

# The New York Times

## The Meaning of Milo

Ross Douthat

February 22, 2017

To be clear on what just happened in the strange carnival that still calls itself American conservatism: First, the Conservative Political Action Conference invited, as one of its headlining speakers, the right-wing provocateur Milo Yiannopoulos, a gay cross-dressing Catholic part-Jewish Brit who likes to boast about his sexual appetite, favors “ironic” racial and misogynist humor, and not occasionally describes the president of the United States as “Daddy.”

Got all that? Good, because *then* the same conference had to hastily disinvite Yiannopoulos when some of his critics on the right publicized clips from a not-very-long-ago interview in which he appeared to offer favorable comments about pederasty.

It would be ... interesting to send this story backward in time to a distant era like the year of our Lord 2004, and see what people back then made of it. 2004 was, you may recall, the year of the “values voter,” when anti-same-sex marriage referendums passed across the country, George W. Bush was re-elected with strong evangelical support, and liberals feared that a killjoy fundamentalism was about to make America Puritan Again.

From Dubya’s evangelical conservatism to Milo’s Rimbaudian new right, from “marriage is between a man and a woman” to “well, we draw the line at ephebophilia” is a rather dizzying trajectory. But if you understand what’s happened to cultural conservatism over the last decade, the strange career of Yiannopoulos makes a striking sort of sense.

First, post-1960s social conservatism — the bigger-than-the-religious-right tent that once included a lot of moderately religious fellow travelers — has collapsed back to its zealous core. On practically every issue save abortion, liberals won the culture war decisively, and religious conservatives awoke to find themselves strangers in their own country, dismissed as bigots from liberalism’s pulpits and stuck on the wrong side of 40-60 or 30-70 public-opinion splits.

But social liberalism’s sweeping victory produced new forms of backlash — less traditionalist and more populist, less religious and more rowdy, not sacred but profane. These forms of resistance take aim at liberalism’s own forms of social-justice sanctimony, which have smothered academic life and permeated notionally apolitical arenas from late-night comedy to sportswriting. The resisters don’t exactly have a program. Instead, they’ve got a posture — a “whaddya got?” rebellion against any rules that the new liberal order sets.

Some of this posturing is specifically masculine: A young-bachelor revolt against the new feminism and its date-rape tribunals, a broader male discontent with rules of sex, marriage and divorce that seem good for “alphas,” male and female, but not for average guys. Some of it is more class- and ethnicity-based: redneck deplorables giving the finger to the prissy upper class; older whites uneasy over multiculturalism and nostalgic for a more homogeneous America; middle-American radicals to whom the moral code of liberalism seems built for a socioeconomic order that doesn't give a fig about their fate.

These rebels do not necessarily have all that much in common with one another, let alone with the remainders of the religious right. The Trump-voting “deplorable” is likely to be a cultural evangelical but not a churchgoer, or a pro-choice lapsed Catholic who never cared for religious moralists. The typical “manosphere” denizen is something else entirely — younger, tech-savvy, impious, impressed with his own unblinking Darwinism. As constituent parts of cultural conservatism, these groups don't form a particularly coherent whole; what unites them are common fears (feminism, political correctness, sometimes Islam), not a common cause.

In this sense, as in others, America is becoming more like Europe, where conservatism has been less -than religious for some time, and the cultural right has long had a fractured and incoherent quality. (Consider France's National Front, which draws support from Catholic traditionalists, ex-Communist workingmen and secular — and gay — voters who fear Islam's encroachments.)

So perhaps it's appropriate that Milo, a European import, has been one of the first to successfully straddle the fractures. If each faction on America's new cultural right is a stranger to the others, he is a stranger to all of them. The social conservatives are strait-laced, and he's promiscuous (he says); the male anti-feminists are insistently straight, and he's flamboyantly gay; the working-class white heartlanders are, well, working-class heartlanders, and he's a British-accented foreigner.

But his outsider status is a selling point, not a liability. Even as it lets him turn the left's identity politics against itself, it also enables him to flatter each conservative constituency in a somewhat different way, to give each a piece of vindication and play to each with a piece of his persona.

Thus he lets religious conservatives feel, on the one hand, like they're accepting the realities of the culture war — *it's over, we lost, we need to make allies of gay people instead of scapegoats* — while simultaneously suggesting, through his performative promiscuity, his Victorian-decadent relationship with Catholicism, that they were actually right about homosexuality all along. (As the writer Walter Olson of the Cato Institute pointed out recently, a staid sort of gay conservative might actually have less appeal.)

He lets male chauvinists and alt-right tough guys feel vindicated in their hostility to political correctness — *see, even the gay guy in drag gets it* — while offering a harsh critique of feminism that unlike theirs is free from the accusation that it's being offered in sexual self-interest.

And when he goes out to Middle America — I recommend watching his visit to Memories Pizza in Indiana, the small-town pizzeria subjected to a two-minute hate because its owners said they might not cater a gay wedding — he presents himself (posh-sounding accent and all) as an

ambassador from the cosmopolitan reaches of society, here to apologize for the terrible behavior of his fellow snobs and globe-trotters.

So Milo's appeal on the right is, one might say, intersectional.

Moreover, his provocations tend to actually work, in the sense that they summon up the illiberal, "shut up or we'll shut you down" side of left-wing politics. Time and again, the offensive thing he said or did to prompt protests or violence or hysteria recedes into the background, and all that conservatives take from his performances is the vindication of their fears about the left. Indeed this is precisely why he found himself offered a prominent slot at CPAC — for the sake of the illiberal responses his campus appearances elicit, for his enemies' sake rather than his own.

It is telling that it took a seeming defense of pederasty, a breach of the last taboo uniting our fractured culture, to make conservatives pay more attention to Milo's own excesses than to the excesses he sets out to provoke.

And it will be equally telling, I suspect, when he finds a way to rebound from this setback, to escape shunning and find a willing right-wing audience again.

Milo would be a queer champion indeed for a cultural or religious conservatism confident in what it stands for and what kind of society it wants to build.

But for a cultural conservatism united only by a shared outsider sensibility, neither consistency nor propriety are consensus virtues any longer — and indecency in the service of attacking liberalism is no vice.