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The Power of the Influencer: Old Gods, Rejected Elites, and Secular Idols

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Few entertainers as of late have inspired such impassioned responses as Joe Rogan. Whether provoked to fanaticism or contempt, hardly a day goes by without news/discussion published about the multi-hyphenate influencer. The college dropout, comedian, former Fear Factor host and Ultimate Fighting Championship reporter, has become the host of the most popular interview and cultural commentary podcast in the world, *The Joe Rogan Experience*.[1] He has amassed an audience that admires his uniquely brazen and unfiltered opinions.

Rogan's values straddle political lines: some of his views are socially liberal (support for recreation drugs and gay marriage, critical of the military and low teacher salaries), others are conservative (militant advocacy for free speech and gun rights, critical of trangender rights).[2] Overall, he proselytizes about freedom, libertarianism, and anti-establishment values. His followers seem to be jaded by the facades, biases, and jargon of many news sources and academics, thus they appreciate Rogan's candid debates with subversive and interesting guests.

Since 2021, Rogan has become an object of scrutiny for publicizing misinformation about the Covid-19 pandemic by unabashedly making incorrect generalizations about the dangers posed by the virus, the inefficacy of masks and vaccines, exaggerating natural immunity, and promoting unfounded medications.[3] Many people, who already distrusted the government and favored Rogan as more impartial and authentic, clung to his assertions and fear-mongering that health regulations would lead to tyrannical appropriations of liberty.

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[1] Spangler, "Joe Rogan Had the No. 1 Podcast"; Hedegaard, "How Joe Rogan Went From UFC Announcer."
[2] The Daily Wire, "Sunday Special Ep 4: Joe Rogan."
[3] Tompkins, "Joe Rogan apologizes for vaccine misinformation."

Facing backlash from chief medical advisor Dr. Anthony Fauci and a multitude of medical professionals, did not dissuade him until his podcast platform, Spotify, began removing certain episodes.[4] He has since claimed, "I'm not trying to promote misinformation, I'm not trying to be controversial, I've never tried to do anything with this podcast other than to just talk to people".[5] While he may not always agree with his guests, he does give them a massive platform.

So why has the public come to trust *The Joe Rogan Experience* as their gospel or their primary news source (even though it admittedly "started out [as] sitting in front of laptops bullshitting")?[6] More broadly, why do we defer to the social media of celebrities for entertainment, activism, and consumer endorsements alike? Why do we privilege the knowledge, advice, and values of influencers as more important than other experts or authorities?

In the wake of globalization, secularization, and exponential technological advancement over the past few decades, Americans have withdrawn from the guidance of formerly predominant institutions. Key establishments which American life used to revolve around – religion, the nuclear family, national pride, faith in capitalism, among others – no longer direct people's senses of identity, purpose, or path the way they once did. The populace feels increasingly disconnected from these longstanding foundational institutions which used to drive culture and society.

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[4] Tapp, "Hundreds Of Doctors Sign Open Letter."
[5] Tompkins, "Joe Rogan apologizes for vaccine misinformation."
[6] Carnell, "Interview: Joe Rogan."

For example, according to Gallup polls, millennials are the least likely generation to affiliate themselves with a religious preference.[7] Even those millennials who still identify as religious are less likely than prior generations to be members at a church, synagogue, or mosque.[8] As the majority of the United States is now made up of millennials, Gen Z, and Gen Alpha, membership to a place of worship has fallen to the minority of the population for the first time.[9] After six recorded decades of stable religious affiliation hovering around 70% of the population, at the turn of the century America has witnessed an exceptionally accelerated decline in organized religion, let alone religious preference at all.[10]

Other institutions that had been the bedrock of American values have likewise been depreciating. Marriage rates are declining, and millennials are having fewer children than past generations.[11] For any combination of reasons (perhaps liberation from stifling gender and social roles, potential climate disaster, wide-scale and personal economic concerns, etc.), we're left feeling jaded toward traditional family dynamics. Polarized partisan loyalty has replaced any of that mid-century sense of post-war national unity. People recognize the dubious practices of big corporations creating shoddy products and planning obsolescence of the sake of profit. We are beginning to comprehend the extent of American wealth disparity and the exploitation of essential labor.

The American dream has been disillusioned by discriminatory barriers to enter – let alone succeed in – politics, corporate administration, academia, spiritual leadership,

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[7] Jones, "U.S. Church Membership Down."
[8] Ibid.
[9] Frey, "Now, more than half of Americans are millennials or younger"; Jones, "Church Membership Falls Below Majority."
[10] Jones, "U.S. Church Membership Down."
[11] Jones, "Is Marriage Becoming Irrelevant?"; Barroso, et al. "As Millenials Near 40."

and other executive positions. We are distrustful and disappointed since the hard work of marginalized groups has not been rightly valued by traditional systems. We feel more misrepresented and alienated from the values generated by the elite. The millennial generational turn has marked greater resistance against white, Christian, heternormative, able-bodied, cis-masuline hegemony. We have started to refuse the social influence of narrow-minded rulers who don't actually represent the multitudes.

The leaders who have predominantly driven our culture represent hardly a fraction of the real diverse interests and identities of the nation. Historically, we have deferred to authority figures of institutions, from presidents to pastors to business magnates, for our ideals of conduct, identity, and goals. Whether by overt discipline or transmitting particular representations and narratives, the decisions and interests of the ruling class impact our beliefs and customs. We absorb and organize ourselves around the conditions constructed by the elite.

But more and more, we doubt the establishment's credibility. Skepticism and opposition are rising against the dynastic elitism of institutional authority. As we are jaded by exploitation and underrepresentation, our faith in those affluent rulers has wavered. The public has started to recognize the dubious nature of many social institutions and the ideologies that justify them

I propose that as we've become disillusioned with traditional authorities, we increasingly turn to influencers for guidance and knowledge. By 'influencer', I mean something wider than the colloquial usage referring to celebrities and stars who monetize their social media followings. I mean to describe a broader category of tastemakers and personalities who can affect and sway masses. Therefore, my label will include certain

political characters, big names in business, pastors in super churches, etc. My use of 'influencer' is not exclusive to the media industry or social networks, instead I designate it to movers and shakers across fields who significantly impact people. Later, I will elaborate on how influencers wield power and status differently from traditional leaders within the same fields.

Influencers lead by cultivating parasocial relationships: the asymmetrical mediated relationships between performers/personalities and their audiences. Clearly, the interactions from an influencer to their audience are paradoxically indirect yet personal. On one hand, there is (often) a literal spatial barrier as the interaction occurs in two different places. Additionally, there is a communication barrier that hinders understanding what each party's boundaries, expectations, and thoughts about the other are, because they may never actually meet or know each other.But on the other hand, the influencer caters to their audience and anticipates what they will respond to, and the fan may intimately follow the everyday life of the celebrity. Parasocial relationships describe the curious power dynamics and doubly one-sided relationships that celebrities feel as they gratify their audience, as well as the way fans admire and form attachments to stars.

There are parasocial relationships that can exist in real space and time, like at live shows, but there are still these peculiar expectations of closeness and distance, feelings of idolization and humility, that exist between the parties. Influencers and their followers can be familiar with the other's desires. But despite these mutual understandings, there will always be some veil obscuring their realities from each other. As the influencer has been so glorified, the distance between the top and the foot of the pedestal can rarely be surmounted.

Our personal investment in influencers grants them authority. They acquire not only wealth through their fame, but also status and power as we defer to their values.

By no means do I assert that we've entirely abandoned long standing American institutions for some new wave of influencer domination. Certainly there are still many deep seated traditional values sustained through contemporary culture. As the earlier statistics described, church attendance may have steeply declined, but of course it has not outright ended. While I see the public leaning towards disillusionment and discontent, it is plain to see that most people aren't altogether radicalized against the government or comprehensively concerned about the malicious workings of repressive social institutions.

We can surely observe how many classic cultural values persist. We can imagine somebody who still believes in the importance of marriage despite divorce statistics, but this person also condemns shady ways businesses have exploited their workers and unfairly reaped disproportionate wealth. Maybe somebody accepts Christianity but also disapproves of problematic gender representation in organized religion, and so wishes to see women have more authority in their congregation. People can be conscious of some manifestations of repressive ruling class institutions, while continuing to embrace others. I concede that a social trend of growing disillusionment is not a fixed rule.

That being said, I argue that we don't socially coordinate around these social institutions – religion, nationalism, the nuclear family, etc. – like we used to. Longstanding cultural institutions carry on despite some people rejecting them, but they do not function as they once did. Even though conservatives value these traditional principles, they do not employ them as strictly as they did in the past. The church is not

the same community unifier and consistent social ritual it once was. Both our daily practices and our larger senses of purpose develop less from religious (or other institutional) ideals and more from our online social existences and our affiliations as consumers.

Since our senses of self had primarily been realized through institutions, but we've felt alienated due to the repression of the establishment, now we suffer isolation and confusion because of our vacant source of identity, recognition, and direction. Thanks to progressively easier technological access to the internet, people can remedy their existential dread with parasocial relationships. Influencers fill the vacuum of power left from disappointing institutions, and they restore the lonely voids in us by offering new ideologies and communities of fandom.

Presently, our identities are constituted more and more through our deliberate presentation on social networks, how others perceive us, and our attachments to organizations, brands, and influencers. People have always had affinities and connections which signaled status and alignment with a particular set of values. The practice of forming our identities by our affiliations is not new. But, the kinds of role models we defer to for our ideology and the kinds of organizations and brands we wish to identify with have changed. Additionally, our identity and community formation has transformed because of the degree to which we are able to express our affiliations and signal our virtues to wider audiences through social media.

Instead of socially coordinating around traditional sources of knowledge and guidance, we have replaced our old gods, our old governance, with new secular idols. Contemporary America is ruled by cults of personality. The influencer represents a

different type of power than just any authority: the influencer can shift both material conditions and ideas through their parasocial relationships rousing our emotions. The most compelling leadership is no longer found in institutions, but in independent influencers.

As our new social authorities, we treat influencers and celebrities as though they have access to transcendent wisdom about the world. We have come to revere them, not only in respect for their particular fields, but we also privilege their standpoints on any number of topics. We now socially coordinate around the ideology of influencers because we reject past elitist systems and desire more agency in choosing who shapes society. Unlike institutional authority, influencers utilize a special persuasive power to emotionally bond with people and get us to adopt their beliefs. As threads of American meritocracy still run through culture, we extend their status from one sphere to an overarching insight. In this way, influencers have come to be so meaningful to society.

I don't intend to frame a normative solution or ethical conclusion regarding our relationship to influencers. Instead, I intend to explore and explain what I've witnessed as social structures have adapted to favor these types of authority. Even though I'm critically engaging with how influencers promote themselves and what beliefs they perpetuate, I cannot answer whether or not we *ought* to look to influencers for guidance. I take it as a matter of fact that this is a feature of contemporary life. This thesis will not offer an ideal moral theory for how to properly engage in parasocial relationships. Rather, I will examine how American hierarchies have been upheld and how they have transformed.

I will begin building from Althusser's ideas about how traditional forms of power and authority construct society and construct our senses of self. By social construction, I

mean the notion that many facets of life exist not essentially, but were created in virtue of social features; most of our behaviors are the way they are because we've been socialized this way.

By introducing this theory, I hope to establish a convincing basis for the ways authority figures and authoritative institutions are meaningful to us, and I want to make explicit some of the ways they shape our lives. Then, as I pivot to the rise of the influencer as a new prevailing type of authority, I will be able to compare and contrast how institutions versus influencers secure and express their power.

I will give my account of the vacuum of ideology left by rejecting the establishment, and describe how influencers and parasocial relationships relieve our feelings of alienation and isolation. Influencers socially construct society and our senses of personality by connecting to our emotions and identity, more so than past forms of authority. Religion will draw some of the most apt parallels for the way that influencers have become idolized.

Then, I will explore the societal impact of giving so much meaning and power to influencers. Exploring some of the positive outcomes as well as negative repercussions of this power shift, I hope to give nuance to assessments of celebrities. I aim to touch on the potential exploitative nature of celebrity, and the codependence consumers feel for them, but I also want to illuminate what kind of progressive positive shift our deference to influencers may be [signaling/coming from]. Rejecting reductive answers that chastise Americans for being anti-intellectual driven by base desires for screen rewards, I'd like to persuade the reader that we should give people more credit. The shift toward influencer power demonstrates a fresh attempt at democratization and reimagining the American

dream narrative. My goal is to begin a sincere discourse on influencers and introduce opportunities for future scholarship on other related questions.

I'm also gonna talk about the pros and cons- what I think this shift in power means, how it continues to affect society. Plus I'll also be asserting that my angle is kinda subversive and significant because it is not just condescening that ppl are dumb and phone obsessed w influencers, but legitimately engaging with the control they have in society.

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To approach the topic of power structures and their effects, I turn primarily to cultural theorist Louis Althusser, a philosopher from the mid 20th century engaging in ideology critique. He understood social hierarchies to be both negative and positive forces: they repress people by taking away certain liberties and choices, yet they are also productive for how they invent ideologies which in turn construct parts of our identity. Negative and positive here do not necessarily have a moral connotation, rather Althusser intended to model how powerful people or organizations inhibit certain matters and ideas, while generating others. His work in ideology and structures of power interest will allow me to examine the capability of cults of personality to influence us.

Althusser developed the notion of the *ideological state apparatus*: a network of cultural values which influences social practices and belief systems to the benefit of the state.[12] Ideological state apparatuses (ISAs) are social institutions like the education system, churches, the media, as well as attitudes about family, gender roles, and propriety, etc. ISAs are distinct from overt forms of political or punitive power (*repressive state*

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[12] Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," 1489.

*apparatuse*s)*, like the government, military, or police.[13] ISAs do not maintain the status quo through law enforcement or direct punishment; alternatively, they perpetuate hegemonic values by controlling what sorts of ideas are disseminated to the public. ISAs are institutions that were not inherently connected to state control, but which have come to transmit the same values that maintain the ruling powers. We can briefly consider how the American education system functions as an ISA, as it conveys all sorts of ideals about gender, race, success, justice, punishment, etc. that align to support the American political agenda and preserve norms. ISAs are social cultural spheres that have become politicized and been used as access points for instilling and naturalizing customs that sustain the state's power.

These institutions establish norms of conduct as they generate the mainstream beliefs. Instead of forceful government coercion, we regulate our own actions and discipline ourselves to conformity. By monopolizing representations and creating myths they produce dominant narratives which bolster the existing social hierarchy. To avoid ostracization, we tend to adopt and internalize these constant messages. ISAs work through internalizing repression, as you are persuaded to adopt beliefs which bolster the ruling class more than serving oneself.

Multiple ISAs will coexist within the same nation and even within the same field. While only one repressive state apparatus (RSA) regime exists in a nation at a time as the primary system of administering law, order, and punishment, there are various and even contrasting ISAs perpetuating the preservation of the state.[14] The Republican and Democratic political parties are coexisting ISAs; though their particular beliefs about

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[13] Ibid, 1491.
[14] Ibid, 1492.

government are opposed, their polarized dynamic perpetuates the existence of the RSA, the American two-party system. Though the parties surely declare different values, they both align in their maintenance of existing political structure and general social hierarchy, rather than advocating for genuinely radical ideas that reconstruct the system itself. In this way, many ostensibly progressive movements get co-opted or diluted until they fit within the framework of the existing regime. They become reform movements rather than revolutionary movements. Althusser proposed that broad hegemonic institutions and customs persist despite the transformations of popular cultural movements and manifestations of ISAs.

Likewise, there are many other instances of competing ideologies that can exist while the culture at large is still bound to the historical influence and material foundation of the RSA. We can consider different common theories of justice, like utilitarian versus retributive punishment: while they make unique arguments, both approaches uphold the existing prison system, instead of actually deviating to imagine an abolitionist society. Or look at the different ways public and private schools are run, yet both curriculums and environments will teach values around obedience to authority, and docility, which eventually habituates a very particular type of civic duty in people to stay in line. Reframing dieting narratives in women's magazines to stories about self-love and self-care doesn't actually decenter our culture's beauty obsession. Thus, despite the diversity of manifestations, ISAs are unified beneath the state's ruling class ideology.[15] Any institutions which disseminate prescriptive beliefs that conserve the state's status quo are ISAs.

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[15] Ibid, 1491.

One way ISAs sustain social power is through their own material reproduction.[16] From Marx's lexicon, material conditions pertain to real tangible things in your environment or possession; they are the physical means through which we interact, opposed to the ideas and abstract social functions. Reproduction can be as literal as Christians having children who grow up to be Christians too. Hollywood produces superhero movies we go to see in theaters, which generates profit to make more of these same kinds of movies. The products sold by the beauty industry affect how we present ourselves, thus perpetuating what we think we should look like, and creating the market for more of these products.

Moreover, institutions often persist because we are validated with just enough material reward to come back. Althusser described how the relations/means of production were accepted because the profit from a long day's work earned just enough minimum wage leisure spending money to afford beer or wine to soothe the weariness.[17] The establishment oppresses us, yet provides for just enough perks and pleasures to convince us that this is a satisfactory life. How could capitalism be oppressive if it provides iPhones? How could gender roles be oppressive when women get dinner dates and diamonds? We are encouraged to be grateful for the luxuries and comforts that the system provides. This indulgence or relief makes us more likely to acquiesce to the powers that be.

Furthermore, ISAs and the RSA persist because we have personal and emotional attachments to them. If we never experienced anything but the establishment, we naturally have trouble imagining alternative worlds. These institutions have framed our

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[16] Ibid, 1494.
[17] Ibid, 1484.

identities, taught us how to assess ourselves and others, and assigned us social roles to take up. We are persuaded to accept the necessity of gender roles, for example, because we're taught to fear an unknown world without the balance of women as caretakers and men as decision-makers, without harmony of emotion and reason, equilibrium of the passive and the active; that we should fear betraying a natural order; that we should embrace unique gendered aptitudes; that we would be unsafe and vulnerable if the hard line between genders were blurred. These myths tap into human desires and concerns about stability, safety, and acceptance, and they frame their narrative as essential.[18] The institutions around us cement themselves by appealing to our emotional connection to tradition.

Just as institutions can offer material remedies to our woes, the ideology provides solutions to our emotional crises of finding identity and purpose. ISAs constitute our sense of self, since it's fundamental human development to reflect your surroundings to learn. We continue to uphold these ISAs because they become normative, and we seek acceptance and fear exclusion from the group.

Even if the norms are grounded in myths instead of reality, the origins of the customs are precluded by the long standing tradition. We have been convinced that institutions and their ideological teachings are the explanations for our problems. They purport that prisons, religion, particular school curriculums, beauty standards, labor hierarchy, salary disparity are utterly necessary to society. Many of these are distorted or invented problems. The ruling class manufactures the problem and the solution: the sense of danger and threat to/from certain communities and the prison industrial complex.

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[18] Ibid, 1499.

Whether by fallacious logic about economic interests, incentives, historical success, our lives remain captivated and intertwined with the stories behind these ISAs.

Interpellation describes how our identities are constructed as we internalize the beliefs imparted to us by the establishment. Althusser uses a dual sense of 'subjection' to describe the connection between authorities and the citizens who are interpellated through ISAs.[19] First, that we are the subjects of a ruler, coerced to obey the dominant ideals. Authority figures subject people to their own will and repress us and discipline us into ideal citizens. The roles and ambitions that ISAs urge us to take up contribute to the maintenance of the current hierarchy of powers. Second is the idea that we become subjects (subject-tion/subject-ification).[20] We do become individuals as we find our tastes, feelings, duties, ranks. As we are socialized to play certain parts, we are subject-ized, and can find meaning and purpose. Identifying as a mother, or a Christian, a Democrat, or any number of labels, has come to affirm something in ourselves, signal things to others, and categorize our experiences. We wouldn't really be able to define who and what we are, what makes us unique, without reference to others, so naturally societal labels do help us group particular sorts of knowledge, or occurrences or experiences.

Through social institutions, we are taught what to repress and what to express. Society's roles limit us, and yet they also provide particular avenues for expression. Whether or not they're an accurate or optimal way to find ourselves, ISAs do provide schemata to help process common emotions and experiences. Your sense of self is not just constituted through social labels (white, black, gay, female, etc.), but it's also your

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[19] Ibid, 1507-08.
[20] Ibid, 1503-04.

preferences, your choices, your roles, all informed by the circumstances you've been exposed to.

With this in mind, a clear tension arises in contemporary America, since we strive to dismantle these repressive elitist institutions, yet we fear losing the social features that account for our interpellation. David Bromwich paraphrases Michael Oakeshott's analysis:

> "[I]f you're taught that you are the product of a culture
> defined by nation, race, region, religion – that you are
> rooted in that culture and the culture is what constitutes
> you – then it becomes a kind of treachery, a kind of treason
> against who you are, to want to pull yourself away from
> the culture you belong to by birth."[21]

We citizens belong to our culture: the nation possesses us for the way it has determined our community and internal values, our sense of order, and organization in life. We owe allegiance from birth to the nation that has constituted all we are. We are frustrated because it feels like a betrayal not only to the state but to ourselves.

Thus, we're caught in an existential and ideological dilemma: we believe that ruling class values do not align with our own interests, yet we are unsure how to establish our own authentic values without cultural touchstones or social agreement.

It seems to be the case that 1. we are constructed by our society, but 2. we feel alienated from the authorities who drive societal values, then 3. we are experiencing loss, uncertainty of identity, and vacancy of guidance, yet still an anxious desire to see potential progress. Postmodern America has been defined by this crisis of purpose, meaningfulness, and order.

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[21] Gutkin,"An Elaborate New Decorum."

So what fills this void and completes our senses of identity? What new social feature has risen at the apex of our vulnerability and malleability?

Influencers have easily satisfied this constitutive role. The inception of social networking has catalyzed unseating traditional institutions from power. They have gained the capability to affect our character, development, and behaviors. I think the authority and attention we give influencers and social media has replaced our deference to many former institutions, but the comparison to religion feels especially convincing. The way we put influencers on pedestals easily parallels worship practices.

Influencers now provide us with the community, identification, purpose, and rituals like organized religion used to. We build communities of fellow fans and commenters, united in the same affection for or desire to learn from a particular influencer. Not only do we have parasocial relationships with the online personalities, but we also form connections with other followers who are similarly "in the know". Calling yourself a fan of something shapes your identity, and signals certain virtues, status, or attitudes to others. If our favorite idols tweet their position on a current event, movement, or trend, our investment in their life inclines us to consider and/or support their view. As influencers consistently post, we repeatedly attend to their outlooks, thus developing customs of engagement and deference.

Influencers and parasocial relationships are the new social mechanisms through which we absorb ideologies. As influencers displace typical institutions, they cater to diverse needs. They can emulate activists, beauty gurus, spiritual advisors, marriage counselors, teachers, etc. While we used to defer to multiple sources for knowledge and guidance, the influencer has begun consolidating these roles. Past generations had greater

conviction that they could rely on their parents, pastors, teachers, the government, and a variety of leaders to aid their judgment. But because we doubt many of those organizations, we continue our search for understanding and expect influencers to advise us in these areas.

Influencers introduce the chance to diverge from ideologies which uphold the state. Instead of bolstering the hegemony, influencers are more likely to be independent cultural arbiters. Diverse voices are not obstructed from success in influencing as they are often inhibited from attaining status in narrow-minded elitist institutions. Poor people or folks from other marginalized groups, who struggled against the system to attain leadership and cultural sway, now have increased opportunities to gain status and affect their communities. Social boundaries between the public and influencers are more surmountable than the hurdles between the public and the traditional elite. There are better circumstances to promote ordinary voices. Ideology used to be transmitted through apparatuses that aligned to perpetuate the state's dominance; nowadays, we have greater direct power to pick our idols and leaders, and there's greater likelihood that they will be unique voices that subvert the ruling powers.

This is not to say that influencers will never support the status quo. Conservative influencers notoriously love tradition. And as touched on during my ISA commentary, democrats and liberals can advocate for pseudo-progressive movements that don't really dismantle the existing state structure.

We will still be subjected to forms of repressive ideology. Look to Gwyneth Paltrow constantly peddling health products, and endorsing detoxes and abnegation under the guise of self-care. Certainly there will be influencers expressing beliefs that serve

themselves, their managers, their capitalist interests. Still, this seems less coercive and constraining than institutional repression.

It is much easier to unfollow or deplatform influencers than to wholly overthrow elite institutions.[22] The ruling class and influencers are both minority populations that depend on the cooperation and deference of the majority. But our social movement toward treating influencers as societal leaders demonstrates a more powerful application of democracy and autonomy. It's easier to join or defect from fandoms, online communities, and subcultures with different values. It's more difficult to find school systems which don't all posit similarly traditional views, than it is to find progressive sources and teachers online. Influencers as new authorities still offer the public more autonomy than obligatory obedience to other institutions.

Furthermore, I think older influencers are much clearer products of their generation's dominant ISAs. Growing up alongside technology, millennials are the first generation with a real democratic power of attention, so there's greater likelihood we've evaded certain ruling class beliefs and adopted novel ones. Older generations developed without the same instantaneous on-demand access to ideas and technology, so they're less likely to escape perpetuating ruling class ideology. We haven't escaped the influence of traditional beliefs either, but I anticipate that successive generations will continue to grow further removed from elitist beliefs.

Our ability to connect with innumerable people online fosters a different kind of parasocial interpellation. We still develop our senses of identity (becoming 'subjects') through our affiliation with things, our comparison or opposition to other things in

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[22] The scope of this thesis could not explore the 'cancel culture' phenomenon, though it would be an apt place to continue scholarship on the authority we give and take from influencers.

society, our roles. Now, however, we express ourselves through our attachments to names and brands and the values they transmit. We feel recognition and affirmation of our identity and rank by being part of an 'in-crowd'. Identifying as a fan of something gives us a purpose to strive for. From Bieber-fever to K-pop stans, fanaticism can consume our identity and goals.

At the same time, the notion of interpellation also entails that followers are subjected to the will and power of the influencers. Influencers hold the authority and wield the ability to mold us. Similar to institutional repression, we still here feel the weight of expectations and standards. Constant attention on the Kardashians coerces us to internalize certain beauty ideals and shame other ideas. We are still socialized to adopt certain roles, though they aren't intrinsically tied to the ruling class anymore since there are countless accounts posting, getting attention.

Influencers appeal to inner desires. They tap into archetypes we want to embody. Like Gwyneth Paltrow evoking desires for beauty, mindfulness, and holistic wellness, or Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson inspiring our wishes for strength, masculinity, wealth, and entrepreneurship. Though we lost hope that hard work within the establishment will be rewarded, influencers excite a new sense of possibility. We see their kind of success as more attainable than ever before as we consume and project ourselves onto influencers.

Finally, the extent to which we can share our lives online affects how we now constitute our sense of self. Of course, as we have the ability to be the audience of new influencers and movements, we also have the opportunity to be the subjects of attention. Social networking expands the number of people who are our own potential audience, making our expression that much more important to us. Our affiliation to particular

brands and influencers is not just significant because of how it appeals to us, or signals

things to our immediate circles, but we have the chance of being exposed to

incomprehensible masses. The values we reflect are more publicized than ever, so it

especially matters to us who and what we identify with.

This theoretical terminology and analysis describes how those with social power

constitute our identities. It is not new that we internalize the beliefs of those who we

defer to. But, the types of people and organizations we cede authority to have changed

from institutional to independent influencers who propagate different sorts of values.

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Let me offer a few examples that will further illustrate the difference between the

power of institutionally granted authority and the power influencers have by our attention

and admiration for them. The reverence we show for influencers mimics religiosity.

There are affluent authoritative people who wield significant power in their industries,

but who do not inspire devout cult followings.

First, in one sphere of influence, let's consider powerful politicians. There are

judges, bureaucratic bigwigs, and state and local agents who have wealth and authority,

but whose names we might never recognize. They could shape our perceptions of

marriage, race, immigration, or international affairs through various lawmaking, rulings,

legal definitions. Thus they have power which extends to both our ideology and the real

practices of our communities and social interactions. These figures could have wealth and

status from their careers, and surely an ability to affect both the common ground of

beliefs we share and the material conditions we experience.

Yet these authorities do not have the cults of personality that follow Donald Trump or Alexandra Ocasio Cortez (AOC). There are many people across politics and law who make critical decisions, but who are relatively invisible compared to public facing politicians who dominate news segments. Trump and AOC not only have the privileges of status, financial power, and executive capabilities of the institutional type of power, but they also have public and online fame, widely known reputations, and parasocial fandoms of constituents. Trump and AOC hold power not only through the jurisdiction of their jobs, but also through our emotional attachments to them and their policies. Distinct from just any sort of politicians, they affect us because they have social capital since we are invested in them parasocially (whether we have trust or contempt for them).

Next, we can envision what it means to be powerful in business. There are extremely wealthy CEOS, entrepreneurs, tycoons, business moguls who make big decisions which widely affect people's daily lives. Their choices about production mechanisms, international commerce, and how they represent various social ideas within their marketing will affect our ideas and our material conditions. But many of them aren't household names like Jeffrey Bezos or Elon Musk. Perhaps some of these relatively unknown CEOS and government figures intentionally evade the public eye to avoid scrutiny and accountability. Some institutional authorities may prefer to be more like a faceless puppet master and reap the material benefits in private. But Bezos and Musk have parasocial presences, so they are not simply powerful because they are billionaires running companies, but because we recognize them. They directly provoke our emotions

in a way many businessmen don't. They gain additional power from their notoriety and our parasocial engagements.

Finally, we can imagine powerful people in media industries. There are Hollywood producers, executives across TV and music, even art curators whose careers grant them wealth and status, and who have a say in what media gets made and promoted. They have all the connections, make significant decisions about who gets represented, how situations get depicted, and where things are distributed. They have the finances and the opportunity to promote certain projects and ideas into mass culture. But not all of them have the cult following of Quentin Tarantino or Wes Anderson, Ariana Grande or Dwayne "the Rock" Johnson. These celebrities have public personas and fandom. They garner more influence to implant ideas and beliefs because they advertise their style, personalities, and try to foster relationships and cult followings.

And so on and so forth these analogies can go with televangelists like Joel Osteen, academics and authors like Ibram X. Kendi or Jordan Peterson, athletes like Shaquille O'Neal, chefs like Guy Fieri, etc. Certain figures have a magnetism and public persona that sets them apart from others in their field. There are exceptionally talented and rich studio musicians who play on the recordings of so many of our favorite songs, but whose names or faces we might never recognize. Yet people make actual pilgrimages to see Michael Jackson's hands at Grauman's Chinese Theater. Not all power is so sublime, not all authorities employ this influencer-esque route. Only particular characters provoke such mythical legacies.

Thus, there is a marked distinction between 1. a general institutionally-granted power, when you have authority and people deferring to you for your wealth, status,

talent, expertise, or otherwise, and 2. influencer power which functions as authority because fandoms will idolize and defer to the influencer's ideology. Both types of power can affect material and epistemic conditions, but only the latter does so through establishing parasocial relationships. Institutional authorities might play a big part in constituting our values and identities, but they do not do it through the same kind of emotional meaningfulness. Influencers wield power and establish cultural presence through cultivating connections to their audience.

On the other hand, Harry Styles also has the power to shift society. 'Cool' is an ambiguous evaluation; it's a social construction that can be subjective, relative, and/or geographical. But if Harry Styles professes that 70's revival fashion is 'cool', it becomes a social truth. As fans defer to his authority as a trendsetter, his ideas spread and materialize. Brands that recognize Styles's sizable following will start producing this sort of clothing to cater to him and his audience. So the market becomes saturated with 70's revival fashion, demonstrating Harry's influence on our ideas and substantial reality. Because Styles has cultivated a following and we are attached to and honor his opinions, an idea turns into a pervasive product turns into a prevailing norm.

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Both sorts of authority socially construct our world, but they affect us through different mechanisms. A judge can say something and it becomes true. They can pronounce you married or convict you to imprisonment. They make rulings about what defines marriage, thereby shaping our norms. Their position gives them power over both material conditions (the convicted man's wealth, where he now must reside, what sorts of marriages will occur) and socially constructed ideas (what it means to be a criminal, what it means to be married).

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In other cases, Elon Musk can retract his support for some cryptocurrency, and the value *will* plummet just because people believe him. Because he's established his status and acumen through his company, and has a particular balance of candidness and showmanship in his interviews and social media interactions, people trust the legitimacy of his endorsements.

The proximity we feel to an authority affects how we embrace their narratives. General institutional authority can shape cultural norms, though it's more indirect, like through representation in media, advertising, or within legal definitions. Whether or not I internalize these ideas could be unrelated to the actual progenitor of the idea. Whereas influencers affect norms because we are personally connected to them. Institutional powers tend to make indirect emotional appeals – like inciting fear of hell generally, or marketing about families generally. Influencers evoke emotions on a personal level, and therefore have a more direct effect on our values.

We also defer to influencers because of the proximity we feel to our own potential fame. Influencers have a type of social clout that is not exclusive to one type of person or one set of tastes. We consider social media fame to be significantly more attainable than institutional success. Whether or not they really represent us, we embrace them because we are projecting our own dreams of fame. By some combination of hard work or charisma, we imagine that we too could earn recognition. This projection we put onto influencers makes us more likely to defer to them as authorities and role models.

In addition, just as ISAs sustain power through providing luxuries, influencers also acquire our obedience because we are entertained by them. They offer a classic sort of bread and circuses that occupy our attention.

Following these social trends, traditional institutions currently try to emulate the influencer model. There used to be a clearer distinction between the celebrity of a movie star versus the recognition of a brand versus the renown of a president. But our politicians act more and more like our celebrities. Car brands, grocery stores, restaurants, the apps themselves, all anthropomorphize themselves more than capitalism has ever seen before in order to connect to their consumers. Churches need to have good social media management. Therapists, teachers, interior designers, chiropractors, and more are all trying to model the influencer. More than just conveying information, these people, organizations, and products are trying to socialize themselves to foster customer loyalty and a sense of interpersonal connection. The influencer is both relatable and likable to the masses, yet an idealized object of admiration too. Different social institutions are trying to recreate this sort of dynamic with the public.

It's not that using personal attachment or emotional investment is new to politics or business or media in some way or another. Institutions have always utilized storytelling trying to coax our emotions and persuade the naturalization of their ideals. They have been putting charming babies and puppies in advertisements for decades. In general, emotional appeals are not new. But there's an undeniably heightened tone with which brands try to appear personable. A shoe brand will post memes and make statements about Black Lives Matter. Brands are trying to characterize themselves more and more so that our personal values or attachments become enmeshed in their holistic ideology.

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Throughout this paper, I have alluded to the loss of the American dream as we feel failed and underserved by our institutions. The American dream narrative is rooted in the Protestant work ethic. We connect happiness, success, and wealth to hard work, personal effort, and intelligence. We are taught that anybody can find success in the land of opportunity. You can flourish and elevate yourself through enough personal effort and time investment

However, as we've established, this myth is disenchanted when we acknowledge the institutional barriers that hinder marginalized groups from contributing to culture. The elite maintain the American dream narrative because it validates their own status, hides the injustice of exclusionary privilege, and provides the public with the hope to continue working and maintaining the systems of power. The Protestant work ethic and prosperity gospel imply that we earn our blessings as a result of dedication and hard work; but this obscures the reality that some people are blessed, or rather socially privileged (not divinely preferred), in virtue of their skin color, gender, or other factors. In spite of their earnest perseverance and hard work, many people will never reap the divine rewards that were promised.

In opposition to the predominance of upper class dynasties, the people have reimagined the American dream embodied in the influencer. Social media does not necessarily discriminate by status and wealth and homogeneity – people from all backgrounds are given platforms to participate. People from small towns with no wealth can gain clout with simply their smartphone.

While there are still people in positions of privilege with higher opportunity, marginalized groups are not nearly as discredited as they are by institutional powers.

Influencing is unique from institutional authority because dynasties are far more difficult to orchestrate. Yes, the Kardashian-Jenners and their children are a sort of empire, but on the other hand, look at Tiffany Trump. Just because you're connected to an influencer and have easier access to that status, that does not inherently mean you will have the power to lead the masses. There are social media algorithm that will privilege cisgender white folks with more exposure. While these systemic advantages should not be overlooked, the barriers to popularity are still more accessible than their traditional counterparts. Parasocial interpersonal skill is not hereditary, and it's not exclusive to one class, race, or gender.

Though many influencers still come from affluent backgrounds, our deference to them nevertheless demonstrates progress toward greater autonomy and democracy. There have been controversies about musicians who are 'industry plants': influencers who are portrayed with a humble background, but whose talent and effort took them from the bedroom to sold out concerts. These stories hide the family's wealth and privileges or the artists' pre-existing connections with notable producers. While influencers like this may exist, the very fact that we feel betrayed and duped by their lies and shortcuts affirms that we so badly crave authenticity, real work being rewarded, and the knowledge that we bestowed their power upon them.

Influencers have become our role models and inspirations because they represent the status we dream of achieving through more honorable means. They affirm the dream that you can achieve greater opportunities and influence with a vision, a unique quality, and effort.

The lingering culture of American meritocracy predisposes us to see an influencer's success and assume they're gifted with intelligence or taste. The authority of some influencers is warranted for their demonstrations of talent, specialized knowledge, or skills. We marvel at the natural gifts of an opera singer with perfect pitch, and we respect their dedication to the craft and unique expertise. Certainly there are academics like authors, historians, or doctors, who earn their fame for being highly published and involved in their field of study. But there are many cases when we overextend this tendency for deference and we are too occupied in influencers' opinions on random topics.

We confer a kind of halo effect onto influencers that we don't usually grant to institutional authority. We amplify our positive impression of an influencer's talent or charisma, and assume their expertise in other fields. We would normally limit the judge's ability to advise on matters of the law and justice. We let teachers discipline during school, we let pastors guide our spiritual lives. On the other hand, the trust and parasocial relationships we build with influencers bias us to overestimate their wisdom. We assume they must know the secrets to success and best ways to live if they've achieved their status.

But why do we privilege the viewpoints of influencers? Why has Joe Rogan, a former MMA commentator, become some people's primary political resource? I don't usually ask my doctor for love advice, and I don't ask a reverend what diet he recommends. Yet, certain comedians will do sponsored ads for meal kit services. Famous makeup artists will do Q&As and therapize their followers. Larry David and Matt Damon are in Crypto.com commercials. Yes, they're wealthy, but their expertise is in writing and

acting, not really financial investments. Why does Jordan Peterson get so much credit outside psychology? Why do we care about model Gigi Hadid's pasta recipe? We grant influencers very broad power to construct social views on seemingly arbitrary topics.

This isn't to demand that we cannot or should not be well-rounded people. It's great to have multifaceted talents and interests. Celebrities shouldn't be excluded from sharing what they do outside of work. Nevertheless, the trust which we give to celebrities' recommendations, hobbies, and personal affinities seems disproportionate compared to the bevy of other resources available. And many will chastise celebrities who post about activism, for example, commenting something like, "stick to acting, not politics". I believe there are issues, like politics, for which we should all participate in dialogue. But we should remember that often an influencer's opinions will be amplified, but not necessarily more correct.

In any case, I see the fluctuation toward democratically chosen autonomous influencers as excellent counter-elitist progress. I imagine that our democratic-mindedness will only increase as we find influencers in progressively more niche spheres. We are correcting for the mass culture that dominated ages of American history by proliferating deeper subcultures. From cottagecore to goth, from Mormon mommy bloggers to our favorite underground bands with only a few thousand listeners, I think we will retreat to seek recognition and identity from smaller tribes.

I witness much more agency, intelligence, and optimism in this influencer movement than many others give modern generations credit for. Rather than accepting mass culture, we are striving to reinvigorate democratic participation in society through technological parasocial mechanisms. It's easy to write off our obsession with celebrities

as simply vapid phone addiction. It's not untrue that we have developed new dependencies on the internet. But these sweeping statements do a disservice to Americans who aim to learn different things, to progress, and to live as best as they can. While deferring to celebrities might be an imperfect method, it is us trying to optimize our world, not us just giving into anti-intellectualism and laziness.

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It's worth noting that QAnon is also a movement rejecting elitism and institutions. QAnon is a right-wing populist movement with extreme distrust in the ruling class. While I see the elite as problematically discriminatory and dynastic, QAnon goes so far as to believe that 'the deep state' is a literal cannibal satanic child-sacrificing illuminati society conspiring against the masses.[23]

They have been let down by the government, and have come to distrust any adjacent institution that the government endorses. This leads us to QAnon anti-vaxxers who deny scientific findings as bogus. They go to the extremes of autonomy that lead to paranoia and skepticism. They often recommend people "Do the research" themselves, leading to wild conclusions from people who aren't specialists.[24] We shouldn't be so independent that we cannot trust doctors, specialists, or widely-accepted realities.

QAnon detests the government, education system, church, and other institutions – but they also disparage groups that are marginalized by the ruling powers. They hate feminists, Jewish people, people of color. However, followers of QAnon tend to discredit all these peoples and institutions *except* for the military and police. Believing themselves

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[23] ADL, "QAnon: A Glossary."
[24] Ibid.

to be a special sect of suppressed intelligentsia, they intend to achieve their liberation from the 'deep state' by any violent means necessary.

Instead of attempting to promote different or more representative people to leadership, they seem to have lost faith in people entirely. Though I've made a case that many of our institutions have mistreated us, and I know there are certainly greedy people behind our flawed society, I do not think people are wholly bad or doomed. QAnon rhetoric is more antagonistic than hopeful as it spews militant alt-right rhetoric. As I've tried to argue, I see positivity in our sincere attempt to find cultural leaders who will propel society.

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I'd like to elaborate or reiterate some of the benefits and detriments I observe in our new influencer social phenomena.

The diversity of influencers has provided many people with representation for the first time. Differently-abled people can more easily find communities for support. People of different races can see more successful role models. It affirms the self-worth and development of younger and older generations alike to witness people like them being uplifted.

We are even affirmed by seeing influencers who don't overtly represent our identities. Dolly Parton and Lady Gaga are icons to gay men; some queer folks feel recognized through worshiping the subversive personalities of divas. People are able to get in touch with new facets within themselves even through witnessing other people's self-expression.

Influencers facilitate communities of like-minded people across states and countries. They have provided some people with a sense of belonging and interconnectedness who previously felt lonely, isolated, or outcast.

The social media era has provided opportunities for positive social movements. From March for Our Lives to Black Lives Matter, or supporting refugees of war and natural disasters, influencers boosting movements have promoted exponentially more participation in crowdfunding, raising awareness, and organizing. Certainly, some social media activism will be performative, but more attention to injustices (even if fleeting) is a good thing. It is more of a starting point than a sustained tangible action, but it still enables people to mobilize and advance a cause.

One of my favorite moving stories (though it sounds absurd at face value) is that of Jordan Turpin, a 17 year old girl at the time, who escaped an extremely abusive household to get help and rescue her 12 trapped siblings, and who attributed her bravery and inspiration to Justin Bieber.[25] It's easy to dismiss celebrity idolatry as silly or vapid (especially coming from teenage girls), but some influencers can serve as earnest encouragement to do good and dream better for ourselves and our world.

Negatively, there are plenty of times when our fanaticism thwarts our critical thinking and fact checking. Not as intentionally evidence-adverse as QAnon, Taylor Swift fans did a disservice to their own values by accidentally sharing Mein Kampf quotes.[26] Whether to troll or to make an example of her fandom, a user edited innocuous Hitler quotes beside photos of Taylor Swift. In blind support and unwavering deference to

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[25] 20/20, "Escape From a House of Horror."
[26] Greenfield, et al. "Who Said It?"

Swift, twitter users widely circulated the images before realizing their mistakes. That we rarely second guess our favorite influencers demonstrates a cultish affection.

Lest I shame exclusively young girls for not checking sources, fact checking is an extensive problem in a headline age of social media. Whether it's our favorite celebrity or a viral circulating news source, we have not cultivated good habits of verifying stories. We are prone to abandon critical thinking or fact checking given our parasocial relationships with influencers and the groupthink of a fandom. Many politicians, news anchors, or political commentators thrive off their audiences' indiscriminate support. Some laws and academic texts are written in such jargon to be inaccessible to the average reader, so that they can mislead the public or slip contentious values into the common ground.

Steadfast supporters of Kanye West, Woody Allen, Roman Polanki, Ariana Grande (among many problematic influencers) end up suppressing valid concerns from marginalized groups. These artists and their fans perpetuate existing institutional biases by normalizing things like sexual violence and harrasment towards women, normalizing racial insensitivity, misattributing victimhood, etc.

Influencers may need to be held accountable for their inaction as well. Neil Young and Joni Mitchell removed their music from Spotify after issuing them an ultimatum to drop *The Joe Rogan Experienc*e for its dangerous Covid-19 misinformation. Many people urged Taylor Swift, among others of the most popular artists on Spotify, to do the same. Though together they would have had enough sway to convince Spotify, many artists would not speak out against Rogan directly.

Like institutions, influencers can exploit vulnerable groups. Celebrities lie about their beauty procedures and distort the truth. They attribute their perfect skin, hair, physique to whatever sponsored product they're collaborating with, instead of being forthright about the hours and thousands of dollars in resources that go into them looking perfect. They manipulate young people, for example, to internalize this reality and thereby internalize shame. This shame makes them the ideal consumers for whatever they intend to sell. Influencers can create echo chambers and distort reality for their own financial gain, much to their audience's detriment.

Yet, I wonder whether any of these drawbacks are truly more absurd than the cognitive dissonance and betrayal of self-supporting values we experience under any form of social hierarchy and traditional abusive systems. Are we any more foolish to defer to celebrities than the institutional elite?

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Overall, I wanted this thesis to critically engage with the common notion that contemporary society and younger generations especially are anti-intellectual, lazy, and addicted to technology. People frequently resort to that line of thinking instead of charitably recognizing the desperation to see representation in leadership and the hopefulness that we can progress through uplifting new voices. We are not simply 'sheeple' following the algorithms – we do use our agency and autonomy as we seek out new guides.

The fact that people perpetuate the beliefs that popular culture and social networking are dumb is evidence in itself for high brow elitism. The elite benefit from the narrative that its dumb to trust these new sources of authority, instead of holding a more

nuanced view. I hope to have revealed some of the more neutral or positive assessments of this cultural development.

As we conceive of ourselves differently, we gravitate toward different kinds of authority. Deference to influencers represents a progressive opposition to elitism and an earnest desire to shift culture.

But perhaps it's inadvertently become just a regime change without major structural change yet. Have we just shifted what is idolized and commodified, from religion being lucrative to media being most lucrative and central to our lives? Have we just reworked a new form of hierarchy? In manys ways the same mechanisms of deference remain. But it is noteworthy that it *has* provided new voices to contribute to shaping the progress of society. We're in a period of generational upheaval that will shift our

I hope that this project opens questions for future further scholarship. As such a fresh yet extremely relevant phenomenon, it is important to tackle this under-theorized kind of power of influencing. Our discourse should have less condescension, and open more dialogue about the progression and sentiment that follows.

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