A direita radical e as narrativas digitais transmídia nos Estados Unidos da América. Entrevista com Mark Potok

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Resumo: Mark Potok é um jornalista, ativista e acadêmico americano, especializado no estudo da direita radical e movimentos violentos. A entrevista foi conduzida por meio de uma série de e-mails no verão de 2021. O objetivo principal desta publicação é divulgar as interpretações pessoais de uma das figuras progressistas mais reconhecidas no cenário da mídia americana. Atualmente, há uma explosão de ideias intolerantes e de violência organizada dentro e fora do contexto digital, que parece ainda não ter atingido seu clímax. As diferentes seções da entrevista tentam lançar luz sobre questões-chave como polarização social, mitologia política, redes sociais, jornalismo tradicional e intolerância violenta.
Palavras-chave: mentalidade conservadora, discurso de ódio, propaganda, Internet, Os Estados Unidos da América

The radical right and the digital transmedia narratives in the United States of America. Interview with Mark Potok

Abstract:
Mark Potok is an American journalist, activist and academic, specializing in the study of the radical right and violent movements. The interview was carried out through a series of e-mails in the summer of 2021. The main objective of this publication is to disseminate the personal interpretations of one of the most recognizable progressive figures in the American media landscape. At present, there is a boom in intolerant ideas and organized violence inside and outside the digital context, which seems not to have reached its culmination yet. The different sections of the interview try to shed light on key issues such as social polarization, political mythology, social networks, traditional journalism and violent intolerance.
Keywords
Keywords / Palabras clave: conservative mentality, hate speech, propaganda, Internet, the United States of America.

Introduction

Mark Potok is one of the leading researchers in the field of far-right studies and conservative political thought in the North American region and Europe. He graduated from the University of Chicago. For more than twenty years, he was a senior official at the Southern Poverty Law Center to try to expose hate groups and to promote human rights and a culture of peace. Potok is a reporter and an editorial commentator who, thanks to the impact of his television and radio interventions, has become a very influential personality. The SPLC project has given Potok the possibility to disseminate content in favor of the civil rights movement and to be a spokesperson for a more just social model. In his long and fruitful journalistic career, his collaborations with USA Today and The Miami Herald stand out.

Figura 1. Mark Potok. Fuente: SPL Center (stio web)

1. Trump Administration and social polarization

From the moment he was sworn into office, Donald J. Trump caused great institutional disorder and serious social unrest with his chaotic discourse and personalist management. Did President Trump lead a radical right-wing movement or

instrumentalize radical groups? What level of power did the right wing of the Republican Party achieve with the electoral victories of President Trump?
Essentially, Trump normalized ideology and behavior that was previously outside the bounds of respectable mainstream discourse. This is what has been characterized as the "Trump effect." To be plain: When Trump did things like say that there were some "very fine people" among the neo-Nazis in Charlottesville, Va., in 2017, he made it acceptable for Americans to push white supremacist and white nationalist ideas. I would not call Trump the "leader" of the American radical right – there really is no leader. But he unleashed white nationalist forces by making people with those inclinations feel that it is perfectly acceptable to push those kinds of ideas in public. There's a fair amount of research showing how his statements made large numbers of people feel they could say and do things in public that were formerly not socially acceptable. The January 6 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol is a good example of that. As to the Republican Party, Trump enabled the emergence of a truly radical wing of the party. The party has been very right wing for decades, but in the last few years it has become so radical that it may eventually collapse, especially as the population of the country becomes more diverse.
President Trump's electoral and institutional messages have been a kind of selective synthesis of Republican conservatism: Warren Harding, Herbert Hoover, Dwight Eisenhower, Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan, et cetera. Does the communication strategy of the Republican Party bear part of the responsibility in the current context of social polarization? Could the rate of increase in social conflict be explained without the impact of social networks and the new uses of the Internet?
I think the Internet and social media have aided the rise of the radical right, but I do not think that they are the fundamental causes. Briefly, that rise is a direct response to major socioeconomic change, not only in the United States but also in Europe and elsewhere. So, for instance, in the United States the changing demographics — the fact that whites will lose their majority here within the next 20 years or so — have created a major backlash among whites who feel threatened by the changes. There are also major economic and cultural changes that have contributed to this backlash. I'm not sure I understand what you mean by the Republican communications strategy. But I am certain that the rise of right-wing commentators like Lou Dobbs, Tucker Carlson and scores of others has greatly contributed to American political polarization. And yes, the Republican Party has also greatly contributed, both by backing the likes of Dobbs and Carlson, and also by allowing their party to become a home to extremists like U.S. Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene.

2. The myths of radical right

Historically, radical narratives have painstakingly constructed a political imaginary and cultural heritage for much of conservative "America." What are the main myths spread through the discourse of the radical right? What types of radical discourse have achieved greater social acceptance?
The main myth of the American far right is the idea that the United States is a nation created by and for Christian white people. That was never true, and of course it is vastly less true today than in the nation's early history. From the very beginning, there were many other cultural and demographic influences. A very important myth that has grown recently is the "Great Replacement" idea — the claim that traitorous elites and others are hard at work trying to replace the native white population with other people. The claim is that these elites, typically seen as liberal or Democratic whites, are even more destructive, and so even more an enemy, than, say, Jews, blacks, Latinos, Asians, immigrants, LGBTQ people, and so on.

The American radical right is also consumed by, and has been for decades, a host of conspiracy theories that push the idea that certain evil people and/or groups are working to destroy what America rightfully should be.

William Peirce Randel affirmed that many propaganda discourses ended up transcending their political juncture thanks to the work of historians. Has the work of conservative historians contributed to socializing the belief system of the radical right? Is there a "battle of the books" today?

The late Samuel Huntington of Yale University propounded the idea of a clash of civilizations, in particular between the Christian and Muslim worlds. Although Huntington was not a white nationalist, his ideas formed the foundation for future white nationalists — the idea that the nation that white European emigrants built in North America is under threat from people who do not look, act, speak, or worship like the rest of us. On a more local level, the work of conservative historians of the American South have greatly contributed to the idea that the South was right in the Civil War, that the South is the most American part of America, and, not parenthetically, that black people got a great deal in America and should quit complaining. There are many other battles of the books as well. The Great Replacement idea, propounded by such European radicals as Jean Raspail and Renaud Camus, is another.

3. The objectives of the radical right

Apparently, radical conservative movements are not homogeneous and are not coordinated with each other. What are the main goals of radical agendas today? Is it possible that such radical agendas can put pressure on legislative processes in the short term?

The main goal of the extreme right is to create a white ethnostate within the United States, very likely in the Northwest, which is the whitest region of the country. Others, even further out, hope to spark a race war that will end with the annihilation of black people and many other minorities. More “moderate” sections of the radical right, like the January 6 insurrectionists, are quite fascistic, in that they very much like the idea of an authoritarian state led by Donald Trump or someone like him. Overall, the radical right dreams of making the United States into a country much more like the one they imagine used to exist — a place where minorities, women, LGBTQ people and others are essentially suppressed and have very little power. In that latter sense, they are making great progress, thanks to the radicalization of the Republican Party, which is now engaged in serious voter suppression and attacks on the fundamental institutions of democracy. In terms of creating a white ethnostate or sparking a race war, no, these agendas will not get any legislative support.

The institutional impact of the Ku Klux Klan was made possible by the cooperation of many individuals who were not part of the organization. William Peire Randel even used the concept of "Klan spirit" to try to explain these conservative synergies. To what extent has the radical right conditioned society as a whole in the recent past? Are the

comparisons between the historic Ku Klux Klan and the current QAnon or Proud Boys groups reasonable?
I think the Klan and formations like the QAnon crowd and the Proud Boys are quite dissimilar. The Klan, at least in the 1860s and the 1920s, its first two "eras," was very much an expression of mainstream American society — white, Protestant and overwhelmingly male. It was supported by leading politicians and intellectuals around the country. That is vastly less true of contemporary groups like the QAnon believers, whose conspiracy theories are ridiculous even in the eyes of the vast majority of Republicans, and the Proud Boys, who are well known to all Americans as a gang of violent street thugs and little more.

4. The alliance between fundamentalism and conservatism

Since the first third of the 20th century, the Christian right has been closely linked to radical political organizations. What are the reasons why conservative church organizations end up taking on radical political discourse? Are conservative church organizations disoriented in the current political landscape?
Because of reactionary doctrines that have taken root in the church in many places — the idea that homosexuality is a disgusting practice that ought to be suppressed by society, and concept that abortion is actually the murder of children, the claim that Islam is not a real religion but just a bloodthirsty doctrine of conquest, and so on. The fact that many people today are highly critical of certain aspects of Christianity has also caused many churches and church leaders to veer further and further to the right in a kind of defensive reaction.
In the second half of the 20th century, the Christian right has enjoyed great popularity thanks to the phenomenon of tele-preaching. Did the Christian communication discourse get a large following for conservative activism? Are the current conspiracy theories of the radical right spreading among Christian communities outside the traditional news channels?
The Christian Right has been important in helping spread the idea that traditional "American" civilization is under attack by a constellation of forces. It has been a key contributor to a kind of paranoia among white Christians. Parts of the Christian Right, in particular the anti-abortion hardliners, also helped normalize the idea that it is righteous to murder enemies like abortion providers in "defense" of the unborn. The Christian Right has also been the leader, and in many ways the creator, of the incredibly vicious attacks on LGBTQ people over the last 30 or 40 years. And yes, conspiracy theories do spread, very rapidly, in Christian Right circles across the United States, largely through social media, certain cable television channels, and in speeches and other in-person gatherings.

5. Journalists and historians in the face of hate speech

The work of journalism is usually very controversial and undervalued in current times: the crisis of the traditional model, fake news, social networks, change in information consumption habits, et cetera. Does progressive journalism make a mistake in considering that democracy is an irreversible process? Does conservative journalism underestimate the effects of socio-political phenomena triggered by fake news and hate speech?
I don't think that progressive journalism takes democracy for granted; on the contrary, many progressive American journalists right now see American democracy as being very much under threat, or even in crisis. With conservative journalists, it's not so much that they

underestimate the effects of fake news and hate speech. It's more that they really don't care. They are willing to say almost anything if they think it will help build the strength of the far right in American politics. Most of them don't believe the COVID vaccine doesn't work — but they are willing to contribute to mass death if it helps their nefarious cause.

Consumers of conservative media tend to view multiculturalism as a loss of national identity. Why is plural thinking interpreted as a cause of the breakdown of the traditional value system? Why do many hate stories and many historical interpretations of supremacism continue to have great validity in social sectors far from radical organizations?
Because they see identity as destiny. That is, who you are, by birth, is far more important than what your ideas are. It's the basic fallacy that your DNA, as opposed to your education or exposure to new ideas, is what makes you what you are.

6. The global dissemination of specialized information

Many theorists of communication and journalistic information consider that the task of dissemination has greatly benefited from the current technological context. How does the Digital Revolution affect the traditional process of historical dissemination? Why is there such a big gap between the academic world and the media specialized in topics related to the social sciences and the humanities?
The basic advantage of the new media to the radical right is that it bypasses the traditional gatekeepers. They can write or speak directly to people without the intervention of, say, editors at The New York Times or NBC News. Of course, the algorithms of Facebook and others, along with gross failures in policing Internet content, also contribute.
Personal testimonies and academic synthesis are two of the main contributions of orality in audiovisual archives today. What is the value of oral sources in the documentation process of a historical investigation? What is the value of academic evaluations carried out to disseminate historical and political issues?
This seems more a question for a historian, not me.

7. Radicalism and the instrumentalization of the past

The extreme right (neo-fascism, neo-Nazism, xenophobic nationalism and racial supremacism) is growing stronger in many countries in Europe and the Americas. Could conservative radicalism re-solidify in the institutions? Is the instrumentalization of the past one of the most used political strategies by hate speech?
No, I do not think that conservative radicalism can rebuild traditional institutions. The world is changing, and institutions will have to change with it, or they will ultimately fall. And yes, of course the radical right instrumentalizes history, as discussed above with regard to the

American Civil War. This is a key concept. Even radical rightists, perhaps especially radical rightists, need to feel that they are doing right, and a falsified version of history is extremely foundational in helping them to maintain that illusion. A good example is the debate in America over Confederate statues and other Civil War memorials.

Nationalists in Europe greatly moderated their speech after the material devastation of World War II. What is your opinion of the strategy of some nationalist leaders who adapt historical accounts to justify and support current political agendas? Is the European Union in danger of disappearing due to the rise of nationalism and the new economic mentality proximate to protectionism?

Fascists and ultranationalists in Europe moderated their speech after WWII because they were utterly, totally defeated. The concentration camps and other aspects of the Holocaust became public and shocked the conscience of much of the world. So, for instance, it is key to the neo-Nazi movement to deny the Holocaust. You can't claim to be defending all that's right and good against, say, the Jews, if people know about the 6 million. So you're forced to say it wasn't so, and damn all the historical evidence, if you're every going to recruit people to your cause. My opinion of those who try to rewrite history to support their extremist ideologies is that they are damned liars. And they are very, very dangerous. This is the path that ultimately leads to genocide. On the European Union, yes, I think there is a substantial danger that it will be gravely weakened by the new nationalist and protectionism. If the EU can't discipline, for example, Hungary, it is in trouble. Also, the sometimes unbelievable bureaucracy of the EU is a serious threat to its lasting power.