in my head. Ben Franklin, Franklin, whatever" (Levin, 2021d, 00:42–00:58). Having conceded this
point, he pivoted.

Now here's the thing… That's the best attack they can launch? It's not an attack at all. In
fact it's the opposite! In a strange way, it's a pat on the back. *We looked and we looked,
trust me, we're at Salon*, commie bastards, *we're looking, and he said Franklin, not
Frankfurt*! (Levin, 2021d, 00:58–01:56)

The Franklin School contretemps could be interpreted as exemplifying several dysfunctions of the
contemporary public sphere. However, they demonstrate one thing clearly: People can develop strong
feelings about texts that they have not read, shows that they have not watched, and other kinds of content
that they rarely, if ever, engage with. Indeed, some people develop public identities based on content that
they have not read, watched, or engaged with. The recent attack on CRT has offered striking examples of
this phenomenon. Without ignoring the substantial evidence that patterns of media consumption and sharing
vary across the political spectrum (Freelon, Marwick, & Kreiss, 2020), we can observe that most of Levin's
Twitter critics did not read Levin either.

Indeed, many Twitter users who mocked Levin's errors emphasized this point. "Even if I dug his
vile politics," one user posted, "I couldn't tolerate 30 seconds of his nasal squawking" (Whitta, 2021). In
this sense, participants in this exchange were not so much talking *past* each other as talking *off of* each
other. Each treated messages from the "other" side of a political and cultural divide as an occasion to
perform for his/her own audience. If Levin's slip demonstrated to academics and media professionals that

he was ignorant, their reaction proved to his audience that they were Marxist sympathizers and irrelevant scolds. (Recall Levin's rebuttal: "Ben Franklin, Franklin, whatever"; Levin, 2021b, 00:42–00:58). Hence, if "Franklin School" was a mistake, it was also ingenious. It inspired hundreds of critics to do free viral marketing for a book that they would never read.

This article treats this episode and its broader discourses as a point of departure to rethink central categories for conceptualizing communication. The past decade has seen a flourishing of both scholarly and popular interest in "conservative news cultures" (Nadler & Bauer, 2019, p. 4) and in an array of subjects that includes "misinformation," "disinformation," "media manipulation," "coordinated inauthentic behavior," "propaganda," "fake news," and "conspiracy," sometimes grouped under the catch-all "problematic information" (Jack, 2017, p. 1). In 2020, the communications scholars Deen Freelon and Chris Wells (2020) observed that this "constellation of media genres [...] is the defining political communication topic of our time" (p. 145). Since then, the continued growth of interest has inspired both exogenous critiques (Bernstein, 2021; Bratich, 2020; Brock, 2021) and endogenous calls for "critical disinformation studies" (Kuo & Marwick, 2021; Marwick, Kuo, Cameron, & Weigel, 2021), as well as exhortations to move beyond disinformation studies altogether (Lenoir & Anderson, 2023).

I aim to contribute to these initiatives empirically and conceptually by investigating conservative messages about CRT and analyzing the genre of speech they exemplify. That is, speech that "talks off of" more than it talks *about*, its referent. Both critics and critical scholars of "disinformation" have pointed out that the concept overstates the power of information to dictate beliefs. Conservative discourse about CRT offers a striking example of how non-informational elements shape political communication.

To explain how they do, I turn to conservative book publishing. Books play a significant role in the "conservative information ecosystem" (Tripodi, 2022, p. 19). Not only do some draw large numbers of readers, but they also provide occasions for, and grant legitimacy to, broadcast and online discourse. By analyzing a set of 10 influential titles purporting to explain CRT to conservatives, I demonstrate that these build on older anti-Marxist narratives and deploy a shared set of rhetorical strategies. I describe these strategies as performing *hate-reading*.

Hate-reading is a familiar term and practice. The cognate verb "hate-watch" entered the Oxford English Dictionary in 2017, and scholars of fandom have documented many cases in which acts of disdaining or mocking media consolidate audiences and brands (Click, 2019). By historicizing and theorizing hate-reading in the frame of affective or libidinal economy, I aim to illuminate its significance for political communication, and particularly for the contested field of disinformation studies. If hate-reading uses specific discursive forms to create identity and community in opposition to what it rejects, affect theory explains why such a practice could bond participants together. At the same time, conceptualizing hate as a *media affect* enables us to move beyond "info-centric" (Peck, 2023) approaches to disinformation research and even the dichotomy between content and reception context (Freelon & Wells, 2020, p. 146). As we shall see, the primary content of a message may be antipathy to its (supposed) subject.

Defining Terms

Cultural Marxism

Hardly anyone has ever referred to themselves as a "cultural Marxist." A search of Google Books turns up only two titles that use the term sympathetically: Dennis L. Dworkin's (1997) *Cultural Marxism in Postwar Britain* and a book of interviews with Marxist literary theorist Frederic Jameson (2007), *Conversations on Cultural Marxism*. Instead, uses are overwhelmingly pejorative. Broadly, speakers use "cultural Marxism" to refer to the work of a group of intellectuals who came together around the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt and followers who, they say, applied Marxist ideas to culture to undermine Western civilization.

Contemporary discourse about cultural Marxism echoes Nazi propaganda (Hanebrink, 2018; Moyn, 2018). However, the specific narrative repeated by conservative elites and social media users over the past decade originates around the end of the Cold War (Jamin, 2018). Intellectual historians and scholars of the far right have identified several sources for it. The earliest come from publications associated with the LaRouche Movement, an international organization led by the late Trotskyite-turned-cult-leader Lyndon LaRouche (Becker, 2011). More influential, however, was a series of presentations and publications by the paleoconservative William S. Lind, who co-founded the Free Congress Foundation for Cultural Conservatism in 1977.

Lind spoke about cultural Marxism at conferences, including Holocaust denial conferences, throughout the late 1990s (Berkowitz, 2002, 2003). Meanwhile, a more mainstream discourse regarding the perils of "political correctness" reached considerable volume (Weigel, 2016). That discourse tended to focus on "multiculturalism" and French "deconstruction," which had become prominent in national media by the 1990s (Redfield, 2015). Texts on cultural Marxism frequently equated the term with "political correctness" and "deconstruction," but associated it with a canon of German-speaking Jewish intellectuals. A pamphlet published by Lind (2004) included a compendium of cultural Marxist thinkers entitled "Profiles" (pp. 6–11). It contained entries for George Lukacs [sic], Antonio Gramsci, Wilhelm Reich, Erich Fromm, Herbert Marcuse, and Theodor Adorno. Lind would reissue versions of this pamphlet for years; the most recent came out in 2019.

The story told by Lind's pamphlet goes as follows: World War I cast Marxists into disarray by disproving Marx's thesis that the international working class would refuse to fight. After 1919, prominent Marxist intellectuals gathered to regroup and came up with another plan to foment revolution in Europe. That plan, which crystallized around the Institute for Social Research, was to use critical theory as an instrument to destroy capitalism and Western civilization. In the 1930s, when the Nazis came to power, members of the Frankfurt School fled to the United States and rapidly insinuated themselves into academic institutions. After World War II, those who remained continued to spread critiques of American culture and undermine the country from within. Cultural Marxists merged with deconstructionists and continued their project to overthrow Western civilization through the creation of gender and ethnic studies departments. By capturing elite institutions, they came to exert influence at the highest levels of government.

Versions of this narrative subsequently appeared in several influential publications. The paleoconservative writer Patrick J. Buchanan (2002) reprised it in his bestseller, *The Death of the West.* Kevin MacDonald (1998), an evolutionary psychology professor and prominent anti-Semitic conspiracy theorist, devoted a large section of his trilogy on "Jewish evolutionary strategy" to the Frankfurt School. And in the 2010s, cultural Marxism became an increasingly popular topic.

Using data from the Berkman Media Cloud, an open-source platform that indexes newspapers and digital news sources, it is possible to see several spikes in attention to the topic over the course of the decade. The largest followed the 2011 attacks of the Norwegian terrorist Anders Breivik, who released a 1,500-page manifesto shortly before murdering 69 people, many of them children. The manifesto argues that cultural Marxism has "Islamified" Europe. Other spikes follow smaller incidents, such as the leak of a memo on cultural Marxism by a member of Trump's National Security Council (Winter & Groll, 2017) or the posting of a "cultural Marxism" meme by former Republican Congressman Ron Paul (Mathis-Lilley, 2018).

So-called "#alt-right" media frequently discussed cultural Marxism (Hawley, 2017; Neiwert, 2017). *Breitbart News* regularly published articles about the Frankfurt School (Huyssen, 2017), and in his memoir*,* founder Andrew Breitbart (2011) devoted two chapters to their "theory of criticizing everyone and everything everywhere" (p. 114). Michael Walsh (2015), a cofounder, published an entire book on how the "ordure of critical theory" had poisoned Western civilization (p. 71). Prominent intellectuals amplified such accounts, including by criticizing them. For instance, when the psychology professor-turned-commentator Jordan Peterson held a public debate about cultural Marxism with the famous Lacanian-Marxist philosopher Slavoj Zizek, 3,000 people attended (Mudhar, 2019).

Critical Race Theory

By contrast with cultural Marxism, "CRT" is a term that members of an intellectual movement use to refer to themselves. The first to do so were legal scholars who began developing an account of the structural racism embedded in ostensibly race-neutral U.S. laws and institutions in the late 1970s—a framework that scholars working across the social sciences and humanities later adopted and adapted. All the results on the first page of a Google Books search use "CRT" descriptively rather than pejoratively. However, neither it nor "cultural Marxism" surfaced often in public discourse before conservative elites took them up.

The Southern Baptist Convention issued a resolution on CRT in June 2019 (Southern Baptist Convention [SBC], 2019). *Fox News* ramped up uses of the term during coverage of the uprisings responding to the police murders of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd. On September 1, 2020, Christopher Rufo, a fellow at the Manhattan Institute, appeared on *Tucker Carlson Tonight* (Wells, 2016–2023). Rufo (2023) described employee trainings by the U.S. Treasury Department, the FBI, and Sandia National Laboratories, before calling on then-President Trump to abolish critical race theory from public institutions. Three weeks later, Trump issued an executive order banning diversity trainings in federal agencies (Trump, 2020).

According to Berkman Media Cloud, between January 2016 and January 2020, "critical race theory" appeared in only a handful of stories published in the United States. Until September 2020, it never appeared

in more than four on any one day. That month, however, uses began to climb up, reaching a peak of 40 stories per day. The number of stories that mentioned CRT steadily ascended in 2021, from 146 in the month of January to 170 in February, 353 in March, 393 in April, and then 1,248 in May, 2,856 in June and 2,200 in July. All told, between January 2020 and January 2023, that "CRT" would appear in nearly 25,000 different stories, both in conservative outlets and liberal ones reporting on the anti-CRT phenomenon.

Methodology

For my content analysis, I assembled a corpus of 10 books published between 2020 and 2022 according to several criteria. I began with sales numbers from BookScan, a data provider that compiles point-of-sale information for physical books in the United States, and Amazon reviews, which I used as a proxy for engagement with physical and e-book editions. I then considered institutional affiliations: Was the author a fellow at a major think tank? Was the book published by a major publisher or conservative press? Finally, I evaluated whether the book had drawn positive attention from other conservative commentators, in the form of coverage or citation. By triangulating these criteria, I arrived at the following list: Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay's (2020) *Cynical Theories*, David Horowitz's (2021) *The Enemy Within*, Voddie Baucham's (2021) *Fault Lines*, Mark Levin's (2021a) *American Marxism*, Mary L. Dodson's (2021) *Critical Race Theory Versus God's Divine Law*, Vivek Ramaswamy's (2021) *Woke, Inc.*, James Lindsay's (2022) *Race Marxism*, Jonathan Butcher's (2022) *Splintered*, Pete Hegseth's (2022) *Battle for the American Mind*, and John Amanchukwu's (2022) *Eraced*.

Each of these titles attained salience in terms of sales, author affiliations, and/or outside attention. However, their authors moved in distinct social networks. Several were former academics who described themselves as liberals and atheists; several were well-known pundits or think tank fellows; and several were evangelical Christians. The books had 11 authors in total (two were co-written, and one author appeared twice). Of these, all but one was a U.S. citizen. Eight were White, two were Black, and one was Asian-American; nine were men, and two were women. Two devoted only a few pages to CRT (Horowitz, 2021; Ramaswamy, 2021), while two allocated one to two chapters to it (Hegseth, 2022; Pluckrose & Lindsay, 2020). The others took CRT as their primary subject.

I had the following hypotheses before I began. First, these books would build directly on older narratives about "cultural Marxism." Second, their accounts of critical theory and CRT would closely resemble one another, suggesting reliance on a small set of common summaries. This second hypothesis was based on reading older texts about cultural Marxism. In *Death of the West*, for instance, Patrick Buchanan (2002) names the same thinkers Lind (2004) presents in his "Cultural Marxist Profiles," in nearly the same order. Anders Breivik's (2011) manifesto opens by closely paraphrasing Lind and reproduces his "Profiles" verbatim. I further expected that the books would only selectively and briefly name specific theorists or cite specific texts.

Before beginning to read, I had a few codes in mind. Some were general, such as the institutional affiliation of the author. Some were more specific, such as what kinds of metaphors the book used to characterize CRT. As I read, new commonalities struck me, and I added these to my list, rereading to identify whether they had occurred in the other titles too. In one or two cases, I changed the books that I would

include in the set. For example, I had initially excluded Jonathan Butcher (2022) *Splintered* because of his low sales numbers and dearth of Amazon reviews. But when I noticed that other, more widely read authors (Dodson, 2021; Hegseth, 2022; Lindsay, 2022) cited Butcher, I restored him. By contrast, while I had initially included Charles Pincourt's and James Lindsay's (2021) book *Counter Wokecraft: A Field Manual for Combatting the Woke in the University and Beyond*, I ultimately discarded it on the grounds that it was repetitive of Lindsay's other two contributions, *Cynical Theories* and *Race Marxism*, which focused on theory and had higher sales, review, and citation numbers.

Findings: Describing "Theory"

Repeating Histories

My data bore out my first and second hypotheses. All the books in my set identified CRT as a form, or direct descendent, of cultural Marxism. Moreover, their authors were highly consistent in how they described cultural Marxism and its influence upon recent social movements. Both facts remained true across the range of identities and institutions that the authors represented, even when the books explicitly addressed distinct audiences ("liberals," "Americans," "patriots," "Christians" etc.).

For instance, the former academics Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay (2020), describe themselves in their co-authored book, *Cynical Theories*, as "philosophically liberal" (p. 20). That book, which focuses on French poststructuralism, treats critical theory only in passing. However, Lindsay's *Race Marxism* (2022) revises its central claim to argue that cultural Marxism inspired social justice scholarship and movements. Like Lind (2004), Buchanan (2002), and others before him, Lindsay rehearses a history of the Frankfurt School that passes from Lukács and Gramsci to Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse–whom Lindsay (falsely) identifies as "cobbling together" critical legal studies. "Obviously, Critical Race Theory is a *Critical Theory* (of race)," Lindsay (2022) writes, "so the connection between Critical Theory and Critical Race Theory is not exactly tenuous" (p. 90).

Among the authors affiliated with think tanks, David Horowitz (2021) remains brief: "Karl Marx was intent on fomenting war between economic classes; Cultural Marxists… expanded the scope of his target to races, genders, and religious Christians" (pp. 11–12). However, Jonathan Butcher, a fellow at the Heritage Foundation who co-authored a widely cited early article on CRT (Butcher & González, 2020), begins with a full chapter on its cultural Marxist origins. *Fox News* hosts Mark Levin and Pete Hegseth reprise this narrative. Levin (2021a) describes Marcuse's essay on "Repressive Tolerance" as the "foundational catalyst for various critical theories that have grown into Marxist-related ideological movements," noting that, "one of the most destructive among these movements is Critical Race Theory" (p. 86). Hegseth (2022) devotes a chapter to "The Straight Line from Critical Theory to Antifa." "Before Ibram X. Kendi and Barack Obama," he writes, "there was Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, and the Frankfurt School" (Hegseth, 2022, p. 107).

The Christian authors in my set devoted less space to intellectual histories. Nonetheless, they followed the same script. Voddie Baucham's (2021) bestseller *Fault Lines* begins with three entries: "Karl Marx's Conflict Theory," "Antonio Gramsci and Hegemony," "The Frankfurt School and Hegemony," followed

by a section entitled "Putting It All Together," which concludes that, "Critical Theory… led directly to CRT and intersectionality, via Critical Legal Studies" (pp. xi–xiii). Google Trends shows that Baucham's name was the term most often searched-for with "critical race theory" in 2021. However, Christian texts with narrower reach tell the same story. Professor Mary L. Dodson (2021) writes of CRT that "its father is Marxism and its mother is postmodernism" (p. 9). Minister John Amanchukwu (2022) holds that "CRT is a product of twentieth century Marxist thought" (p. 67).

In addition to concurring that critical theory directly produced, or evolved into, CRT, the books share an account of the emergence of CRT itself. The accounts of CRT that appear in this set rely on two sources: The anthologies *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings that Formed the Movement* (Crenshaw & Gotanda, 1995) and *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction* (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). The authors returned repeatedly to the introduction to the second volume, which describes participants in the conference that Derrick Bell convened at the University of Wisconsin in 1989 as "a bunch of Marxists" (Baucham, 2021, p. xi; Lindsay, 2022, pp. 3, 4, 87, 150, 154).

Strikingly, the authors in my set remain consistent in how they define critical theory and CRT, even when they characterize the harms of these traditions in very different terms. For instance, Pluckrose and Lindsay focus on academia; Levin, Hegseth, and Butcher on primary education; and Dodson and Baucham on the church. Vivek Ramaswamy (2021), by contrast, argues that CRT legitimates antidemocratic corporate diversity and investing initiatives, while Amanchukwu foregrounds abortion. The repetitions I observed suggest a reliance on a limited number of sources and summaries. However, my third hypothesis that these books would not quote many texts at length proved false. They directly quote a wider range of authors than I had expected.

While I had initially created a column in my coding table to list thinkers named and cited, I soon stopped keeping track; there were far too many. In addition to Marx himself, members of the Frankfurt School and CRT scholars Derrick Bell, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Richard Delgado, and Jean Stefancic appeared repeatedly, as did bestselling authors Robin DiAngelo and Ibram X. Kendi. Texts recurred, too. For instance, Levin (2021a, p. 82), Butcher (2022, p. 107), Lindsay (2022, pp. 61–66, 104, 116–118, 167, 273), and Hegseth (2022, pp. 103–104) all discuss Marcuse's (1965/2013) essay "Repressive Tolerance." Quotes from, and paraphrases of, Crenshaw's (1991) essay "Mapping the Margins" appear in Pluckrose and Lindsay (2020, pp. 123–124), Levin (2021a, p. 90), Butcher (2022, p. 66), and Lindsay (2022, pp. 7, 28, 44–45, 69–70, 84). Yet the authors in my set cited dozens of other sources. Many included hundreds of footnotes.

Performing Hate

Rather *not* reading the books in my set evinced and invited *hate-reading*. Digital networks encourage hate-reading; by making it feasible to identify, search, and replicate content at low or no cost, they make it easy for users to share negative reactions and find others doing the same. But the practice is not new. The hate-reader has many forebears: the Catholic priest hearing confessions, the government censor reading for seditious messages, and the double agent participating in the planning of a murder—but only, they insist, so that they can report back. In each case, the receiver of the message must produce an

identity that is distinct from that of an imagined "mere" recipient through the act of receiving it. And they must produce this identity for an audience, even if that audience consists only of the self.

The practice of hate-reading makes meaning *in opposition* to a mediated message. How precisely any given hate-reader does this is a question of style. Given the differences among their authors, publishers, and target audiences, the books in my set exhibit a wide range. However, they converge in several key respects, enabling authors to tell the same story about, and attach common feelings to, disparate subjects. First, all 10 books are highly intertextual. Authors cite their own past work as well as one another, producing a circle of mutual validation. Baucham (2021) names Pluckrose and Lindsay (2020), while Horowitz (2021) cites Levin (2021a); Levin (2021a) names Butcher (2020), as do Dodson (2021) and Lindsay (2022) himself. Hegseth (2022) repeatedly praises Pluckrose and Lindsay (pp. 21, 104); Amanchukwu (2022) uses Baucham as a chapter epigraph (p. 58).

When citing theory directly, these authors engage in two opposing strategies. The first is to catch the Marxists "in their own words," expressing horror at their brazenness. Lindsay (2022) writes: "Delgado, an admitted Marxist, understands perfectly well that he is making a statement of Hegelian-Marxist faith" (p. 197). The second is to show how critical race theorists conceal their origins and nature. Levin (2021a) writes: "Many Marxists cloak themselves in phrases like 'progressives,' 'Democratic Socialists,' 'social activists,' 'community activists,' etc." (p. 2). Butcher (2022) maintains: "A teacher does not have to use the words 'critical race theory' to capture the racially discriminatory ideas at the very center of this worldview" (p. 105). It follows that Marxism is everywhere. It remains unclear how a charge of Marxism could ever be disproven.

Second, the authors in my set use several rhetorical strategies to turn theory *itself* into a character. To do this, they first establish that theory is a single thing. Horowitz (2021) refers to "a racist ideology that goes under the names Identity Politics, Cultural Marxism, Critical Race Theory, Intersectionality, and 'Anti-Racism'" (p. 184). Lindsay (2022) writes of "Critical Theory (so, neo-Marxism)" (p. 15), "neo-Marxism (which is Critical Theory)" (p. 61), "neo-Marxism (Critical Theory)" (p. 89), and "the Identity Marxism that we call 'Woke' today" (p. 159), drawing distinctions only to dismiss them. After a digression on the differences between critical theory and cultural Marxism, Lindsay (2022) concludes that, "all this said, I will treat the two ideas as approximately synonymous" (p. 112). He coins neologisms to group disparate tendencies together. Alongside the "race Marxism" of his title, these include "Identity Marxism," "Dialectical Leftism" and "Gnowledge." Lindsay and others justify such simplifications as necessary for the purpose of clarity.

At the level of the sentence, run-on lists dissolve particulars. Butcher (2022), for instance, writes:

> Once members of the Frankfurt School came to America, their ideas evolved into critical legal theory, which argues that American law is systemically racist, and later critical race theory, which incorporates all the ideas of critical theory and critical legal theory and adds an obsession with racial differences. (p. 24)

Lindsay (2022) similarly alleges:

Rousseau's philosophies didn't just inspire the bloody French Revolution; they also inspired romanticism, which inspired existentialism, which inspired structuralism, which evolved into poststructuralism, which became core to postmodernism, which is the second biggest part of the root of Critical Social Justice Theory and thus Critical Race Theory. (p. 200)

Hegseth (2022) enumerates a litany before ending on a singular pronoun: "Social justice, political correctness, 'wokeness,' 'diversity, equity, and inclusion,' Black Lives Matter and gender fluidity—it's everywhere" (pp. 24–25).

These rhetorical strategies characterize theory as unitary. Others characterize it as living. Authors across my set used extended metaphors and personifications. Dodson (2021), for instance, repeatedly describes a "marriage" between Marxism and postmodernism and calls CRT their "now adult offspring" (p. 25). Levin (2021a) refers to Marcuse as the "father" of the New Left (p. 57) who "spawned Critical Race Theory" (pp. 90, 259) and higher education as the "breeding ground of American Marxism" (pp. 41, 258, 259). Numerous authors chose words to describe the relationship between critical theory and CRT that suggest nonhuman acts of reproduction, such as "offspring," "breeding," "progeny," "spawn," and "hatched."

The disgust that these terms evoke both depends on and reinforces the heteronormative assumption that there are licit and illicit kinds of coupling. By condemning the "breeding" of predominantly White (Jewish) intellectual traditions to produce CRT, these authors further suggest that thinking itself should stay segregated—and that only White thinkers generate world-changing ideas. In a history of CRT that appeared after I concluded my analysis, Christopher Rufo (2023) denigrates Angela Davis, Paulo Freire, and Derrick Bell and other "descendants" of Herbert Marcuse as "all… lesser minds than their master" (p. 273).

The organic metaphors that these authors use to vilify theory also attribute agency to it. Lindsay (2022) calls CRT a "virus" (pp. 8–9), while Hegseth (2022) describes critical theory as a foreign plant that found "fertile soil" in the United States (pp. 108, 112, 115). Amanchukwu (2022) denounces CRT and abortion as "plagues on our society" and "poisonous plants" (pp. 1, 26, 48). These figures of speech grant theory an ability to shape-shift. This, in turn, helps justify the chronological gaps in the stories that these books tell—leaping from the 1930s, or 1960s, to the 2010s.

One way to describe this style is paranoid (Hofstadter, 1964). The books on CRT that I analyzed exhibit multiple traits of conspiracy theory. Substantively, they propose that a concealed group of people have caused far-reaching social changes (Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009). Narratively, they focus on a small number of actors and connect them to a wide range of topical domains (Jameson, 1992, 2013; Tangherlini et al., 2020), weaving theories together and updating them to fit current events (Zuckerman, 2019). However, calling these books paranoid does not explain their performative dimension. To account for that, we must turn from political psychology to the sociology of genre.

All 10 books in my set position themselves as explainers. The insider-outsider "reporting back" from within elite institutions has a long history in conservative publishing, extending back at least to William F. Buckley's (1951) *God and Man at Yale*. So do intellectual histories that argue that modern philosophy is

undermining Western civilization; Richard Weaver's (1948/2013) *Ideas Have Consequences*, cited by both Levin (2021a) and Butcher (2022), comes to mind. If it is paranoid to assert that a small group of actors have secretly remade the world, sidestepping the complex processes that enabled them to do so, this paranoia is characteristic of popular intellectual history in general. That genre shares with conspiracy theory a tendency to simplify and exaggerate the power of the ideas that it exposes.

All 10 books encourage readers to do their own research. Baucham (2021) recommends "diving into the sources I have cited" (p. xviii). Dodson (2021) and Amanchukwu (2022) call on readers to imitate the Biblical figure of the "watchman." Such exhortations are common within contemporary "conspiratorial communities of practice" (Marwick & Partin, 2022, para. 8). However, they also appeal to ideals of self-education with deeper roots in United States and Protestant culture. The media ethnographer Francesca Tripodi (2022) has shown that training in Biblical exegesis shapes how Christian conservatives seek and share information online. Multiple books in my set perform recognizably Christian modes of reading, including attending closely to passages selected at random, with the conviction that they will reveal truth.

The fact that in these books the "admitted Marxist" and the Marxist who pretends to be merely "progressive" both offer evidence for the same argument illustrates that, at some level, the particulars of any given passage they cite do not matter. So does the exasperation that the authors express when analyzing texts. For instance, Lindsay (2022) deploys bathos to dismiss Patricia Williams' (1991) study, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*. "This odd, narrative-driven book," Lindsay (2022) writes, "begins with the author complaining about how depressed she is and that she's writing in a tattered bathrobe, because, in the saying *du jour*, she *can't even*" (p. 197; emphasis in the original). This paraphrase reflects Lindsay's (2022) confidence that his readers already know what to think—to the point where he can replace Williams' words with an admittedly anachronistic cliché. Across the anti-CRT canon, theory assumes the persistence of sin. It may, like Satan, disappear for decades at a time, but keep exerting malign influence.

Discussion: Hating Theory

These books do not only express, or seek to inspire, individual paranoia, in other words, but also strive to generate social belonging, by drawing on well-established repositories of forms and gestures. The idea that subjects construct themselves through enunciations of discourse (Foucault, 2002) and acts of performance (Butler, 2011; Goffman, 2021) has been well-established across the social sciences and humanities. Scholars of taste (Bourdieu, 2013) and "cultural capital" (Guillory, 2013) have further demonstrated that aesthetic judgments and preferences closely correlate with class. Therefore, such judgments and preferences become one of the primary means by which individuals produce their identities and their differences from other social groups. Bourdieu (2013) observed that aesthetic aversions created the strongest barriers among social classes (p. 49).

The feminist theorist Sara Ahmed (2014) developed the concept of an "emotional" or "affective" economy to describe the role of feelings in generating social identities, hierarchies, and collectivities. Ahmed (2014) defines emotions as both speech acts and forms of capital. Rather than properties of individuals, or values in themselves, Ahmed argues that feelings come into being through acts of enunciation and

circulation. Because any given act has a history, we are all already marked. Certain bodies are more likely than others to evoke desire, paranoia, disgust, and so on, for certain audiences.

More recently, the media scholar André Brock (2020) has developed an account of "libidinal economy" online. Broadly, the framework of libidinal economy holds that psychological and emotional intensities, rather than rational material interests, drive racism. Brock (2020) emphasizes the role of media technologies in structuring such feelings. For instance, Brock (2020) argues that social media enact "weak-tie racism" through recommendation algorithms that encourage White users to interact with videos depicting anti-Black violence (pp. 155–160).

What Ahmed and Brock add to Bourdieu (2013) and Guillory (2013) is a way of conceptualizing how cultural or aesthetic judgments, mediated by specific speech acts and media technologies, come to be charged with feelings that bind social groups. The authors in my set do not just *disagree* with the texts that they discuss. These authors are outraged. Their goal is not only to convince their readers that critical race theorists are wrong but also to inspire, as Lindsay (2022) puts it, "deep antipathy" (p. 17). By performing their own antipathy to theory, these authors distinguish themselves and their audiences from the institutions and communities where, they say, theory is practiced. That is, from public schools, elite universities, and public agencies that conservatives have lobbied to disempower since the Civil Rights era.

Both Ahmed and Brock characterize hate as producing boundaries between the self and others. In hate, Ahmed (2014) writes, "bodies surface by 'feeling' the presence of others as the cause of injury or as a form of intrusion" (p. 48). Brock (2020) similarly stresses that social networks depend on antipathy as well as comity: "Intimate, intense libidinal tensions bon[d] the out-group and the in-group" (p. 157). For both thinkers, hate is always entangled with love: The beloved community comes into being insofar as the sensation of hating something or someone else evokes it.

By performing hate-reading—through the stylistic strategies outlined above—the authors implicitly define a culture that they want to preserve against outsiders. CRT is expedient to define themselves against precisely because it is abstract. Focusing on theory grants the authors in this set plausible deniability against charges of prejudice. In the past, avowed anti-Semites have described the utility of attacking the Frankfurt School to avoid "naming the Jew as a group" (Jay, 2010, p. 35). Authors who quote passages by Crenshaw or Williams, expressing exasperation at their syntax or imagery, might see similar advantages to this approach.

At the same time, by "proving" that cultural Marxism "spawned" CRT, these authors connect CRT to a well-established image of the enemy. Marxism is what Ahmed (2014) calls a "sticky" signifier. It has become charged with feeling through a long history of statements made about it, including the conspiracy theory that Marxism is a plot by Jewish cosmopolitans to convince non-Whites to overthrow White civilization. This idea echoes in narratives about the Frankfurt School inspiring CRT and CRT inspiring the Black Lives Matter movement.

The utility of "theory" goes beyond disavowal, however. As the generalizations and run-on sentences quoted above demonstrate, "theory" has little specific referent for conservative audiences. To the

extent that this vagueness leaves theory open to being defined in a variety of ways, it renders theory a pretext for many possible interventions and an object of antipathy to many possible constituencies. Some of the same negative characterizations of critical theory and CRT that appear across the books in my set have different implications for different readers. For instance, multiple books characterize critical theory and CRT as forms of religion: a "cult" or "false gospel" (Baucham, 2021), "fundamentalist," "religious in nature," a "dialectical faith" (Lindsay, 2022) and even as a "curse" or "satanic" (Amanchukwu, 2022). But the authors give this aspersion different meanings depending on their audience. For those who identify as "liberals" (Lindsay, 2022; Pluckrose & Lindsay, 2020; Ramaswamy, 2021), religion implies irrationality. For "patriots" (Horowitz, 2021; Levin, 2021a) and Christians (Amanchukwu, 2022; Baucham, 2021; Dodson, 2021; Hegseth, 2022), it suggests split loyalty or heresy.

The blankness of "theory" enables hate-readers to tie it to many kinds of concerns. This, in turn, facilitates coalition-building across groups with different or even competing interests. Hate-reading, like any kind of hating, produces identity in contradistinction to that which it rejects (and, thus, partly incorporates). Theory is *good to hate with* because the performance of hating theory defines the community engaging in it as empirical or natural, beyond debate, a fact.

Conclusions: From Media Effects to Media Affects

Hate-reading offers a way to conceptualize the fascination that right-wing intellectuals and movements have long evinced for their left-wing counterparts. Numerous popular (Nagle, 2017; Neiwert, 2017) and scholarly (Hawley, 2017) accounts of contemporary right-wing movements remark on their tendency to "appropriate" (Huyssen, 2017) ostensibly left-wing elements. The political theorist Corey Robin (2018) has described this tendency as central to "reaction" since the French Revolution. Hate-reading names a set of discursive forms through which such reaction can take place. Those forms are not only rhetorical; they involve the materiality of media technologies, too.

This article has focused on books. But these books were written to be released in a digital environment. The hate-readings that they perform remediate older practices for this context. At the level of composition, the repetition of specific passages across the corpus suggests that CTRL-F and copy-paste functions played a key role in their research and writing. The books also anticipate their own digital reception.

As the Berkman Media Cloud data showed, "cultural Marxism" initially functioned as a "data void" (Golebiewski & boyd, 2019). Because there was very little content associated with the term before conservative critics took it up, those critics quickly dominated discussion. Because so few people identified as cultural Marxists, few rushed to respond to initial attacks. The case of CRT is only slightly different. Conservative discourse about CRT resembles a form of "keyword conquesting," a search engine optimization strategy that involves bidding on terms associated with a competitor to gain exposure. While there did exist a discourse about CRT prior to conservative attacks, major search engines had hardly indexed it.

In this sense, the significance of hate-reading extends beyond the specifics of this case and even the broader topics of right-wing media and radicalization. To be sure, much conservative literature about CRT is hateful—anti-Semitic, racist, misogynistic. But hate-reading is not a fringe activity. The irony has not escaped me that it is one way one might describe my method. The relationship between "hate" in the strong and banal senses may be the key thing to grasp, to explain how contemporary media mediate prejudice.

My analysis showed how an influential set of authors used a shared set of discursive strategies to transfer existing feelings about the Frankfurt School to a very different set of actors and texts associated with CRT. These strategies take advantage of core properties of digital networks and search engines. In recent years critical scholars of disinformation have rejected strong models of "media effects" (Marwick, 2018), emphasizing audience agency and social context over the power of individual facts or technologies to dictate beliefs. To these interventions, my concept of media affects offers a way to describe the role of discursive forms and their embeddedness in both technology and history. To legitimate their attacks on movements for racial justice, critics of CRT activated feelings about Marxism whose power came from centuries of use and did so in a way primed to capture digital audiences. Previous scholars have pointed out the power of "affective gestures" to promote democratic conversations online (Papacharissi, 2015). But affective gestures do not only point to liberation.

The prevalence of hate-reading today calls upon us to rethink core analytic categories including public, community, attention, participation, and engagement. Each of these terms seeks to describe forms of human collectivity and the mediated practices that shape them; each is complex and contested. However, these categories have remained central to theorizations of modernity and democracy across political science, sociology, history, literature, media studies, and law, as well as communication studies. All canonical definitions concur: Publics and counterpublics, as Michael Warner (2002) wrote in a famous essay on the subject, are constituted "through mere attention" (p. 60).

Yet, recent clashes around CRT show that our beliefs and identities can be deeply shaped by discourses that we do *not* (directly) attend to. Publics or communities come into being not only by engaging with to certain matters but also by refusing to engage with others—through what they define themselves *against*. This may be particularly true in digital networks where individual users have strong incentives to differentiate themselves and sorting algorithms prize signals of distinction. What does it mean for the ontology and pragmatics of digital publics, for what they are and do? Does it require us to rethink their epistemology and methods, or how we know them?

Dominant figures for describing problems of the digital sphere, and contemporary political life, stress our separation. The problem, we often hear, is filter bubbles, siloes, or poles; the remedy is to break these down. But the case of cultural Marxism and CRT suggest a different topology of epistemic crisis. Here, affects do not stand still at one pole or another, but move constantly through the performativity of language, likes, and shares, or by algorithmic aggregation based on those signals. Communities arise not by fleeing to separate poles but contesting nodes where interpretations clash, and they draw the distinctions that define them.

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