Macrothink Institute™

Issues in Social Science
ISSN 2329-521X
2024, Vol. 12, No. 2

Qualifying the ‘Social Disconnectedness’ at the Core of Right-Wing Populism

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Received: August 23, 2024 Accepted: November 16, 2024 Published: December 20, 2024

doi:10.5296/iss.v12i2.22195 URL: https://doi.org/10.5296/iss.v12i2.22195

Abstract

That a comparatively heightened sense of social disconnectedness characterizes the core of right-wing populism in the US is a matter of record. But such terms as ‘social disconnectedness’, ‘alienation’, and even ‘loneliness’ are large unwieldy terms with multiple causes and multiple expressions effecting broad demographic swathes and classes of citizens with ‘mental health issues’; these terms in general usage make it difficult to analytically apply them to specific phenomena like the belligerent form of social disconnection currently embedded within the core of right-wing populism. The term ‘social disconnectedness’ is in need of a measure of dissection. This paper shows that the social disconnection at the core of right-wing populism manifests some distinguishing features of excessive and problematic individuation that have coalesced into a coherent social phenomenon (to be called ‘emporia’). This paper extricates this psychopathy from the expansive and nebulous reference in general discourse that is ‘social disconnectedness’.

Keywords: Populism, Alienation, Disconnectedness, MAGA

1. Introduction

Diverse institutions and forums have come to acknowledge ‘social disconnectedness’ as a hazardous phenomenon with systemic proportions. But in the US its impact has been most intense at the center of right-wing populism where a profound state of social disconnectedness has become prominent at the base of disruptive political change (Berardi, 2017; Brown, 2019); this demographic subset reports an intensity of social disconnectedness that is comprehensive—extending from one’s routine daily experience, to one’s perceived purpose and personal life trajectory, and onto one’s entire reference group (Barber & Pope, 2019, 53; also see Ellis & Stimson, 2012; Grossmann & Hopkins, 2016; Greene, 1999). Therefore, the most intensive experience of disconnectedness was reported by Republicans (Harris, 2016; PR Newswire, 2016), only exceeded by the specific supporters of Donald Trump. In fact, Trump-supporters were three and half times more likely to report feeling like a “stranger in their own land” (Public Religion Research Institute 2017, q. 20d & h). No less remarkable is the assorted types of disconnectedness. Irrespective of age, working-class supporters of Trump paled in comparison to their college-educated peers with respect to participation in routine social activities (i.e., neighborhood associations, community service, team sports, cook-outs); 31% of whites with a college education reported not or rarely taking part in such activities as compared to 55% of working-class whites. These are but the vanguard statistics of a general withdrawal from social participation over the last six decades in the US (Putnam, 1995; Nisbet, 1962; Green, 2017).

Diverse social science disciplines and political camps are acknowledging the mental health issues in their respective fields that show the linkage of problematic social disconnection to social inequalities, political fatalism, community erosion and fragmentation (i.e., Brown, 2019; Fukuyama, 2018; Piketty, 2020). A foreboding with respect to social disconnectedness has been increasingly noted by leading political figures; thus, as part of his campaign, senator and presidential candidate Bernie Sanders (2019) warned that “we must not view America only as a population of disconnected individuals” (par. 65). Hillary Clinton (2023) urges action to “defend against those who would exploit our social disconnection”. And the US Surgeon General (2023) has formally qualified social disconnection as an “urgent public health concern” (p. 10) with multiple adverse manifestations.

But where does analysis go once the diagnosis of ‘social disconnectedness’ is made? The innumerable health effects as well as the myriad dimensions of mass estrangement has left ‘social disconnectedness’ a large unwieldy term; its pathology is far too expansive and multidimensional to precisely apply and show how it is integral to specific and complex institutional processes. Indeed, the very notion of a ‘dynamic’ form of social disconnection would appear to represent antithetical forces—‘dynamic’ implies transformational engagement while ‘social disconnectedness’ connotes disempowerment stemming from disengagement with others. The ponderous immensity of the term is an obstacle to comprehension. Thus when the US Surgeon General (2023) described social disconnection as “Objective or subjective deficits in social connection, including deficits in relationships and roles, their functions, and/or quality” (p. 7), the investigating social scientist is seemingly neutralized like an ardent sunworshipper engulfed by a fog; presently social disconnection

can be attributed to illness, aging, discrimination, seclusion, chronic misbehavior, disfigurement, or an abundance of other circumstances that prompt disengagement from one's household, reference group, or the world at large. The condition could readily apply to a conventional stage of male adolescence, to the acclimatizing immigrant, the artist, housewife, the bigot, the investor, and both the politician and the excessively pious.[1] The resulting disorientation associated with a diagnosis of social disconnection is pervasive. Columnist George Will (2021) states that "America has always had winners and losers. This is different, and I don't quite know why" (at 4:29). Obama speechwriter, Jon Favreau (2023), said with respect to addressing the phenomenon at the core of right-wing populism, "I don't know what to do… I don't have any good solutions here" (at 45.22). Former Treasury Secretary and Harvard president, Larry Summers, commented that "the answers here lie more in the realm of sociology than they do in economics" (in Kahloon, 2023, par. 12).

It is the premise of this paper that a term like 'social disconnectedness', as presently employed, is inadequate to service a competent comprehension of the psychopathy presently disrupting leading western democracies, and the US in particular. Addressing this inadequacy is important because it is increasingly apparent that populist disconnectedness cannot be considered an inchoate emotional ailment; rather it is a systemic and expanding feature of technological capitalist society; it therefore is critical to begin a process of effectively 'mapping' the experiential landscape into which we advance. This paper will identify three features of the disconnectedness at the core of right-wing populism that coalesce, producing a distinctive level of intensity and reaction; the resulting disaffection merits a coherent categorization/articulation of disconnection with politically disruptive effects. It is to the benefit of social science scholarship to recognize this articulation of social disconnection, as well as the distinguishing features that give it shape.

2. 'Social Disconnection'… a Synonym for Marx's 'Alienation'?

The formal identification and categorization of profound social disconnection in society is hardly a new endeavor. In 1844 Karl Marx's (1932) described the mass experience of social disconnectedness that was the result of the individual being indifferently integrated into a novel industrial production operation as well as being subject to the dispiriting imperatives of consumption. The reader will note how the contemporary characterization of social disconnectedness plaguing society easily encompasses Marx's identification of the individual as becoming summarily alienated from the physical and social world, and from reality itself; a being whose *raison-d'etre* had devolved to the routine maintenance of the material self (p. 31). Indeed, as Sayers (2011) points out, 'alienation' is one of the few terms from Marxist theory to have gained common use in ordinary speech. Presently, the routine use of such terms as 'social disconnectedness' and 'social isolation', whether by design or not, obscures the term 'alienation' from its ideological roots. Nevertheless, as regularly referenced in popular discourse, the term 'alienation' (just like 'social disconnectedness') is presently utilized for conditions far afield from any consequence of Marx's capital-labor rivalry.

There is a hesitancy to readily link the social disconnectedness of the present era to the historical division of labor and the process of production; it may very well stem from the fact

that the capital/labor relationship would 'appear' to be an imperfect fit for much of the contemporary capitalism in developed economies. Far beyond alienation experienced by an historical 'proletarian', the middle class that is suffering a profound sense of social disconnection at present has the unprecedented access to capital privileges found in developed economies (i.e., revolving credit, 401ks, federally-assisted mortgages, etc.); and this could only apply to the fragment of the mid-19th century US labor force which Frederik Engel's described as an "aristocracy of the wage-working class" (Engels, 1969 [1845], 7). But indeed, upon scrutiny, the relevance of classical alienation to the multifaceted contemporary expressions of social disconnectedness is readily apparent. The oft-heard protest of the core of right-wing populism with respect to eroding pillars of the social landscape (i.e., gender, ethnicity, theology, livelihood, etc.) directly harmonizes with the *The Communist Manifesto*'s prognostication of the "uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation under capitalism [that] will create a perpetually accelerating dynamic in which all traditional social relations will melt into air" (Marx & Engels, 1848, 7).

Despite the description of social fragmentation in mid-19th century Marxist theorization, it would nevertheless be instructive to more clearly link classical alienation as a critical driver to disruptive contemporary events; these contemporary events seem to exceed the simple dissolving of "traditional social relations…[melting] into air" (i.e., mass supported violent coups, sustained litany of middle class massacres by 'disconnected' members of the mainstream, calls for a militarized immigrant response in a country with a falling fertility rate, frank suggestions to suspend the constitution, etc.). But there is a "lack of a clear boundary between alienation and other Marxist concepts that readily apply to the socially disconnected core of right-wing populism, such as commodity fetishism and reification, and to anomie, social disintegration, individualization and similar sociological constructs" (in Øversveen, 2021, 442). To successfully re-synchronize and re-apply Marx's alienation to contemporary consumer culture, alienation must conform to "an expanded view of production in which production, human subjectivity, nature and society are fundamentally intertwined" (Ibid, 445). And alienation must conform to the practice of mature consumerism which was at an inflection point in the 1960s with respect to the reproduction of culture as an explicitly commercial process (see Mandel, 1975; Denning, 1990). In sum, one can readily conclude that Marx's alienation, once a fitted piece of footwear designed for a time and place, has understandably grown loose and cumbersome from overuse and travel into subsequent landscapes of social estrangement to which it is momentarily ill-fitted (and routinely called 'social disconnectedness'). The remainder of this paper seeks to refine the comprehension, and thus definition, of the social disconnectedness specifically animating the populist center of contemporary right-wing conservatism in the US.

3. The Distinguishing Characteristics of a Dynamic Articulation of 'Social Disconnection'

While the systemic origins of a vast pan of social disconnectedness effecting all quarters of society bespeaks similar experiences and sensations, how one subgroup responds as opposed to another—like the Darwinian creature—conforms to the specific resources and

rationalizations pertaining to that subgroup's social positioning in the environment. So, what are the characteristics of the dynamic brand of social disconnection presently animating the nucleus of populist right-wing conservatism? Three interconnected and overlapping facets of this social disconnectedness merit identification as a systemic phenomenon; these characteristics distinguish it 'within' (not 'from') the vast shapeless body of alienated discontent embedded in the term 'social disconnectedness'; these characteristics also provide some modernizing 'flesh' on Marx's theoretical skeleton of an alienated society beleaguered by an "uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions" (Marx & Engels, 1848, 16).

3.1 Alienation Characterized as a Prominent Incapacity to Effectively Articulate a Conceptual 'Us'

Contrary to historical convention for a group espousing an aggrieved 'us', there is a dramatic lack of historical identity criteria by right-wing populists that defines this 'us' from which they are 'disconnected' (i.e., not language, cuisine, spatial territoriality, architecture, historicity, daily personal interaction, or definitive set of collective practices). While white Christian nationalism is often casually referenced as the beleaguered 'us', it is almost exclusively termed so by its critics; this is because in materialist consumer culture white Christian nationalism is not an outward rallying point that can be articulated as a definitive set of practices or traits that specifically distinguishes the core of right-wing populism and its specific complaints. Prominent amongst the representatives of 'otherness' to the core of right-wing populism are cosmopolitan liberals, 'immigrants', and non-whites. But these targeted groups contain large quantities of whites, nationalists, and Christians—the latter is especially the case with respect to domestic non-whites and immigrants. To be sure, amongst the core of disaffected right-wing populists skin colour, gender, religious practices are certainly emotive topics, but they are 'not'— nor cannot— be formally highlighted or articulated as an operationalizable political proposition in frank terms that can outwardly serve as a functional nucleus of association (such has been the definitive cultural effect of now iconic civil rights conflicts that have been formally integrated into the US constitution). The result for the core of right-wing populism is that there is no set of collective practices that perfunctorily catalyze an 'us' amongst its members. This form of disorientation is a cardinal feature of the postmodern era that precludes metanarratives and their fixed identities (see Foster, 1983).

3.2 Alienation Characterized as a Consummate Loss of Political Identity/Status in Place/Time

Social disconnectedness at the core of right-wing populism at present has an unusual temporal and spatial conceptualization. One can experience myriad forms of social disconnectedness and not refer necessarily to any causal era, cultural place, or specific set of actors (i.e., social separation derived from depression, chronic illness, longevity, etc.). This differs from estrangement articulated by conventional political forms. The political articulation of disconnectedness invariably articulates specific environmental problems, rationalizes specific grievance, and legitimizes performative retaliation towards specific actors in the landscape. This is what is meant when referencing the loss of political identity/status in 'place/time'. The selling of an ostensibly therapeutic response for social

disconnectedness based on what 'can' be is most effective when employing simplistic references to existing concrete and historical social forms that have already been affirmed as idyllic or iconic. Thus, the *Make American Great Again* (MAGA) slogan of right-wing populism is an explicit reference to a preceding period of esteemed social forms that have been eroded.

One of the most prominent theories in explaining the psychological triggers of nostalgia first proposed by Fred Davis (1979) is the so-called discontinuity hypothesis. The theory states that "the nostalgic evocation of some past state of affairs always occurs in the context of present fears, discontents, anxieties, or uncertainties…that pose the threat of identity discontinuity" (p. 34). Strengthening self-esteem and identity, giving meaning to an uncertain present through reference to the past, and reinforcing social connectedness are specific functions of nostalgic memory during periods of insecurity (see Sedikides et al., 2004). The act of looking towards the past is not undertaken with a wide-angle observational lens but rather employs a "telephoto lens" to evoke specific partisan contrasts with a problematic present (p. 31). Thus, corresponding to MAGA is the term '*Trente Glorieuses'* (the Glorious Thirty years from 1946-75) coined by corresponding political actors in France (Fourastié, 1979; Caron, 2013; Financial Times, 2017); or the expanding political base in Russia channeling nostalgia for the Soviet Union (i.e., Mazur, 2015; Chaisty & Whitefield, 2022; Esanu, 2022); and most notably Brexit's nostalgic *Take Back Control* slogan by the conservative wing of Great Britain's political spectrum. The importance of specificity in place/time with respect to the nostalgia at the core of right-wing populism is interesting, for it does 'not' refer to alienation from values embedded in the larger foundational historiography of the US. MAGA's reference to the 'greatness' of America does not refer to the liberation from 18th century British imperialism, the frontier expansionism of 19th century 'Manifest Destiny', the Protestant work ethic, or more importantly, does it nostalgize the early 20th century struggle against inferior industrial wages and working conditions of the proletarian. Nor does the 'greatness' refer to compromised iconic (often constitutional) ethics (i.e. access to the ballot box, freedom of speech, equal protection, etc.). Rather, Trump supporters distinguish themselves (72%) over all other political demographic groups when attributing the perceived decline of America society specifically to the post-1950s– the period to which the populist slogan wishes to presumptively resurrect (Public Religion Research Institute, 2016, 7; also see Gaston & Hilhorst, 2017; Gaston, 2018). Thus, the problematic form of social disconnectedness at the center of the populist right-wing is a distinctly *time-specified point of departure* perceived to be within the living memory of its older adherents. Therefore, the sponsoring means of disconnection *since this period* is critical to comprehending the genesis and trajectory of the politically destabilizing form of disconnection presently at the core of right-wing populism.

3.3 Alienation Perceived as a Consequence of Competitive Displacement

The sense of social disconnection at the core of right-wing populism attributes its isolation to an incremental process of displacement by an ill-defined conception of 'others' (now casually referenced as 'White Displacement Theory'). But this fear of disconnection through involuntary separation is exotic in historical terms; this displacement by 'others' is not in

terms of territory (segregation); neither is it expressed in terms of labor participation (occupational displacement); neither is it in terms of political representation or material status–for in all these criteria the socially disconnected core of right-wing populism is dramatically overrepresented in political representation and wealth when compared to those they target as threats. Neither is this sense of displacement simply one of a purposeful scheme by racial 'others' to alter national demographics by the sheer weight of numbers, for a lower fertility rate is a routine feature of high-income capitalist development on an international scale that is experienced by whites and non-whites alike (i.e., the most dramatic examples being 'non-white' Japan, South Korea, Singapore, etc.).

Unique in history, the alienation at the core of right-wing populism is reacting to being displaced from an almost singular perch on the summit of esteemed middle-class imagery in the visual electronic mass media. With its focus on capital-sponsored imagery as identity, contemporary right-wing populism in the US may be the first time since the establishment of industrial society that a mass movement for empowerment—believing itself to have an increasingly violent mandate— stems from a comparatively empowered middle class itself; a belligerent mass movement that does not include or advocate for the most materially and institutionally deprived demographics of society, and a belligerent mass movement that is strongest in physical environments where there are comparatively scarce local threats who are perceived as agents of displacement (see Sides & Citrin, 2007; Ivarsflaten, 2005; Rothwell & Diego-Rosell, 2016). Since the social disconnectedness reflected in terms of mass market imagery is dependent on a ubiquitous mass media, this form of social disconnectedness could 'only' be a product of the consolidating industrial urban societies of the mid-late 20th century.

De Oliver (2021) has introduced the term 'emporia' so as to extricate the pattern of estrangement represented by the simultaneous presence of these three articulations of social disconnectedness; such a term usefully distinguishes the resulting condition of estrangement from the defocused smorgasbord of popular applications of the term 'alienation' or 'social disconnectedness' in general speech. Emporia is defined as a belligerent form of identity instability (profound individuation) in a consumer culture 'mass-mediated' by technology that is dependent on heterogenous and transient cultural forms (Note 2). Atypical of the generalized experience of social disconnection beyond the core of right-wing populism, the resulting estrangement is hardly reclusion, disengagement, or apathy; rather it is a politically destabilizing belligerence in an increasingly globalized medium of capitalist society that is proving socio-politically disruptive.

4. Tracing the Formation of Emporia as a Contemporary Psychopathy in Need of Recognition

The previous section described three peculiar articulations of social disconnectedness that, while not unique to the core of right-wing populism in the US, are particularly intense and pervasive within this political segment. These three varieties of social disconnectedness are collectively termed 'emporia'; they are (1) alienation as a prominent incapacity to effectively articulate a conceptual 'us', (2) alienation as a consummate loss of political identity/status in place/time, and (3) alienation perceived as a consequence of competitive displacement. This

section traces the 20th century emergence and mutual dependence of these specific articulations of disconnectedness within the concept of 'emporia', affirming the need and function of this collective term so as to advance comprehension of the current political disruption attributed to social disconnectedness.

a. The genesis of 'alienation as an unprecedented inability to articulate a conceptual "us"'.

It is not coincidental that MAGA's referencing of the 1950s corresponds to a novel physical environment that would become the principal place of residence for the US: middle-class suburbia. The dramatic explosion of US housing starts in the 1950s represented the rapid relocation of the spatial and environmental center of American life. This demographic shift was confirmed in 1970, as this was the first decennial census indicating that residence in the suburbs then represented the majority of the US population. And the premiere demographic status at the initial consolidation of the suburbs in terms of income, access to capital, institutional agency, and general cultural deference was that of the white male. And thus, decades later, there is much to learn about the contemporary sense of disconnectedness at the core of right-wing populism by looking at the birth of this now iconic residential form; for the 1950s middle class suburb possessed novel cultural properties that would disproportionately confront the benchmark cultural identity around which it was initially constructed.

Middle-class suburbia was/is an environment where locality is not only radically marginalized in terms of the reproduction of social identity, but so too the suburbs were temporally extricated from the historical flow of identity-confirming landscapes. As de Oliver (2021) describes, the middle-class household that emerged en masse in the 1950s was 'not' based on a pre-existing ethnicity that was distinguished by language – a fundament of historical group cohesion and identity. While clearly English-speaking predominated in the middle-class suburb, the use of a specific language did not separate this new residential place from other national groups or other suburban populations within the country; nor was linguistic distinction affirmed by face-to-face communication in an environment increasingly devoid of personal interaction or integration with neighbors (see Putnam, 1995). Moreover, much of the conglomerate populations of European ancestry groups that were initially allowed to relocate to the suburbs had only recently acquired the English language themselves. Thus, language did not bear the historical bonding function of old. And the lack of a shared linguistic tradition for the populations of European ancestry groups relocating to the suburbs indicates that language was not a galvanizing feature of suburbanized consumerism's articulation of identity.

Neither was the historical occupation of a specific expanse of territory a galvanizing aesthetic of identity for middle-class suburban culture (such as, for example, 'highlanders', 'southerners' or 'Yankees', 'British'); for the suburbanite was 'not' perceptible as a singular actor fluidly blended into the historical flow of time by its inhabitants; the suburbs were entirely novel and haphazard creations of anonymous residential capital that emerged with little apparent logic attached to their 'cultural' membership. Indeed, the historical anonymity of the new suburban 'community' was underlined by the modular components of the housing stock itself, which were entirely derived from industrial mass production carried out in distant

locations that serviced innumerable other such suburbs. Up until the 20th century middle-class suburb, any one of several white ethnic ancestries was still a functional identity form. The 'skin-colorism' so prominent in order to gain access to the early middle-class suburb occasioned the homogenization (and thus anonymization) of numerous European ancestry groups that had been theretofore prominent in the early 20th century urbanism of the US. 'Whiteness', as a status of privilege, was raised up the suburban flagpole after having been definitively stripped of its cultural and community-forming fibers, replacing historical ethnicity as a coalescing agent with what was perceived by many to be monotonous overconsumption.

Cuisine had theretofore represented another historical marker of traditional identity. But middle-class suburbia reflected no historical cuisine, indeed the suburban lifestyle increasingly eroded the central feature of family cohesion and affirmation: the family meal (i.e., Miller, 1995; Murcott, 1997; Gallagher, 2014). Much like architecture, suburban cuisine consisted of a mélange of prepared foods themselves industrially produced and reflecting no singular historical group or tradition or particular suburb. The guild membership of the medieval city exemplified how economic profession could serve as an urban nucleus around which a distinctive identity and purpose could coalesce. But the mid-1950s suburb did not represent a distinctive or representative profession or industry. Indeed, economic livelihoods 'within' the early suburbs were strictly regulated or prohibited by zoning ordinances that precluded industry or skills as a nucleus of connectedness, rendering the new spatial environment uniquely a place of residence. Indeed, the incapacity of the suburbs to generate coalescent identity was expressed by the emergence of what Relph (1976) called 'placelessness' – a dilution of the distinctness of places such that they "not only look alike but feel alike and offer the same bland possibilities for experience" (p. 90). Placeless environments are composed of the interchangeable output of mass production, the base components of suburban residence.

A beleaguered state of trying to remain socially 'connected' in a consolidating suburban consumer culture devoid of historical landmarks of identity is particularly intense amongst those groups whose identity was recently seen as the cultural benchmark; white patriarchy dominated all premiere decision-making roles, high-paying 'suburban-affording' jobs, receipt of institutional agency, and routine deference in public and private spheres. All other demographic groups represented either a supportive reference point or a degenerate contrast to the white male benchmark. Presently, support for a reinforcement of historical white male patriarchy is disproportionately concentrated at the populist center of right-wing conservatism. The integrity and coherence of this identity amidst the dispersive systemic forces that the rise of middle-class suburbia represented is central to this demographic segment's complaint; for as early as 1951 C. Wright Mills would write, with respect to the aesthetically homeless white collar man, his "isolated position makes him excellent material for synthetic molding at the hands of popular culture… [who] is especially open to the focused onslaught of all the manufactured loyalties…of those who live in worlds they never made" (p. xvi).

The collective result was/is an unprecedented difficulty to articulate a conceptual 'us' in historical terms.[3] Therefore, note the extraordinary vagueness with respect to

group/self-identification in the induction pledge of the militant populist group, the *Proud Boys*, when publicly reciting 'I am a western chauvinist'—as if the group's targeted antagonists or their loathed lifestyles weren't fundamentally 'western' in origin, and as if these targeted groups themselves weren't also predominantly avowed partisans of western culture. This inability to effectively articulate a conceptual 'us' may be central to explaining the extraordinary reliance on an authoritarian personality as a nucleus of association to service the need for a readily articulatable 'us' (thus the term 'Trumpism').

b. The genesis of 'alienation as a consummate loss of political identity/status in place/time'.

The disorienting effects of mid-20th century consumer culture with respect to white male patriarchy was far more comprehensive than a comparative inability to conceptualize an historical 'us'. There is a place/time component that is specific to the late 20th century and allows for the identification of actual antagonists and manifest grievance. This place/time component pertains to the need to replace identity-forging components within the consumer culture which have been anonymized in the placeless landscape of modern consumption. By its being a common window out from the increasingly isolated industrial middle-class household, the visual electronic mass media increasingly became the arbiter of cultural identity in industrial society, promoting social success and personal distinction through a common visual imagery featuring vigorous consumption.

The implications of a new socializing 'central place' were dramatic for middle class identities which were only recently detached from their historical moorings in language, territoriality, aesthetics, et cetera to a medium sponsored by commercial capital; the very identity of 'middle class' was increasingly defined by the ready access to the visual electronic mass market and the capacity and disposition to vigorously subject oneself to its commercial messaging. From its inception the new industrial middle-class identity was subject to the mercurial antics of corporate capital in its quest to expand the array of marketable aesthetics—a process of social change now measured in months and years rather than centuries. As opposed to identities seated upon a broad platform of time, space, and organic practice, there will be unforeseen consequences when identity is reduced to one of many commodified images awash in the transient medium of television's postmodern display. With a flick of a wrist or the tap of a finger on mass access technology by either consumers or distributors, the message is changed, the aesthetics scrambled, the disorientation fundamental, as middle-class identity became increasingly rearticulated, shaped, condensed, and placed in the outbox of corporate boardrooms. Taylor (1987, 103) argues that television was "the first cultural medium in the whole of history" to present the past as a "stitched-together collage of equi-important and simultaneously existing phenomena largely divorced from geography and material history and transported to the living rooms and studies of the West in a more or less uninterrupted flow." Fiske (1987, 307) writes that the news was exemplary of television discourse in that it "lays no claim to the unifying action of a single imagination, but instead flaunts the diversity of the world that it covers and creates[.]" As a means to convey culture, television was both supreme and indispensable after the 1960s (i.e., Meyrowitz, 1985; Spigel, 1992).

MAGA's nostalgia for the 1950s bespeaks the place/time dimension that is/was fundamentally associated with the visual electronic mass media—a visual medium that is/was unprecedented in accessing the general population where it lived. The nostalgia expressed in *Make American Great Again* pertains 'not' to the manifest lived experience of white male patriarchy in the 1950s but to the 'imagery' associated with white male identity of the period. As indicated in Figure 1, the 1950s white male identity conveyed in the visual electronic mass media was the inaugural mass market identity of the expansive middle-class consumer culture; it represented a momentary period of stability and foundational integrity for a medium that, so as to drive consumption decades later, would accommodate a never-ending kaleidoscope of challenging lifestyles and demographic examples of non-white male success. Referring to the individual's increasing incapacity to adjust to rapid technological change and abundance of 'choices', the term 'Future Shock' was developed by Alvin Toffler (1970). The disorientating nature of this medium elicits particularly intense resentment amongst the populist center of right-wing conservatism who complain of the stressful process of continuous adaptation from one transitory set of social norms to another, and of a political medium that prioritizes seemingly menacing but evanescent issues over coherent values and triumphal serenity (see Gaston, 2018, 2; also see Gaston & Hilhorst, 2017, 37 & 85). For those whose superior social positioning was associated with a seemingly foundational set of aesthetics, 'choice' is indistinguishable from 'inconstancy' and 'precarity'; for this demographic segment such changes represent involuntary disconnection from what was not only conventional and historical, but from the very social underpinnings of existence itself. Figure 2 portrays the wide range of sweeping aesthetics that were contested as the 'Golden Era of Capitalism' came to a close in the late 1960s; thus, for example, the 'melting pot' was challenged by multiculturalism, the traditional patriarchal family contrasted with the single-parent (usually female-headed) household, and nationalism was contested by supranationalism; these were but a small sampling of numerous conceptions of presumptive normalcy and propriety embedded within an increasingly commercialized patriarchy centered on the white male in the middle of the 20th century. Even the broad valuation of work itself as fundamental to success had been demoted. In 1987, 29 per cent of the US population agreed that the notion of hard work offers little guarantee of success; by 1991 the figure increased to 44 per cent. A general consciousness of the erosion of the Protestant work ethic was evidenced by the fact that two-thirds of the population thought that hard work and sacrifice were not considered by many to be essential to success (Times Mirror Center, 1991, 31; 1994, 33; also see Yankelovich, 1981). These aesthetics represented symbolic challenges in the electronic public square that would promote a sense of demotion and disconnectedness to any identity enjoying managerial privilege—namely white male patriarchy. To restate the matter, MAGA's nostalgia for the 1950s pertains to the brief period of image stability conveyed in the visual electronic mass media, bearing the imprimatur of 'normalcy' and legitimacy by that fact alone. To be sure, the formalized and normalized race and gender restrictions of the 1950s are historical practices that do not outrage the contemporary core of right-wing populism, but those practices existed 'prior' to the 1950s, and thus the utility of those practices do not themselves represent a simple rationale for the era's prominence to contemporary right-wing populism. The 'iconization' of the 1950s by *Make America Great*

Again pertains to a viable 'consumerist' white male identity. The power and esteem of this identity is 'not' based on objective behavioral or physiognomic characteristics of 'others'; rather the power of this identity is perceived to be its stability within a consumerist kaleidoscope of changing aesthetics that is fundamental to the visual electronic mass media.

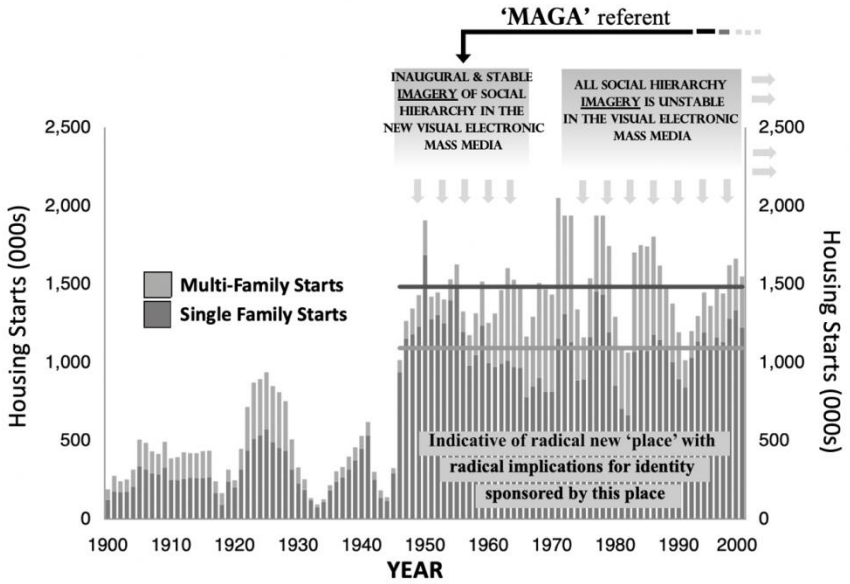

Figure 1. Total US Housing Starts, 1900-2000 and a new environment with a new 'central place'

Source: Base data from US Department of Commerce (in Harvard Joint Center for Housing Studies, 2000, 8).

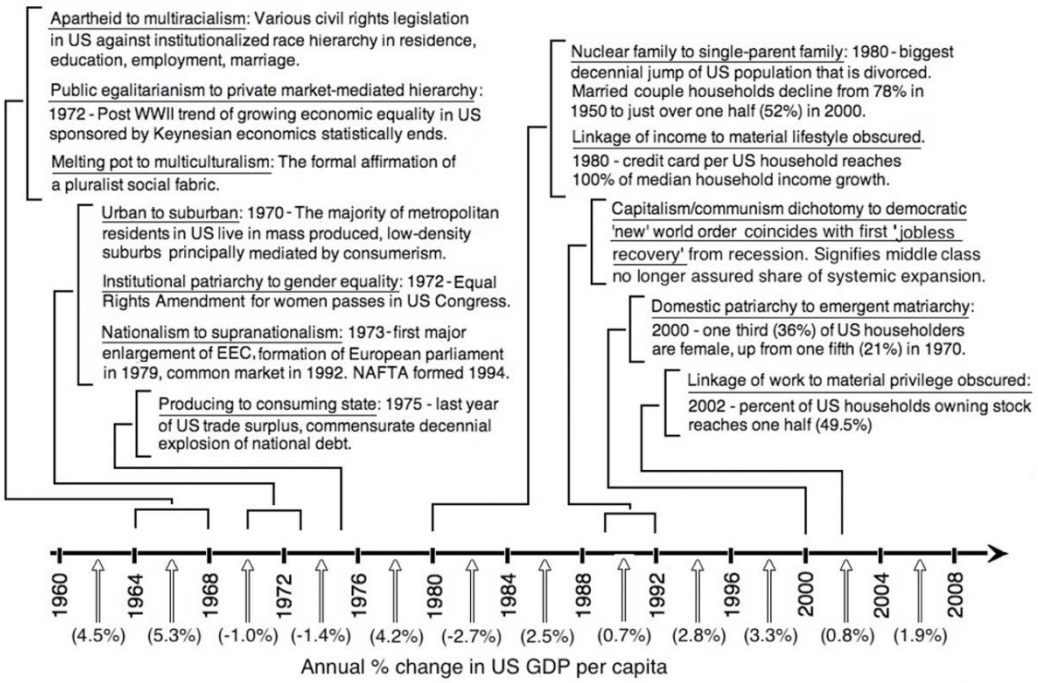

Figure 2. Economic contraction and the corresponding demotion of hierarchy-forming and reality-shaping aesthetics

Source: de Oliver 2021, p. 11.

The identification of 'media image viability' as the elemental rationalization for MAGA's nostalgia explains why previous eras of white male privilege do not serve the contemporary core of right-wing populism's nostalgic purposes. A stable consumerist identity is 'not' an historical identity that can be seated in some pre-1950s era of US history. The symbolic depictions of pre-1950s white male privilege cannot service the manifest needs of the contemporary mainstream core of right-wing populism. Pre-1950s depictions would have to be rooted in the ideological radicalism of the 18th century revolutionary era, or the violent frontier individualism and/or agrarianism of the 19th century, or the muscular unionism of the early 20th century; all these historical depictions of white masculinity either fail to empower, service or reflect the manifest realities of the present core of right-wing populism. A contemporary MAGA fist thrust skyward for ideological liberation, farming individualists, or muscular unionism would have little galvanizing effect. The public pledge of induction into populism's *Proud Boys* connotes this resentful anchoring to the discomforting here-and-now, 'I refuse to apologize for creating the modern world'. In contrast, the lionized MAGA identity of the 1950s white male earns a viable capitalist wage, is reliably afforded credit and routinely manages debt, practices conventional political participation, and receives peremptory deference in family, work, and cultural representation. As opposed to the increasingly ephemeral promenade of multicultural identities following in its wake, the formative mass media identity featuring white male patriarchy presently appears to the core of right-wing populism as foundational, possessing a presumptive authenticity that subsequent and manufactured representations cannot— for no imagery from the 1950s conveyed an 'apology' for the post-WWII hegemonic American society leading the world through 'The Golden Era of Capitalism'. The collective result is one of the three forms of alienation within the concept of emporia: alienation characterized as a consummate loss of identity/status in actual place/time.

c. The genesis of 'alienation perceived as a consequence of competitive displacement'.

Unlike society in general which sponsors innumerable forms of interaction between individuals, the marketplace is comprised of products and is governed by one interactional principle: competition. Once the principal sponsoring medium of identity has been fully coopted by the capitalist marketplace, it follows that consumers will reify waves of threatening—albeit abstract—groups associated with their commodified imagery in the marketplace. And the imperative of marketplace competition must necessarily adrenalize the clash. Stylistic novelty is the perpetual stimulator of consumption; and once one's conception of 'us' had been stripped of its historical moorings in language, territoriality, aesthetics, et cetera to be fully borne by an electronic mass media, the perpetual need to stimulate and re-stimulate consumption would incentivize the injection of alternative social aesthetics (see figure 2). And if the promotion of consumption through novelty or variety is not enough, the cyclical growth and stagnation phases of commerce assure unavoidable waves of contention between polarized consumers beyond the marketplace; this is exemplified by the inaugural mass-market consumption model of the 1950s centered around corporate-sponsored white male patriarchy in comparably homogenous demographic communities. For this demographic group, the effects of any systemic economic downtown in productivity would be dramatic, as

new consuming and cheaper labor markets were sought out to stimulate consumption. And that is what occurred in the late 1960s and early 1970s at the conclusion of a period commonly referred to as 'the Golden Era of Capitalism' (1950-70); note the notable decline in US GDP per capita at the bottom of figure 2. The systemic imperative of greater tolerance towards 'others' in the US (meaning multicultural aesthetics in the marketplace) was necessary in the 1960s so as to operate an increasingly competitive globalizing economy with both increasingly diverse labor forces and consuming markets. What is systemically viewed as simple market expansion by the economist is culturally seen by the core of right-wing populism as domestic elites using 'external others' to facilitate competition and displacement of domestic white males; this is the very definition of 'White Displacement Theory' (see Darby, 2019; National Public Radio, 2021).

The notion of an external group of 'others' with the objective to incrementally 'disconnect' and marginalize representatives of white male patriarchy from what they feel to be their patrimony–indeed from existence itself–is a reflexive miscomprehension fundamental to the mathematics of market participation. To make a celestial metaphor, the perceptual fate of a benchmark identity is like an aesthetic singularity in an expanding online universe: evaporation. That is to say, a fixed point in an expanding technological medium of infinite diversity (limited only by imagination itself) is fated for a diminishing share of profile and deference; in the intensely visual central place of a novel consumer culture, this is the allegorical imagery of group disintegration, and indeed, annihilation. This problematic perception combines with a marketing imperative to promote lucrative 'individual' consumption as a means of expressing purpose and pursuing happiness. When individual purpose and happiness is prioritized over traditional family and child-rearing, the result is greater individual isolation and a declining fertility rate. Moreover, it is unlikely to be coincidental that the areas with the proportionally higher support for right-wing populism (small rural towns) are conspicuous by their waning fertility rates and the concurrent loss of younger adults who have relocated to urban opportunity. When the expanding diversity of commodified images and diminishing population trends are viewed by right-wing populists through the lens of expedience and insecurity, a simplistic narrative of a demographic conspiracy to supplant white male patriarchy is infinitely more marketable than acknowledging the obvious documentable fact: Successful capitalism prioritizes the reproduction of short-term exchange, not the long-term reproduction of consumers.

There is an eccentric feature of the visual electronic mass media that assures that the competition that it promotes is particularly vehement when identity is one of the marketed aesthetics. And the older demographic nucleus of right-wing populism is disproportionately implicated in that vehemence when acknowledging the fact that individuals over 65 registered 300 percent more time in front of the television than younger cohorts (Gauthier & Smeeding, 2003; Krants-Kent & Stewart, 2007). A critical study was undertaken by Krugman and Hartley (1970) to determine the organic effects of exposure to televised imagery. A transition from beta waves (active logical thinking) to a state of passive reception (alpha waves) was almost instantly induced upon exposure to the television—a transition to what the authors termed "passive learning" that was described as "an absence of aroused resistance" to

new information (p. 188). As a consequence, the television had the ability to impress mutually antagonistic sensibilities loaded with volatile inferences on the passive psyche: esteemed multiculturalism/paternal racialism, single-parent household/nuclear family, cosmopolitan dynamism/rural simplicity, spiritual experimentation/theological certitude, etc. A consequence of this form of assimilation is a powerful antipathy—both conscious and subconscious—with respect to the conventional mass media that passively imports these antagonistic dualities into the psyche; antagonistic dualities that are seemingly unavoidable due to the electronic mass media's comprehensive seizure of society's central place. It is no surprise that the core of right-wing populism expresses the strongest hostility to visual electronic mass media which it qualifies as the "enemy of the people" (Gallup Organization, 2018a, b; Quinnipiac, 2018, p. 29). Additionally, when the compulsion to publicly release the animosity towards normalized 'otherness' is smothered by the emotionally constipating effects of 'political correctness' (see Conway, 2018; PBS NewsHour, 2016; Gaston & Hilhorst, 2017), the subversive need for eruptive catharsis increases. Called "the rebound effect", the expression of a problematic emotion is increased by attempts to suppress it (Wegner, 1988; 1989; Wegner & Schneider, 1989). The result is the transgressive commotion that is emblematic of MAGA gatherings; indeed, it bolsters allegiance to personalities who distinguish themselves by legitimizing the public act of purging this state of anxiety with derisive contempt. Therefore it is not surprising that, in comparison to younger cohorts who demonstrated comparatively better stress-buffering abilities, adults over 65 enjoyed the television less despite their greater voluntary exposure to it (see Depp et al., 2010, p. 173). The result is a particularly distinctive articulation of disconnectedness from the normative universe and its managerial prerogatives, that being alienation as a perceived consequence of competitive displacement by those whose identities have been constructed as bearers of otherness in the visual electronic mass media.

5. Implications and Conclusions

In an era that has now fully been acknowledged as suffused with clinical states of social isolation, this paper has illustrated the need to distil a specific configuration of social disconnectedness so as to comprehend the disruptive impetus presently at the core of right-wing populism. Referred to as 'emporia', this particular configuration of social disconnectedness is closely associated with the emergence of the visual electronic mass media and its appropriation of capitalist society's 'central place' of identity-formation. Indeed, it is the complex socializing role of the electronic mass media as to why Marx's classical articulation of alienation is in need of some re-synchronization to postmodern society; for Marx's mid-19th century critique, however universalizing and calamitous, did not have to contend with the manifest reality of a dramatically ubiquitous electronic mass media with far-flung and capricious dispersal effects on historical forms of identity-formation (language, religion, place, skin-color, ethnicity, etc.). And while the 'purchased identity' of contemporary consumer culture still clearly implicates the class-centric analysis of Marx, it is not constrained by it. The positive relationship between contentment and income diminishes once annual income exceeds $75,000 (i.e., Kahneman & Deaton, 2010; Jebb et al., 2018), indicating an increasingly immaterial component to contentment and engagement that seems

to be linked to representation in the visual electronic mass media. Perhaps the best evidence that it is the instantiated 'image' of 1950s white male patriarchy that fuels right-wing populism's complaint is the fact that MAGA ultimately laments the loss of such privileged imagery; MAGA says nothing about the alienated 1950s patriarchal wage-earner who was already emotionally displaced from the family and stripped of his managerial authority in the household by corporate marketers (see Gilbert, 2006; Ewen, 1976).

What the core of right-wing populism is lionizing with *Make American Great Again* is, in effect, a media expression of what Jean Baudrillard (1994) termed 'hyperreality' – "that being the generation by models of a real without origin or reality" (p. 1) – a simulation taken as its origin; a "hyperreality of simulations in which images, spectacles, and the play of signs replace the concepts of production and class conflict as key constituents of contemporary societies…, [a circumstance where] entertainment, information, and communication technologies provide experiences more intense and involving than the scenes of banal everyday life, as well as the codes and models that structure everyday life (in Kellner, 2020, par. 32).

With respect to 1950s US, the socially disconnected core of right-wing populism eulogizes what Benedict Anderson (1983) ultimately described as an "imagined community". And the significance of the visual electronic mass media to the disconnectedness at the core of right-wing populism closely harmonizes with Marshall McLuhan's (1964) assertion that, rather than any specific message within it, it is "the change of scale or pace or pattern" that a new invention or innovation (like the visual electronic mass media) "introduces into human affairs" (p. 8) that bespeaks its power and importance. The prevalence of this image-centric hyperreality is most apparent by the fact that the socially disconnected core of right-wing populism sees itself as an aggrieved group that is persecuted by society. The fact that targeted demographic groups identified as 'others' do not enjoy corresponding privilege to the core of right-wing populism in the 'real world' is entirely irrelevant to those who feel their imaged representations are experiencing displacement. The affliction of emporia compels one to eclipse the conventional measures of power and privilege (i.e., wage rates, wealth, elite access to capital, representatives in political bodies, territorial dominion, cultural deference, privileged policing, etc.) when identifying social injustice; and it is this failing that bespeaks the need for a dissection of the vast and unwieldy term that is 'social disconnectedness'.

In an evolving world economy increasingly centered on global cities and diverse markets the focal point of these image-disrupting forces is presently on the core of right-wing populism. But this concentration necessarily must shift to additional demographics within the kaleidoscopic consumer landscape of the electronic mass media, impacting broad aspects of domestic and institutional stability. The utility of articulated subsets of social disconnection (such as emporia) becomes apparent in elite labor markets of the world economy. Be it Japan's Satori generation in the 1980s, the *bailan* ('let it rot') or 'Lying flat' demographics in urban China, or even the elemental discontent that presently is driving 'the Great Resignation', the expansive experience of social disaffection rests on a base alloy of isolation, futility, and apparently the need to reject inclusive doctrines. Given the rapid evolution of cyber-connectivity that continues to reformat the imperative of identity, it is unlikely that

current right-wing populism will be the last such movement perturbed by the experience of this combination of alienations that comprise emporia. Identifying the coalescing fibers within the experience of social disconnectedness that have presently grown acute at the core of right-wing populism, therefore, provides some critical illumination to a politically destabilizing phenomenon.

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Notes

Note 1. There are various terms being employed that inconveniently overlap with social disconnection such as ‘loneliness’ and ‘social isolation’. “Social disconnectedness can be characterized by a lack of contact with others. It is indicated by situational factors, like a small social network, infrequent social interaction, and lack of participation in social activities and groups. Perceived isolation, on the other hand, can be characterized by the subjective experience of a shortfall in one's social resources such as companionship and support. Feelings of loneliness and not belonging, for example, indicate a perceived inadequacy of the intimacy or companionship of one's interpersonal relationships compared to the relationships that one would like to have (in Cornwell & Waite, 2009, p. 3). Perceived isolation (loneliness) is subjective; for some individuals, the perception of social resources is entirely unrelated to the actual amount of time spent alone. The casual interchangeable use of these terms in society is not problematic with respect to the analysis of ‘social disconnectedness’ in this paper, as their experience is rarely mutually exclusive of each other.

Note 2. By its spelling and pronunciation, the term ‘emporia’ is a fusion of existing terms of classical Greco-Roman origin that convey a portion of its meaning, such as ‘emporium’ (a large selection of commodities, in this case the increasingly commodified and alienated identities of an intensifying consumer culture), ‘atopia’ (a society whose lack of territorial borders generates anxiety and disaffection), ‘aporia’ (a useful state of puzzlement or doubt, an amorphous inclination to raise objections), ‘dysphoria’ (a general state of unease/dissatisfaction with life). This term is a creation of the author.

Note 3. The reader might very well make the observation that the rivalry between the core of right-wing populism and its perceived antagonists bespeaks overwhelmingly a rural-urban aesthetical divide and ‘not’ the ‘suburban-urban’ aesthetic divide implicit here. But this would be misleading. The dispersal of historically identity-confirming aesthetics that middle-class suburbia’s rise indicates has almost entirely co-opted rural localities. The identity-confirming

capacity of rural locations has dramatically eroded over the last seven decades. The 1950s development of the interstate highway system was instrumental in anonymizing the small towns located between major urban destinations. Moreover, the process of anonymization pertains to the built environment itself; historical commercial town centers have been displaced by enormous ‘big box’ retail structures on the town periphery, with the accompanying expansive parking lots and supplementary strip development (see Kaszynski, 2000). These clusters of franchise businesses are entirely interchangeable with myriad others, and must be considered the definitive feature of the national cultural landscape; but their ultimate effect is to integrate residents of rural communities into the same high-volume consumption rituals and products rooted in the suburban center of North American society (Stone, 1997; Artz & Stone, 2006); thus these commercial clusters that serve as the dynamic core of rural America can neither sponsor discrete identity from suburbia or from each other.