



ARTICLE



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“The rebirth of the West begins with you!” — Self-improvement as radicalisation on 4chan

Ben Elley  ¹✉

Among the discussion threads devoted to racism, conspiracies, and fascist dogma on 4chan’s notorious ‘Politically Incorrect’ board, there is also a small but significant number of posts on the topic of far-right self-improvement. These posts speak in a style that blends the language of self-help and fitness with far-right propaganda and conspiracies, and are designed to turn the movement from aimless online ‘shitposters’ into survivalists and soldiers. This article describes the unique form of self-improvement advice known on 4chan as the ‘iron pill,’ and considers the role that self-improvement plays in radicalisation among the far right online. It addresses how this plays into the history of fascism, looking in particular at the concept of the ‘New Man’ in Italian fascism, and discusses how a political narrative of conspiracy and resistance to imagined tyranny is used to motivate self-improvement, and how this in turn builds and cements radicalisation.

¹University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand. ✉email: benjaminjohnelley@gmail.com

Introduction

Throughout their history, fascist movements have seen improving the lives and bodies of their followers as fundamental to their success. Because they are often self-defined by their fetishization of strength, virility, and supposed genetic superiority, these movements seek to reshape their people into a powerful collective using methods that have included sports, exercise, and military training as a means of forming them into the closest possible approximations of their ideals of strength. This process is often better remembered in its negative aspect, where fascist governments purged undesirable groups from the collective body using mass murder, but as new fascist movements emerge on smaller scales without the resources to commit mass murder, it may be best to understand their significance by looking at the more positive aspects that they use to recruit and retain new members. This article looks at the ‘iron pill’, a form of self-improvement advice that the alt-right community on 4chan provides for its members, and discusses the implications that this advice has for online radicalisation.

4chan and the alt-right

4chan is a large and popular online forum that has existed since 2003. Originally designed for the discussion and sharing of anime pornography, by the mid-2000s 4chan evolved into a home for a community of social outsiders built around internet pranks and a tolerance for unusual behaviour and transgressive humour. 4chan boasts a large userbase of 22 million unique monthly users (4chan, n.d.), and forms a significant and influential element of contemporary internet culture. 4chan’s community has been responsible, for example, for popularising the first internet memes, the ‘Anonymous’ hacker collective and movement that campaigned against the Church of Scientology, and helping to build support for the Occupy Movement.

The website has an unusual design originally based on a forum called Futaba Channel, or 2chan, which was popular among the Japanese otaku subculture, and which was adapted for use in English by a community of young anime fans (Beran, 2019, pp. 49–51). On chan-style forums, users are anonymous by default, and discussion threads are presented in a floating order with the most popular first, with the least popular threads quickly deleted instead of remaining available. This style creates a rapid turnover of content where the most interesting or entertaining content rises to the top, with anonymous users feeling free to experiment without any repercussions for failure.

Most recently, 4chan incubated the initial growth of the alt-right, an internet-based extreme-right movement that rose to prominence alongside Donald Trump’s 2016 US election campaign. 4chan was a natural fit for the alt-right because the condition of anonymity allowed users to flirt with extreme ideas without any danger to their offline identity, because the forum’s few rules and lax moderation did nothing to stop the open discussion of fascism and violence, and because 4chan’s trademark dark and ironic humour made serious calls for violence difficult to tell from satirical ‘shitposts’. While the alt-right community has now spread beyond 4chan, the forum remains a central platform for the movement’s discussions, and serves as a key location where individuals who have been exposed to far-right messaging through sources such as YouTube can go to develop a radical identity without any risk of it affecting their ordinary offline life.

Alt-right activity on 4chan is largely confined to one politics-focused board called Politically Incorrect, or /pol/. Within /pol/ there is a strong consensus among users toward far-right ideas in general, with users generally in agreement about ideas such as white supremacy, ethno-nationalism, and conspiracy theories

about ideas of ‘white genocide’ and a Jewish New World Order, but there is significant ongoing argument about the movement’s exact goals and how best to achieve them.

The community on /pol/ keeps its participants engaged by stimulating outrage and anger, and by engaging readers in a conspiracist narrative where the far right is the only trustworthy source of information. Posters on /pol/ trade in ‘red pills,’ which is their term for illuminating ‘facts’ or ‘truths’ that, once swallowed, change a person’s perception of the world toward the political right, much as the red pill in *The Matrix* (1999) allows Neo to see the truth behind the false world around him. These ‘facts’ are carefully crafted chunks of disinformation, often based on misconstrued or de-contextualised statistics, misleading or fake news headlines, and conspiracy theories, and are designed to produce in the viewer a sense of alienation, dissatisfaction, and rage. The world as viewed through these red pills is degenerate, deranged, and perverse, and cruelly manipulated by a cabal of global elites for their own benefit. As one user explains, consuming these red pills can be isolating and addictive:

Anonymous 08/28/16 (Sun) 06:07:38 ID IGvpantIG No. 86877726

The concept of “THE” red pill is flawed. There is no single revelation. It’s not one red pill, it’s an unending course. Like antibiotics. Or, more accurately, like addictive painkillers.

So you get addicted to your little bottle of red pills and can’t stop taking them. Soon you need bigger and more shocking revelations and info to feel like you’ve learned something noteworthy.

Somewhere along the line, you learn terrible things about... Basically everything. There aren’t “happy” red pills. This can very easily poison you against the world. AND, on top of this, you can’t talk yourself out of it or “just be happy” or “not care” or “ignore it” ...Because it’s the truth, and you’ve proven it.

Posters on /pol/ often describe becoming dependent on this environment and its supply of red pills because of the alternative social capital that they grant. Red pills flatter their readers by casting them as alternative intellectuals, researchers of hidden knowledge who possess the rare mental strength needed to handle the uncomfortable truths that wider society refuses. This grants readers an imaginary superiority over others and diverts the blame for any social or personal failings in their lives toward wider society. Moreover, once a reader has begun to accept the red pill’s worldview, ordinary sources of information no longer live up to the apocalyptic tenor of the red pill, rendering them unsatisfying and no longer compelling. This leaves readers of /pol/ increasingly reliant upon that platform for both news and community, and increasingly isolated from ordinary reality and society.

Self-improvement on /pol/

On /pol/, one regularly appearing thread topic is “SIG,” or “Self-Improvement General”. In these discussion threads users share tips and suggestions for self-improvement, with the apparent goals of improving each other’s lives and creating better soldiers for their far-right movement. Similar posts often appear in other threads on /pol/ as well, attempting to steer misanthropic or depressed users toward a more ‘positive’ outlet for their anger and hatred. These self-improvement posts speak in a unique and distinct tone that is a blend of fitness instructor and propagandist,

or skinhead and self-help guru, and which can at first seem difficult to reconcile:

Hitler Is Unironically My Role Model

Anonymous (ID: xMBUMuUF) 07/07/19(Sun) 05:59:27 No. 218616962

Self improvement time faggots, get out there and make something of yourself. do 10 push ups learn a new language get a good education in a trade or technical job keep your mind sharp never fall to kikery and degeneracy the only thing stopping you is yourself

The style of self-improvement that these posters advocate is often referred to as taking the iron pill—one of many derivatives of the term ‘red pill.’ The ‘truths’ behind the iron pill, broadly, are that civilisation is becoming decadent and collapsing, and that a return to masculine strength, a more authentic style of living, and traditional values, are the only way to survive or avert this collapse. These ideas fold into the wider narrative and worldview of the alt-right, and also reflect themes from the history of fascism more generally.

The topics included under the banner of iron pill self-improvement vary considerably, ranging from straightforward health improvements such as fitness and healthy eating to wider lifestyle changes such as finding employment and becoming more successful in relationships, but broadly conform to a theme of building a self-actualised and capable fascist individual. These ideas are largely practical and uncontroversial, and many of them might be difficult to distinguish from mainstream self-help advice if they were not written in the profanity-laden subcultural dialect of the online far right. The fitness information given, for example, is generally straightforward, and encourages readers to begin with simple exercises and follow established exercise plans to build achievable routines in the longer term.

Anonymous (ID: VwGPLx/T) 07/04/19(Thu)10:00:05 No. 218318256

Remember, you don’t need all the latest workout equipment, supplements or drugs to get a naturally fit look. All you need is natural movement and you’ll achieve the body you’re MEANT to have as the Homo-Sapiens male. You have a tiled floor? Jump from one end to the other. A fence outside? Climb over. You have a lot of work on your computer? Put it on a shelf so you have to stand and thus better your posture.

Also, set goals for yourself. See if you can lift sandbags that weigh up to 80 kgs eventually. Carry it on your shoulders, throw it as far as you can, attempt to eventually lift it with nothing but a single grip. Get used to being able to punch something as well. Do NOT be a limp wristed faggot who would cry if he gets hit. Be able to defend yourself.

Similarly, iron pill diet guidance borrows many basic elements from mainstream health and wellness advice, and advocates for limiting sugar, avoiding processed foods, and learning to grow vegetables in a home garden:

Anonymous (ID: VwGPLx/T) 07/04/19(Thu)09:59:47 No. 218318231

Stop drinking ALL soda/artificial juices and stop eating junk food. Stop buying super-market meals and try to grow your own vegetables that aren’t infected with pesticides and plastics. Healthy and economic, as well as peaceful. Till the

soil like your great grandfather did. Try to drink mostly water or coffee/tea with little to no sugar added. Purchase meat and produce from local producers that you know personally. A big reason why western men’s sperm count has gotten lower is because we do less outdoor jobs like we used to 50 years ago, which means less sun exposure and less Vitamin D production.

Like many of the ideas promoted and discussed among the far-right community on 4chan however, iron pill posts also freely intermix fact with fiction and pseudoscience, often veering quickly into paranoia, misinformation, and conspiracy theories. SIG threads advocate strongly for avoiding masturbation and pornography, for example, based on the claim that masturbation reduces testosterone, and a conspiracy theory that the pornography industry was created by Jewish elites in order to weaken western men by making them addicted to masturbation.

Iron pill threads also include lifestyle advice with a generalised slant toward right-wing and conservative ideas. As shown in Fig. 1, contributors advocate for a return to an ‘authentic’ and traditionalist lifestyle that includes moving to the countryside or a small town, marrying, having children, and generally avoiding the “degeneracy” of modern urban society. /Pol/ as a whole is strongly suspicious of universities as left-wing and progressive institutions, and as such the iron pill promotes learning trades and getting physical, outdoor jobs as healthy and fulfilling alternatives to white collar jobs and higher education. This conservative lifestyle, which includes staples of American

Before /SIG/



After /SIG/



Fig. 1 An image posted in a SIG thread on 22/08/2019. This image, which is regularly posted in SIG threads, shows many of the self-improvement goals that SIG advocates for: in the second panel the character has among other things tidied his room, lost weight, given up drugs, popular culture, and unhealthy food, taken down pictures of Louis C.K. and Richard Dawkins, moved to the country, and taken up reading, exercise, religion and gardening.

conservatism such as Christianity and gun ownership, is positioned as being more satisfying and rewarding than the empty and depressing world of modern consumerist life.

Anonymous (ID: VwGPLx/T) 07/04/19(Thu)09:59:47 No. 218318231

[...]

Thus we should grow our own food, get outside more, and not rely on commercial food producers. Over specialisation creates a society without purpose for many and too much interdependence. Cities are inherently self-destructive because they are unnatural. Multiple cities reaching more than hundreds of thousands in population did not exist prior to the mid-19th century. The countryside would remain unaffected in the long run if a future collapse occurs. 99% of our history has not been like this with populations concentrated like ants and living like parasites. It's a very volatile mix and you do not want to be a part of it. There's a reason liberals are concentrated in these shitholes. [...]

While you don't have to go 110%/innawoods/right now, it's always good to be in a state of relative independence, and in a small closely knit community. It is such values and societal composition that will survive a collapse and reclaim what is left once the dust has settled. Hopefully the kikes will be gone with it, their degenerate little empire burned to ashes.

Iron pill self-improvement is popular on 4chan because many among this community have a lot to gain from the practical elements of the advice it gives. While there are clearly a wide variety of people in the 4chan community, the common and widely accepted stereotype of 4chan users is that of an out-of-shape, unemployed, and antisocial young man who rarely leaves his computer (see the first panel in Fig. 1 for an example of how users often depict themselves in images). No credible demographic surveys of 4chan users exist,¹ but this stereotype—either in part or in whole—is regularly played out on the imageboard, where members have adapted negative labelling into a somewhat positive group identity. Users often half-jokingly refer to themselves with labels such as 'betas'—as in beta males—or 'autists', which they use to imply that they have poor social skills, and there is visible in the discourse on 4chan a strong presumption among users that the other users they are speaking to fit into these categories (Sparby, 2017).

This self-conception has its roots in the forum's history and reputation as an online home for outcasts that would welcome even the most antisocial or poorly-adjusted of the internet's users (Beran, 2019), but continues to be relevant in the present, and in the alt-right community in particular. Users on/pol/regularly report that they are socially isolated, unsure what to do with their lives, and addicted to the internet:

Anonymous (ID: pWMh1v7o) 07/11/19(Thu)17:22:00 No. 219106918

>Had a whole summer before college starts to practice my music, work out, read, and do positive things

>Spent all of it being unemployed in front of a computer masturbating

You know I've never really considered it before but I think I may have an internet/video game addiction

How the fuck do I kick something like this? I guess my solution is being forced away from the computer by school, but once summer hits I'm just completely fucking seduced

by all of this shit I know this is basically just zoomerposting but I don't know how to get away from the fucking computer

Anonymous (ID: Wq0RnzSa) 09/14/20(Mon)20:54:01 No. 277408570

Still living with mom at 26. Been socially retarded and anxious since childhood. Could never keep any job I was able to get because of it. [...]

Anonymous (ID: IfaMGAYn) 09/14/20(Mon)20:25:18 No. 277406517

How can I stop being weak? I am physically weak, mentally weak, and spiritually weak. I have no control over myself or any impulses. I am a NEET failure who watches cuck porn all day. I just don't know how to turn everything around.

Users also often talk about struggling with employment and other aspects of ordinary life, and many have adopted the label of 'NEET' (Not in Employment, Education, or Training) as a label as well.

Anonymous ID:bMF/oroO Tue 03 Nov 2020 13:23:14 No. 286540913

I'm a neet, I haven't worked in 8 years. Think about that next time you do your taxes.

Anonymous ID:xywMH9Cm Tue 03 Nov 2020 8:07:25 No. 286466215

Failed male here. NEET until 30. I have two kids and maybe gonna get extra trashy and have more with another woman.

While many evidently find a degree of comfort in a community that accepts (and often revels in) their perceived failings, there is also a strong undercurrent of dissatisfaction and depression as a result of users' poor social status and lack of real-life success. Users often post about feeling lonely, hopeless, and unmotivated. In a 'confession' thread in /pol/ in July 2019, for example, multiple users reported feeling suicidal:

Anonymous (ID: sB9Z44W9) 07/07/19(Sun)10:08:14 No. 218638433

I consider suicide every day.



Anonymous (ID: g1YUEWmJ) 07/07/19(Sun)10:21:34 No. 218639553

Im 99% sure im being watched by the gubbermint. Also I want to kill myself ever single day.

Under these circumstances, many of the lifestyle changes recommended by the iron pill are beneficial, and perhaps even necessary, for members of the community on /pol/. The iron pill is designed specifically to patch the holes in 4chan's collective identity: users are encouraged to break unproductive habits, set

goals, develop skills and hobbies, and learn to exercise. This encouragement is delivered in clear, supportive, and non-judgemental terms, with straightforward instructions that are aimed at beginners. This is a significant deviation from the tone of debate on /pol/ generally, which is often harsh, combative, and rude. Catering to their audience, SIG threads often recommend starting with simple exercises, personal hygiene, or even tidying a bedroom, and working their way up to more ambitious goals.

This is not the first time that community self-improvement has been attempted on 4chan, but the inclusion of far-right politics as a lever for change makes it considerably different from past efforts. The iron pill's more basic instructions echo the style of a previously existing genre of self-help advice created by 4chan users during the late 2000s in a short-lived attempt to help each other shed the community's antisocial reputation (Beran, 2019, pp. 81–83). This was exemplified by an online text distributed on 4chan called *The Well Cultured Anonymous*, which provided social and lifestyle advice aimed at beginners, on topics including how to choose clothes, how to cook, and even how to take a shower (Anonymous, 2007). *The Well Cultured Anonymous* contained no political content, however, and was a product of a different era of 4chan's community, when the site was first coming to widespread attention, and long before the rise of the alt-right. By adding far right politics to this blueprint for self-improvement advice, the iron pill adds additional motivation and more accurately reflects the angrier and more jaded outlook of the current /pol/ forum.

Although it is difficult to know exactly how many actually keep to the iron pill's guidance long enough to improve their lives, commenters often report taking its advice and seeing significant benefits:

Anonymous (ID: 3E96Zj7D) 07/11/19(Thu)16:52:19 No. 219104778

Recently I bought a total gym & I've been working out 5 days a week. Completely changed my diet around. Quit drinking in the morning & stopped getting pure drunk every night. I also stopped smoking pot everyday all day. Feels good man.

Anonymous (ID: vy+iW+x6) 07/11/19(Thu)16:05:44 No. 219101455

I've been working out 5 days a week or more for the past 2 months. I have been training in muay thai 2–4 days a week in those 2 months with few exceptions. The results are already astounding. I have also started to read more again, and I have made efforts to be more uplifting around my friends and less of a depressive drag. I have almost no time for video games. I have grown much more resistant to porn/masturbation, but I do still falter at times. We can make it gentlemen. First we conquer ourselves, then the world.

Anonymous (ID: Fz/Otcx6) 07/22/19(Mon)13:05:45 No. 220267128

Losing weight on keto. Banned sugar. Did a Jordan Peterstein and cleaned my room. Working towards a minimalist lifestyle. I literally want to be a fascist hippy.

Those who take the iron pill see benefit because many of the things that it suggests are genuinely beneficial, and because many of 4chan's regular posters have a lot to gain. Although initially positive, however, these changes serve to advance their adherents down a darker path toward radical right-wing views that ultimately does more harm than good.

The New Man

The connection between fascism and organised self-improvement can be seen most clearly in the original fascisms that emerged and took power in 20th century Europe. Fascism arose as a major political movement in the aftermath of the Great War as a response to the perceived degeneracy and weakness of modern civilisation, and thrived in areas such as Weimar Germany where that civilisation appeared to have failed by promising to take the topsy-turvy post-war world and turn it once again toward progress by re-establishing a naturally ordered universe. This 'natural' order was among other things brutal, conspiracy-driven, and patriarchal, but for many it was also appealing in its perceived straightforwardness and moral clarity. The anchor for this worldview was physical strength as a means of establishing and justifying order, and fascism celebrated the vitality and masculinity of its leaders and people as evidence of its natural authority. In practice, fascist leaders and propagandists used strength and the threat of violent re-ordering as an antidote to the unsatisfying complexities of politics and their opponents' arguments. Mussolini's early fascism, for example, sought to directly replace political debate with the clarity of violent masculine force. As Paxton (2004) explains:

A few months before he became prime minister of Italy, [Mussolini] replied truculently to a critic who demanded to know what his programme was: "The Democrats of Il Mondo want to know our programme? It is to break the bones of the democrats of Il Mondo. And the sooner the better." "The fist," asserted a Fascist militant in 1920, "is the synthesis of our theory" (p. 17).

Even as fascism grew beyond this initial simplicity and began developing written doctrine, its preoccupation with strength remained, and was abstracted out into ideals of heroism, national spirit, and racial identity. In fascist Italy, this strength was organised into the idea of the 'New Man,' an idealised model citizen who provided an archetype of fascist citizenship through "attributes of heroism, selflessness, purity, creative aggressiveness, love for the fatherland and firm moral coherence in thought and practice" (Dagnino, 2016). This idea was taken up in other fascisms as well: in Nazi Germany, for example, similar ideas were enshrined in the concept of the Aryan man, whose strength and vitality were intertwined with his claim to inherited nobility. As with much of fascist thought, the New Man's actual nature and characteristics were often unclear, and he was instead largely defined by what he was not, and the enemy and worldview that he stood in opposition to. Created as a response to concerns about the perceived weakness, individualism, degeneracy and feminisation of culture under modernity, the New Man was antimodern, hyper-virile, hyper-masculine, ruralist, patriarchal, communalist, anti-elite, and lived an 'authentic' life away from modern city life (Bellassai, 2005).

Despite its conceptual murkiness, the image of the New Man (or his variations in other fascisms) proved to be a powerful symbol for fascism and its aspirations. It was one of early Fascism's most important innovations was that it realised before its competitors that Europe "had entered a visual age," and that through the use of symbols such as weapons, uniforms, and the masculine bodies of its leaders, fascism could communicate with its people in a way that registered as being much more visceral and compelling than traditional political messaging (Dagnino, 2016). The fascists turned their model of masculinity into a visual symbol by appropriating and channelling the aesthetics of ancient Greek and Roman statuary, which as Mosse (1996) explains, was a complex metaphor for the state that the viewer could understand intuitively:

[the musculature of the New Man] projected both self-control in its posture and virility in the play of its muscles;



Fig. 2 O. Garvens, "The Sculptor of Germany", 1933. A political cartoon which shows Hitler as the sculptor of a unified, singular Germany.

it symbolised both the dynamic and the discipline which society wanted and needed. Here, order and progress, often in conflict, were reconciled through the symbolism of the male body modelled on the harmonious form of Greek sculpture.

Superficially, the body of the New Man was not especially unique—Mosse (1996) observes that “there is little difference in looks, manly behaviour and posture, between Mussolini’s new man, the German Aryan, the clean-cut Englishman, or the all-American boy,”—but he is significant in terms of what his body represented: the New Man was what Dagnino (2016) calls a “collectively organised human being,” whose body autonomy was willingly sacrificed to the needs of the fascist people. Because

fascism was defined by its strength, which was in turn drawn from the literal muscles and vigour of its people, the New Man’s body was inescapably collective. The bodies of the Italian and German people, then, as fascist New Men and Women, could be seen as sites and sights of fascist action, no longer private or solely their own, but expressions of the collective health of their race.

The significance of the New Man (or its versions in other fascisms) is perhaps best illustrated by the 1933 political cartoon shown in Fig. 2, which depicts Adolf Hitler as a sculptor reshaping a warring rabble of clay figures into a singular idealised man. The cartoon Hitler reforms this clay Germany using masculine force, first using a violent attack to break it down and then using strong hands (which are rendered in particular detail) to

re-sculpt it, and the final figure clearly equates the idea of a perfect Germany with the strength of an ideal male form. The attack scares away a modern, academic, and Jewish-looking caricature, who is presumably the artist of the original disorganised and imperfect sculpture, and who is conspicuously absent in the final two panels. The cartoon demonstrates a vision of the ideal society where the people are reshaped using the twin tools of violence and deliberate sculpting (or genocide and state-directed personal improvement) from a discordant mass into a singular and harmonious whole.

Although the New Man was an Italian invention, the collectivisation of the peoples' bodies came most clearly to fruition in Nazi Germany. In order to strengthen its collective body, the Third Reich vigorously encouraged physical fitness among its people through state-controlled organisations such as the National Socialist League of the Reich for Physical Exercise, which promoted sports and physical exercise among the German people, and the Hitler Youth, who encouraged youth toward physical development through sports and outdoorsmanship. Adolf Hitler held physical fitness in high regard, and wrote in *Mein Kampf* that physical training was "a requirement for the self-preservation of the nationality" that was a matter for the state, and not, in keeping with the ideas of the New Man, "an affair of the individual" (Quoted in Keys, 2010). Through events like the 1936 Olympic Games held in Berlin, sporting activity was promoted by the Nazis as a form of diplomacy that aimed to demonstrate both the state's prosperity and the genetic superiority of its Aryan people.

Taking this commitment to its logical extreme, the Third Reich also sought to purify the collective body by removing weakness. As well as acts of genocide against unwanted racial groups, their eugenics campaign targeted those that it deemed to be physically unsatisfactory (such as those with disabilities), mentally unsound (such as those with schizophrenia, epilepsy, or low intelligence), or morally impure (including criminals and homosexuals) for sterilisation or death (Weale, 2010, pp. 176–195). In its early years the Third Reich also introduced strong prohibitions on recreational drugs and social taboos against vices such as smoking and drinking alcohol (Ohler, 2015, pp. 17–20), reversing the Weimar republic's culture of intoxication and escapism (pp. 12–13), while at the same time tacitly encouraging the use of the amphetamine Pervitin, a stimulant drug used to keep workers and soldiers motivated, alert, and productive (pp. 41–126). Instead of the state working to the benefit of individuals, under this system, the individuals of Nazi Germany were turned to the creation of an idealised Aryan state and tasked with reshaping themselves around its imaginary form. The accepted majority were honed, propagandised, and chemically encouraged into a productive, efficient, and militarised whole, while those who were not accepted contributed to the collective by being excised from it.

By creating a nation comprised only of New Men and Women, the Nazis sought to leave no place for alternatives to their vision. This collectivisation folded every individual into a heroic narrative of constant improvement, where the struggle of the state played out through the individual bodies and minds of its people, and therefore was to become undeniable. Only when the human cogs in the Nazi war machine started to wear out and the long-term consequences of Pervitin abuse began to manifest did it become clear that there was no tipping point at which total commitment to an ideal narrative could make that fiction a reality.

Despite the obvious failure of the 20th century fascists' collective efforts, we can see a similar use of self-improvement as a method of moulding fascist soldiers and deepening their radicalisation at work on 4chan through the iron pill.

"SIG is political": using politics to motivate self-improvement

Following in the footsteps of the original fascists, the far-right on 4chan use politics to motivate self-improvement, and in so doing transform that self-improvement into a form of political action. This is achieved by using the far right's adversarial and conspiratorial worldview to reconceptualise the individual's life and body as a battleground.

Posters in Self-Improvement General threads are quick to emphasise the connection between self-improvement and political action:

Anonymous (ID: VwGPLx/T) 07/04/19(Thu)10:03:53 No. 218318627►

SIG IS POLITICAL

>SIG IS POLITICAL

SIG IS POLITICAL

>SIG IS POLITICAL

SIG IS POLITICAL

>SIG IS POLITICAL

Self-improvement and taking care of oneself is incredibly important in order to make any sort of positive change in the world. Before we can know right from wrong, we must enrich ourselves spiritually. Before we can argue and criticise we must improve our mental knowledge of philosophy and history. Before we can take back our communities and countries, we must be in top physical condition.

As the post above shows, the iron pill views self-improvement and political action as fundamentally intertwined, with each supporting the other. One of the reasons that the iron pill is so compelling and effective for commenters on /pol/ is that it offers an alternative model of motivation, where political and social goals become a lever for personal change. Instead of motivating individuals to make change for their own benefit, it positions their self-improvement as part of a wider political struggle, giving it a greater significance and providing the individual with the promise of a greater reward. The iron pill extends the far-right's imagined political battlefield to include the individual's body and private life, exhorting them to make change on behalf of their people. As one SIG post explains, "The rebirth of the West begins with you!"

On a superficial level, the logic of this connection between fitness and the far right's goals is clear: if its members are not strong and capable, they cannot undertake the heroic battle and conquest that fascist myth demands, and if they are not visibly superior (or at least relatively presentable) specimens then their claims to racial superiority begin to quickly unravel. With this in mind, it is common to see far-right groups of all types engaging heavily in physical training and developing fighting skills among their members: the skinhead groups that emerged in New Zealand in the 1990s, for example, often made efforts to keep their members fit for battle, with some even going as far as banning drugs and alcohol, although in practice this latter element often proved to be a bridge too far for youth-oriented groups who were more interested in partying than ideological purity (Gilbert and Elley, 2020). Contemporary offline far right groups also often include self-improvement as a component of their organisations: in the USA, members of the Proud Boys are required to abstain from masturbation, and were required to join boxing gyms in 2017 (Based in Colorado, 2017), and in New Zealand members of

the fledgling nationalist group Action Zealandia undertake group runs and gym sessions as a reflection of the idea that “strong men are the foundation of strong communities and successful families,” and the requirement that “members be physically fit independent thinkers” (Action Zealandia, 2019).

The importance of fitness and presentation has been strongly impressed upon the alt-right: during 2016 and 2017, the alt-right undertook a short-lived campaign of violent physical action in the USA that helped to establish them as a real-world political force. Through a series of staged events designed to create protests and counter-protests, alt-right groups including members of the community on 4chan became regularly involved in violent public confrontations with antifascist groups. As these battles became more common, both sides began to fight in costume, with many antifascists dressed in black and the alt-right appearing in outfits of goggles, gas masks, and wooden shields designed to resemble makeshift knights or gladiators. Although the fights themselves were often awkward and unimpressive, those who were able to hold their own (or look the part) were essentially given positive coverage by a horrified news media, while fighters who could not were very publicly mocked. This rash of violence came to a head at the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia in 2017, where far right demonstrators clashed with counter-protesters over two days, and a parade of young men marched at night with burning torches chanting, “Jews will not replace us.” When an alt-right demonstrator killed an anti-fascist protester with his car on the second day, however, what had begun as a public relations coup for the alt-right quickly turned into a rout as intense media and law enforcement scrutiny resulted in swathes of bare-faced alt-right demonstrators being identified and doxed² (see for example, McKay, 2017; Pasha-Robinson, 2017). Following that event, the online far right quickly and near unanimously pivoted away from demonstrating and street fighting, but nevertheless that brief window of violence provided the movement with first-hand evidence of the value of training and exercise, and the significance of being able to appear presentable and put-together in front of their opponents and the media.

Although these physical confrontations have largely ceased, the far right maintain a worldview that is steeped in conflict, and which provides ongoing motivation for the iron pill. To create this struggle, the far right draws heavily on conspiracy theories, the most significant of which is the narrative known as Cultural Marxism. Cultural Marxism is conspiracy theory that forms a foundational element of the alt-right worldview, and which broadly claims that a cabal of Jewish elites are using modern culture and progressive movements as a means of weakening the western population and making society vulnerable to a totalitarian ‘Marxist’ takeover (Lynn, 2018). Versions of this conspiracy theory have been popular among American conservatives for some time (see for example, Buchanan, 2002), but it has become increasingly popular among the younger online right because it provides a narrative of climactic cultural battle that justifies and incorporates Nazi-style antisemitism and general xenophobia into a contemporary setting. Echoing the anti-modern concerns that motivated early fascists to create the New Man, Cultural Marxism claims that this cabal of elites has created a world where modern conveniences and instant-gratification pleasures make people (and men in particular) dependent, weak, and childish:

Anonymous (ID: VwGPLx/T) 07/04/19(Thu)09:59:30 No. 218318195

Modern society is to blame for there being so many people who don't deserve to live. Most people in the West used to harden as they grow on their own, like anywhere else. Now

without effort you can remain indefinitely infantile due to our decadence. There were always outliers that became like this throughout history, but now the general masses have succumbed to this condition. There is no longer a rite of passage into adulthood, you can be sheltered and live comfortably. This is de-evolution. Everyone has a dandy-ol time being a degenerate well into their 50s. Constant entertainment, pre-cooked meals and pornography have robbed us of our man-hood.

The iron pill worldview positions self-improvement as rebellion against a totalitarian state that uses pleasure and human weakness against its citizens in the style of the regime in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. Under these circumstances, becoming more capable and self-sufficient is conceptualised not only as being desirable for personal satisfaction, but also actually necessary to avoid enslavement. In this way, actions taken by an individual to improve themselves become political acts:

Anonymous (ID: +ZjzSBf4) 05/08/18(Tue)18:15:22 No. 170912758

No, [self-improvement] absolutely is political. The Jews/globalists/elite/whoever you want have put a LOT of time, money, and effort into destroying our people. They've poisoned our well with pornography, racemixing, video games, degeneracy and literal chemicals. [...] They have dedicated everything to ruining us.

/Sig/ is us fighting back.

[...] They NEED you to be a useless fat virgin neck beard with cystic acne and no friends. [...] It fucking terrifies them to consider that that we aren't what they want us to be. That there exists a group of physically fit, handsome, sociable, successful, hygienic, happy, independent, proud, capable and competent men out there who are ready to destroy everything they've done so far.

Anonymous (ID: AUGMyKkH) Wed 28 Oct 2020 19:21:41 No. 285294144

Reject all false gods and take the iron pill. Your folk are all that you have in this life and they are the only ones you can depend on. We are the masters of our own destiny. Our enemies are physically weak. If they were capable of killing us all outright they would've done it by now. They depend on deceit and trickery to move their agenda along. Forge your soul into an incorruptible mountain of steel. Help yourself so you can help your brothers. When the day comes where the alien and the traitor are forced to throw themselves onto our swords, we will tear them apart with the ferocity of a billion dead men screaming from the void for vengeance.

By placing the reader within this adversarial world, their self-improvement is reconceptualised as an act of rebellion against the enemy that they are led to believe has caused all of the problems in their life. The contemporary fascist's life and body—much like the New Men of the 20th century—is collectivised by this struggle, and by becoming strong and self-actualised, he makes fascism strong and keeps his race from being destroyed. Acts of self-improvement that would ordinarily be self-centred and done for their own reward, such as going to the gym or learning to hunt, become part of a righteous Manichean battle, greatly distorting the balance of input and reward that might normally be expected. Small personal victories such as losing a few kilograms

or successfully growing a vegetable are incentivised as victories on the cultural battlefield, and small failings such as eating a fast food meal or watching pornography gain the added disincentive of being betrayals of the folk and submission to the enemy's agenda.

This system allows for the alt-right on /pol/ to actualise these red pills by putting them to use in the real world—even if that real world extends no further than their own bodies. By turning the body into a battleground, self-improvement can become part of the wider cultural battle being fought by the far right. This creates a way for the alt-right on 4chan to actively participate in the movement without having to resort to the danger of exposing themselves by fighting or marching in the streets, and provides a way to advance themselves down the path to radicalisation without undertaking genuine radical activity. By suffering and doing work on behalf of the far right cause, and expending time and resources, their commitment to the cause can deepen, regardless of whether the outcome of their labour actually provides any real benefit to the movement itself.

This appears likely to be effective motivation: by turning what would ordinarily be a 'battle' with the self—which is naturally a lonely and difficult thing to approach consistently—into a conflict with an external enemy, feelings such as anger and rebelliousness (which the 4chan community and the alt-right have in spades) can be channelled toward improvement. As one commenter explains, /pol/ and the iron pill are a natural fit for one another; /pol/ provides a constant source of new anger and outrage, which can then in turn be used to fuel self-improvement:

Anonymous (ID: niRSIIIf) 11/15/17(Wed)17:38:56 No. 149588980

[...] Every time you start thinking about making excuses not to go to the gym, GET ANGRY!!! And this is where you use that RAGE I talked about earlier. THIS IS WHERE THAT RAGE WILL HELP YOU INSTEAD OF DESTROYING YOU. If you find yourself lacking motivation, summon that anger that /pol/ has instilled in you. Bring it to the brim. USE THE RAGE. LET IT CONSUME YOU. Then, just get up and go to the gym and burn out the rage by lifting. As you lift, think of all the red pills you've swallowed and think about how mad it makes you. Think about how hypocritical and evil this world truly is. Think about how when the shit hits the fan, there are only 2 things that are going to save you; your physical strength and your guns.

In this way, the iron pill serves as a natural counterbalance to the aimless anger and hatred generated by other elements of the community on /pol/. It takes the vitriol and rage that the alt-right's addiction to red pills produces and turns it into a resource that can benefit the movement.

Discussion

The iron pill's self-improvement advice draws on a long history of physical fitness efforts within far right and fascist movements, and interweaves it with methods popularised on 4chan during the site's early years. This potent mixture is uniquely targeted toward the needs of the community on /pol/, serving their needs specifically and filling in the gaps in their lives with self-improvement advice that is interwoven with far-right ideology.

This method of radicalisation seems to be applied both knowingly—as it has been by other white supremacist groups, by individuals who see themselves as leaders in the movement—and organically by members between each other as a natural manifestation of the movement's racial ideals.

In many ways, what the iron pill provides its adherents is positive. Assuming it achieves its goals, it takes people who are disengaged from society and unable to care for themselves, and gives them a usable framework for developing self-sufficiency and participation in society. Moreover, it takes feelings of anger and hate that might otherwise be directed outwards and allows them to be put to use in ways that are not directly harmful to others. It may even be that for some this provides a pathway out of radical belief: the iron pill aims to build many of the elements of 'good lives' that are acknowledged to be helpful in building a pro-social and non-radical identity, such as employment, social participation, and wellbeing (Ward, 2002; Youth Empowerment and Innovation Project, 2018).

The danger inherent in this positive life change is that it is anchored to an extremist worldview that is hate-driven, volatile, and fundamentally uncoupled from reality. The individual recasts himself in a heroic mould, deepening his commitment to the movement by altering himself to fit within it. Those who take the iron pill reshape their bodies into the form of an ideal fascist soldier, letting the fiction and ideology of fascism into themselves as part of the bargain. By using the narrative of Cultural Marxism to shape and improve their lives and bodies, the posters in SIG threads internalise the narrative of conspiracy and apocalyptic conflict, working it into the very fibre of their new and improved being. The new person generated by this effort is by definition a New Man—a collectivised body whose individuality is sublimated the fascist struggle. This New Man is now indebted to the movement for his change, and, having become collectivised, no longer fully within his own control.

The iron pill's focus on physical strength is a reflection of the far right's broader fixation on strength and masculine power, and so in a sense it may be a small positive aspect of a larger issue. For all its higher-minded goals, the performative machismo of the iron pill is not entirely distant from the hyperbolic displays of strength through military-style firearms and other weapons that we often see from far right groups when they act in public, and it may be that for many, either one is a reasonable substitute for the other. For those who take on the iron pill's ideals of improvement and fail, it may carry them further down the path of radicalisation but leave them with no choice but to adopt weaponry and militarism as their source of strength instead.

Moreover, the improvements created by the iron pill may not be transferrable to ordinary life should an individual choose to leave the far right behind. By creating a rationale for self-improvement that is motivated by anger and unending imaginary conflict, the iron pill requires an ongoing connection to the outflow of rage created by /pol/ and other alt-right communities. Real life, with its uncertain future and lack of narrative structure, is unlikely to provide such an effective source of motivation. In this way, the iron pill is able to create many of the primary aspects of a positive identity in a person, but they may be held hostage to that person's connection to the alt-right community.

Conclusion

We tend to imagine the online far right as a community defined by blind hatred and directionless vitriol, but if we are to understand and counteract the radicalism that it fosters, it is important to understand the benefits that it provides to its members as well.

Much as the original fascists sought to reshape their people into a heroic and compliant collective that could make their ideals a reality, so too does the far right on 4chan use the iron pill's self-improvement advice to weave its fiction into the very bodies and lives of its adherents.

The iron pill blends the far right's history of self-improvement into a product ideally suited to the far-right community on

4chan's /pol/ board. It takes that board's infamously angry worldview and rhetoric and turns it into fuel for self-improvement in all aspects of an individual's life. Despite providing a less harmful outlet for this anger, the outcomes of this system are not entirely positive. Where self-improvement in the ordinary world is tied to goals in ordinary society, the iron pill's positive outcomes are inextricably bound to the narratives of collectivised anger that fuel them. By rebuilding themselves in the image of a fascist hero, those who take the iron pill's advice create a world around and within themselves that grows increasingly difficult to separate from the conspiracy theory-driven narratives of the far right.

Data availability

This article is drawn from ethnographic study of the alt-right's community on 4chan's /pol/ board. A largely complete record of /pol/, including the content discussed here, can be found at <https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/>.

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Notes

- 1 Perhaps the closest we have available is 4chan's advertising page, which lists the site's overall demographic as 70% male, aged 18–34, college educated or enrolled, and interested in “Japanese culture, anime, manga, video games, comics, technology, music, movies” (4chan, n.d.), although it is unlikely that this assessment is based on any credible survey either. Anecdotally it would appear that /pol/ in particular has an even higher proportion of male users.
- 2 ‘Doxing’ is the act of posting a person's details—such as their name, address, and workplace—online and linking their offline life with their previously anonymous online activity. This is often used as a tool of violence by online political movements because it places an individual in danger of being targeted in their offline life. In this case, victims reported losing jobs, friends, and family as a result of their affiliation becoming public.

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Competing interests

The author declares no competing interests.

Additional information

Correspondence and requests for materials should be addressed to Ben Elley.

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