

What people are saying about

Against the Web

Michael Brooks offers us a polemic focused on the battle for ideas. This book is not a discussion of this or that issue but of worldview and narrative. Michael rips away the sophistry inherent in the prevailing right-wing narratives but then offers a humble, explicitly leftist alternative framework. In offering a left framework he also does battle with some of the key toxicities within the US Left that undermine our collective efforts to build a movement for fundamental social transformation. This book left me thinking; which is what I have come to expect from Michael Brooks.

Bill Fletcher, Jr, editor of globalafricanworker.com, former president of TransAfrica Forum, author and activist

Michael called out the nonsense of the so-called Intellectual Dark Web well before anyone else caught onto their cynical games. A brilliant critique of the Right with very sharp insight on some of the shortcomings of the Left, this book is a must-read for anyone looking to understand how dishonest actors spread their propaganda.

Ana Kasparian, host and executive producer of The Young Turks

You don't know it yet, but this is the book you've been waiting for. Reading Michael Brooks' devastating and insightful account of the IDW feels like a breath of fresh air. He meticulously and expertly challenges the shallow platitudes and certainties of a certain



JOHN HUNT PUBLISHING

First published by Zero Books, 2020
Zero Books is an imprint of John Hunt Publishing Ltd., No. 3 East St.,
Alresford,
Hampshire SO24 9EE, UK
office@jhpbooks.com
www.johnhuntpublishing.com
www.zero-books.net

For distributor details and how to order please visit the 'Ordering' section
on our website.

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ISBN: 978 1 78904 230 6

978 1 78904 231 3 (ebook)

Library of Congress Control Number: 2020930635

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Design: Stuart Davies

UK: Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY
US: Printed and bound by Thomson-Shore, 7300 West Joy Road, Dexter, MI
48130

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Chapter One

Meet the New Right: The Intellectual Dark Web and Capital's Contradictions

Everyone is preoccupied by how the online world is shaping politics. The left and many liberals have been deeply concerned with the right's fluency on platforms ranging from YouTube to Instagram to Twitter, and their ability to use these platforms to push their messages and create an overall political narrative. With authoritarian right-wing governments holding power from the United States to Brazil and Hungary to India, the need to understand and overcome these forces is urgent. This book focuses on the Intellectual Dark Web (IDW), a group exercise in collective self-branding that may already be by the wayside. However, the tactics, ideologies, and arguments used by this group remain relevant for understanding the broader center-right and right-wing ecosystem, and the absolutely necessary changes that the left must make to tell its own more appealing and dynamic story.

The IDW is a group of men that Bari Weiss introduced to the world in a 2018 *New York Times* profile titled "Meet the Renegades of the Intellectual Dark Web." According to Weiss the IDW was a group of maverick intellectuals who, feeling locked out by a relatively new and culturally dominant "political correctness," came together to speak truth to the power of the liberal consensus. According to Weiss, the group was quickly taken up by a public hungry for free thinking, and it is certainly true that the two most

prominent members, Sam Harris and Jordan Peterson, were filling auditoriums with admiring fans. By the end of the year, when Amelia Lester called the online magazine Quillette “The Voice of the Intellectual Dark Web” in Politico, everyone likely to read such an article was well familiar with the IDW.

This is how Weiss introduced the IDW in her original piece:

Here are some things that you will hear when you sit down to dinner with the vanguard of the Intellectual Dark Web: There are fundamental biological differences between men and women. Free speech is under siege. Identity politics is a toxic ideology that is tearing American society apart. And we’re in a dangerous place if these ideas are considered “dark.”

Showing a stunning lack of historical awareness—and by the way, the IDW’s stunning lack of historical awareness will be one of the major themes of this book—the subjects of the profile informed Weiss that “a decade ago...when Donald Trump was hosting ‘The Apprentice,’ none of these observations would have been considered taboo.” In reality, both the group’s claim to be a persecuted minority and their depiction of the left as censorious and dominant were hardly new accusations. The conservative framing of American politics around a perceived culture war dates back to at least 1951 when *National Review* founder William F. Buckley, who was in that moment both a segregationist and a vocal white supremacist, released his book *God and Man at Yale*. Though the culture-war specifics might not have been firmly in place in that book, they certainly were by the time conservative philosopher Allan Bloom wrote *The Closing of the American Mind* in 1987. When the movie PCU (starring a bald Jeremy Piven) came out in 1994—10 years before the first season of *The Apprentice* and a full 24 years before Bari Weiss’s piece hit the *New York Times*—these complaints were shop-worn clichés.

So is the IDW just a rebranding of old-style cultural

conservatism? Not exactly, although you might be forgiven for thinking so when you notice that Ben Shapiro is an IDW member in good standing. Shapiro is a religious conservative who believes that Palestinian rights can be disregarded because, as he says in one YouTube clip, “God gave Israel to the Jewish people.” (In the video, entitled “Ben Shapiro: Why Jews Vote Leftist,” a young Shapiro expresses amazement and disgust that most American Jews don’t share this belief.) Like any good fundamentalist, Shapiro is firmly opposed to letting women control their own bodies. He invariably refers to abortion as “killing babies.” He regularly speaks out against “open borders,” gun control, socialism, and even redistributive taxation. In 2003, 2 years after a teenaged Shapiro began writing a nationally syndicated column (the conservative obsession with teen “prodigies” never ceases to amaze), he used it to cheer on the invasion of Iraq. Shapiro could be grouped together with Rush Limbaugh and Sean Hannity as naturally as he is with his IDW comrades-in-arms Sam Harris and Jordan Peterson.

It’s probably Harris, who genuinely does part ways with the Limbaughs and Hannities of the world on a number of core issues, who marks the difference between the IDW and the more old-fashioned right. The Stanford- and UCLA-educated neuroscientist is a warmonger and an apologist for the status quo in many ways I’ll explore as the book goes on, but he has conventionally liberal views on domestic policy issues ranging from abortion to closing the gun show loophole. He supported Hillary Clinton against Donald Trump in the 2016 election. And where Ben Shapiro naively believes that God Himself shares his attitudes toward women and Palestinians, Harris is fiercely secular. Long before there was an Intellectual Dark Web, Harris belonged to a group of intellectuals who collectively branded themselves The New Atheists.

While many of my major intellectual influences are in fact atheists of the old school materialist tradition who analyzed

religion as a cultural force determined by economics and social relations, I was always critical of the obsessive view of atheism as an innately liberating belief system that superseded the material conditions that we all live in and that shape our lives. The New Atheists, and Harris in particular, spent a lot of time obsessing over the problem that people believe “bad things” even as they ignored the real-world forces that might generate those bad beliefs, and in turn, adopted much of the reactionary worldview of their Christian counterparts in the Bush administration, but we will explore Harris’ fixation on “bad ideas” later in the book. For now it’s suffice to say that his prime intellectual contribution to New Atheism was to put a scholarly sheen on the belligerent, hysterical, and ultimately imperial neoconservative foreign policy agenda that defined the American right’s worldview in the Bush era. Seen from this perspective, his current chummy collaboration with Shapiro is not as surprising as it might otherwise seem.

Still, this move to the IDW milieu certainly represents a step down from the New Atheist scene. Christopher Hitchens was a witty and insightful writer whose post-9/11 turn to the right was preceded by a long and honorable history on the left. Richard Dawkins is not *just* a schmuck on Twitter; he’s also a real scientist and a gifted popularizer of evolutionary biology. Daniel Dennett was writing serious academic philosophy long before he started writing for a popular audience.

Compare Hitchens, Dawkins, and Dennett to Harris’ new club, which includes failed stand-up comic Dave Rubin as a charter member. In the original *New York Times* piece, Weiss credulously quotes Rubin when he called himself and the rest of the IDW “just a crew of people trying to have the kind of important conversations that the mainstream won’t.” (If you watch my show, you are undoubtedly reading that quote in the “Rubin voice,” which should make the experience much more satisfying.)

Now, Rubin and I exist in the same media ecosystem, hosting

YouTube shows and podcasts. (In fairness, his show has a larger audience than mine while my show is the infinitely superior program.) I'm the host of *TMBS* (The Michael Brooks Show) and the co-host of *The Majority Report*, which is part of the TYT (The Young Turks) network, as was Rubin's show until he dramatically "left the left" in 2015. My good friend and frequent collaborator Ana Kasparian knew Rubin during his TYT years. The way she tells it, he "left the left" at least as much as a cynical career move as a genuine ideological shift. I believe her. Even if you think his turn toward "classical liberalism" (read: half-baked libertarianism) was completely sincere, though, here's what anyone who watches his show can confirm for themselves: Dave Rubin doesn't belong in the "intellectual" *anything*. He's dumb as a rock. He might as well *be* a rock to judge by how little he bothers challenging the right-wing guests he "has important conversations" with on his show. He talks a lot about having "high-level" conversations about "ideas," but in practice he stares blankly into space while a parade of crackpots and crypto- and not-so-crypto fascists make ridiculous assertions. His idea of having "important conversations" certainly doesn't include talking to anyone who would seriously challenge *him*. He's been dodging debate challenges from *The Majority Report's* Sam Seder for years.

To get a sense of why he's so afraid of Seder, check out how he did in what was supposed to be a friendly chat with an ideological ally, the amiable and IDW-aligned Joe Rogan. On episode 1131 of *The Joe Rogan Experience*, Rubin rants about the evils of government regulation. He and Rogan start out by agreeing that bakers shouldn't have to make cakes for gay people's weddings—gliding over the possible civil-rights implications for legislation all over the country. Rubin, as usual, gets a lot of mileage out of *being a married gay man himself*. The two further agree that left-wing objections to inherited wealth are misguided. But when Rubin says that the government doesn't do *anything* right, Joe Rogan reaches

the point where he can't go along with Rubin's increasingly absurd assertions.

Rubin: Do they do the Post Office well? No! What do they do well?

Rogan: They do the Post Office pretty good, actually.

Rubin: But guess what, if the Post Office closed tomorrow, it would be all right. You'd still get mail. Amazon would—

Rogan (drily): It would suck.

Rubin: No it wouldn't. Amazon would pick—

Rogan: You'd have to send things through UPS, it would cost a lot more...

Rubin: It wouldn't, though. Competition would start kicking in and between UPS, Fed Ex and Amazon and drones and blah blah blah...

Rogan doesn't even make the obvious points about how much Amazon currently relies on the Post Office or how it would be massively unprofitable for private companies to service depopulated rural areas in a post-USPS world without enormously jacking up prices—all excellent reasons to think that it would indeed suck a great deal—but I have a hard time imagining that anyone watching the exchange or listening to it later could have missed the way that Rogan is bringing up practical realities while Rubin is both literally and figuratively hand-waving it all away. It gets even funnier when Rubin tries to back up his childlike belief in the invisible hand by telling a story about ordering live chickens from UPS. Rogan points out that Rubin's story is actually a USPS success story. UPS doesn't deliver live chickens. Flustered, Rubin concedes that his story was about the USPS, but insists that in a libertarian utopia UPS *would* deliver live chickens and that they'd do it even better. He then awkwardly pivots from the postal service to regulation.

Rubin: I'm not saying these things have to be eliminated tomorrow, I'm not even *really* calling for them to be eliminated, but just generally, what problem would you—everything you're building here right now...do you want the government to tell you how to do all these things, and all the regulations that you gotta have your electric wire like this and...

Rogan (slowly): Regulations like that for construction are important, though. You got to make sure that people don't do stupid shit, that you don't have power lines near a water line, and that...

Rubin: But I would put most of that on the builders, though. They want to build things that are good.

Rogan (after making incredulous noises): That's not true. People cut corners *all the time*. You have to have regulation when it comes to construction methods or people are going to get fucked.

Rubin: They cut corners when there are regulations anyway.

Rogan (patiently): They do, but they would do a *lot* more if there weren't regulations. You go to Third World countries and look at construction methods, they're fucking dangerous. That's why schools collapse on kids...

At this point, Rubin backs off again, retreating to an even vaguer version of some undefined libertarian claim about regulation—a claim that he says he likes “intellectually,” whatever that means. (I strongly suspect that it's his way of acknowledging that it's impractical bullshit.)

Rubin will appear from time to time in this book either as an illustration of the bankruptcy of some of the IDW's ideas or as comic relief. But we shouldn't get too fixated on him. In this case, to be fair to Rubin, he's making exactly the same argument that Milton Friedman made for decades. In both the “smart” and “dumb” (Rubin) versions, the claims are equally untenable. This is

also a good illustration of why, if we are going to—as the IDW people obsessively say but seldom do—“steelman” our opponents’ arguments, I will spend less time focusing on Rubin and his various antics than the comedic part of me, and probably many of you, so desperately wants me to do. But don’t worry—there will be some of that. The centrality of Rubin to the IDW’s project undermines its claims to analytic rigor and a culture of intellectual introspection, which is probably why the IDW-aligned website *Quillette* has spent so much time lately isolating Rubin and his silly show. (Rubin has taken this about as well as you’d think.)

It would be easy to spend the book mocking the idiocy of people like Dave Rubin (which admittedly is a core brand proposition for me) and ripping into the hypocrisy of guys like Jordan Peterson, who talk as if they’re being persecuted by the all-powerful Intolerant Left while they hold down a tenured position at a prestigious university (Peterson), host a super-popular podcast (Harris), write best-selling books (Peterson, Harris, Shapiro), and receive loving profiles in mainstream media outlets (all of them). And don’t get me wrong, I *will* do some of that—but I’m primarily interested in a broader and more important project.

For one thing, I want to understand not just what the IDW has in common with previous groups of reactionaries, but what’s new and different about it, since even after the “Intellectual Dark Web” withers away, the new right will continue in the same vein. It will, for instance, continue to hide its conservatism. That Harris is an atheist with some socially liberal domestic policy positions, that Rubin is a married gay man, that even Jordan Peterson never *quite* calls himself a conservative—all of this helps them brand themselves as unclassifiable renegades even as they share elements of an unmistakable anti-left agenda.

They all defend the capitalist economic order domestically and American imperial hegemony globally. They all see themselves as defenders of a poorly understood (and frankly historically

illiterate) construct called “the West.” They all defend what they imagine to be “biology” against feminists, and at least some of them—like Sam Harris, who’s supported the odiously far-right and overly bigoted Charles Murray—defend a similar stance when it comes to race. Crucially, in all of these areas the IDW promotes narratives that either *naturalize* or *mythologize* historically contingent power relations—between workers and bosses, between men and women, they are old school reactionaries.

But, how is the IDW different than what came before?

That’s a bit more complicated, a bit more difficult to explain. I think that the primary difference isn’t to be found in the IDW itself, but in the larger context, the historical moment, that they arose within.

To understand the IDW moment we should look back to April 1917, when Vladimir Lenin returned to Russia from his exile in Switzerland. The train station at which he arrived has long been a symbol of the revolution he went on to lead. But, 100 years later, in his contribution to a series of articles the *New York Times* published to mark the anniversary of that revolution, *Jacobin* editor Bhaskar Sunkara contrasted the political possibility that continues to be represented by St Petersburg’s Finland Station with two contemporary metaphorical alternatives.

“Singapore Station” is the unacknowledged destination of the neoliberal center’s train. It’s a place where people in all their creeds and colors are respected — so long as they know their place. After all, people are crass and irrational, incapable of governing. Leave running Singapore Station to the experts...“Budapest Station,” named after the powerful right-wing parties that dominate Hungary today, is the final stop for the populist right. Budapest allows us to at least feel like we’re back in charge. We get there by decoupling some of the cars hurtling us forward and slowly reversing. We’re all in this together, unless you’re an outsider who doesn’t have a ticket,

and then tough luck.

Sunkara is no uncritical apologist for everything that happened in the years after Lenin arrived at the Finland Station. In his article, he emphasizes “political pluralism, dissent, and diversity” as integral parts of his socialist project. He’s dead right, though, that the pressing threats to democracy in today’s world come from the “decidedly non-Stalinist” forms of authoritarianism represented by Singapore and Budapest Stations.

Like Bhaskar, I believe in Finland Station. I’m also aware that much of the world today does often seem to be pitted between Budapest and Singapore. The 2016 Presidential election in the United States, the struggles within Britain’s political elites over Brexit, and the corporate media faith in modern “Centrist” leaders like Emmanuel Macron all manifest a struggle between these two options. That said, if we see them as irreconcilably opposed, we’ll miss important parts of the larger picture. Go back in the archive and look at Tony Blair’s Home Secretary David Blunkett’s comments on migrants to see that the themes of today’s rightists did not emerge in a magical vacuum. Even if representatives of Budapest sometimes express dissatisfaction with market fundamentalism, the two have more in common than simplistic media narratives reveal. Look no further than the relationship between the “woke” Justin Trudeau government in Canada and the decidedly unwoke government of Brazil’s Jair Bolsonaro. In particular, these two agendas have found ways to not only co-exist but cross-pollinate in emergent forms of right-wing politics—particularly in new and social media.

It’s with this context in mind that I’ll be exploring the IDW. I’ll treat them as a case study in the way that reactionaries have begun to repackage their project of defending traditional hierarchies even as I try to show what a rejuvenated, humane, internationalist, and appealing version of the politics of the Finland Station might look like.

Along the way I'll show exactly what's wrong with the IDW's arguments. Largely ignoring the always easy to dunk on dummy Dave Rubin and/or the bland Weinstein brothers, I'll take aim at the misleading narratives of Shapiro, Harris, and Peterson. Where they naturalize or mythologize social problems, I am going to *historicize* them. I'll critique the inadequate ways that the left has responded to the IDW's challenge and the broader evolution of right-wing ideology that its members represent. Though I firmly reject false equivalencies between well-intentioned but misguided leftists and actively malevolent reactionaries, I don't ignore the way that counterproductive strategies and inadequate analyses have played into the enemy's hands. Finally, I'll sketch out a left-wing vision that might help us meet the challenges presented by the new right by providing those who currently listen to Harris, Peterson, and Shapiro with a better way of understanding the world. Saying that culture-war skirmishes have the effect of distracting us from the economic forces that lie at the root of our problems is true enough, but it's also not enough. The mistakes, excesses, and wrongs of the performatively ultra-woke can't be combated with economic analysis alone. Culture matters. In Marxist terminology, the ideological and cultural superstructure rests on a material base, but that doesn't mean that the latter issues don't have a life—and an impact—of their own, or that we're going to win power by telling people to simply ignore the cultural issues that profoundly impact their lives. What we need to transcend the stale dichotomies of the past is a cosmopolitan vision of global socialist humanism.

In writing this book I took particular inspiration from the Nobel-Prize winning economist Amartya Sen, who, in response to the usual Eurocentric claim that the tradition that produced human rights flowed from Greece through Rome through Europe to America, countered that rather than a story of cultural continuity, the struggle for human dignity has always been

fragmented, multicultural, and global. The West's history is hardly an unbroken chain of progress toward social equality. Instead of inaccurately particularizing the concepts of rights and justice as Western, we should understand that the fight for social equality and justice has arisen, in various forms, in a variety of cultures from ancient to modern times.

While Jordan Peterson talks about “the West” as having discovered individual rights in a way that's so ahistorical that to listen to him you'd think that the UN Declaration of Human Rights was extracted from a speech Achilles gave at the end of the *Iliad*, the cynical promoters of “Asian values” are the other side of the same coin. Putting a minus where the Petersons of the world put a plus, leaders in Singapore and Malaysia have argued that their disregard for individual “liberal” protections—that any socialist must defend—of assembly and free speech and dissent is grounded in Confucian group norms. Sen elegantly and amply demonstrates that there are Asian, African, and Islamic arguments for open societies and free debate. Both the European chauvinist's narrow and bigoted claim that “West is the Best” and the despotic case for “Asian” values should be rejected—not because of some moralistic “taboo,” but because the historical narrative underlying both arguments is a patchwork of nonsense.

Similarly, we should reject *both* the Shapiro/Peterson defense of traditional hierarchies and the misguided attempts of the ultra-woke to improve society by scolding people for holding imperfect ideas in their heads (or for having senses of humor). Wittingly or unwittingly, ultra-woke scolds feed a project of endless fragmentation and standpoint epistemology that, if relied on as a strategy for action, destroys any possibility for collective liberatory endeavor. At the same time, we need a path forward that rejects empirically baseless racial essentialism while avoiding the descent into tone-deaf economic reductionism. This is the only way we will move toward an equitable, compassionate, and truly

global socialist future.

The following framework and synthesis, which borrows from Marx, Fatima Mernissi, Cornel West, Adolph Reed, Bill Fletcher Jr., Mehrsa Baradaran, and many others, begins by grounding the critique of the IDW, the right, and capitalism in material conditions, as understanding these realities is essential to the success of any left project. It then elucidates a liberatory and Internationalist project that has broad cultural appeal and is rooted in an ethos of openness and dynamism, not puritanical moralism.

The Cape Verdean theorist and revolutionary Amilcar Cabral noted that imperialism and colonialism pushed its subjects outside of history, and that the purpose of anti-colonialism was to return the history-making process to colonized peoples. This book is best understood as an act of *historicizing* that integrates an international socialist project to both counter the right's fixation on pop science, hierarchy, and mythology and, ultimately, to build a better world.

However, only a bit more than a year into this joint project, there are already significant fissures inside this aggrieved band of renegades. The two leading lights of the IDW, along with Ben Shapiro and the Weinstein brothers, have left their mark on pop-intellectual culture in the United States and Europe. The way they combined and repackaged the agendas of Budapest and Singapore isn't going anywhere. The group's devotion to affirming capitalism when its legitimacy is under threat, its shared obsession with campus and social media controversies—as we'll see, they manage to get such controversies wrong even when they're right—and their intense interest in IQ and other innate justifications for systemic inequalities is the defining feature of the right-wing project historically and in our specific moment.

from the one promoted by the Canadian academic Jordan Peterson. Where Peterson is as emotionally intense as a tent revival preacher, Harris' speech patterns are usually calm and measured. The impression he works hard to convey is that of a rational man inviting you to face harsh, and often unpleasant, realities.

He even manages to sound like that when he's floating the idea that—while it would be a terrible shame, of course—America might *have to* commit genocide in the Middle East. Here's the passage in *The End of Faith* in which he promotes this notion:

It should be of particular concern to us that the beliefs of Muslims pose a special problem for nuclear deterrence. There is little possibility of our having a cold war with an Islamist regime armed with long-range nuclear weapons. A cold war requires that the parties be mutually deterred by the threat of death. Notions of martyrdom and jihad run roughshod over the logic that allowed the United States and the Soviet Union to pass half a century perched, more or less stably, on the brink of Armageddon. What will we do if an Islamist regime, which grows dewy-eyed at the mere mention of paradise, ever acquires long-range nuclear weaponry? If history is any guide, we will not be sure about where the offending warheads are or what their state of readiness is, and so we will be unable to rely on targeted, conventional weapons to destroy them. In such a situation, the only thing likely to ensure our survival may be a nuclear first strike of our own. Needless to say, this would be an unthinkable crime—as it would kill tens of millions of innocent civilians in a single day—but it may be the only course of action available to us, given what Islamists believe. How would such an unconscionable act of self-defense be perceived by the rest of the Muslim world? It would likely be seen as the first incursion of a genocidal crusade. The horrible irony here is that seeing could make it so: this very perception could plunge us into a state of hot war with any Muslim state that

image

not

available