**Varieties of an Atheist Public in a Digital Age:
The Politics of Recognition and the Recognition of Politics**

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Abstract:

With the rise of atheism as a *cause célèbre* in the last decade or more, media and others have offered many interpretations for the apparent growth of nonbelief, ranging from the apocalyptic to the utopian. Many cite the Internet as a major contributing factor to this growth; undoubtedly new media have provided atheism with greater visibility. In this article it is argued that atheism as an Internet phenomenon ought to be understood less as the manifestation of a social fact and more as the discursive constitution of one or more publics in Michael Warner's sense of the term. To this end, the article draws attention to a body of data that has received limited attention in scholarship to date, namely the blogs of some notable atheists. These are limited to blogs originating in the United States, and especially those by authors who identify as 'progressive'. Thus, the conclusions drawn are not imagined to apply outside that context, nor are the sources employed considered to be representative of American atheism. But these limitations present no bar to the analysis of the particular discursive practices of the authors in question. Following Warner, virtual atheism as a public or publics has little capacity for agency: even if its growth as a social fact is true, and even as it develops agendas for social change, it is neither discursively or substantively robust enough to challenge any aspect of the contemporary neo-liberal order.

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Varieties of an Atheist Public in a Digital Age: The Politics of Recognition and the Recognition of Politics

1. Introduction

No doubt, discussions of atheism have reached a pitch not seen since the heyday of Freethought in the 19th century, if at all. At least as much for their published works, the media presences of Dawkins, Hitchens and Harris have attracted the notice of a much wider audience. At the same time, the new media presences of greater and lesser known atheists have created unique vehicles for new kinds of audience. It is debatable how “new” this atheism is; what is harder to dispute is the length and breadth of the mediated reach that atheism now enjoys. Today, atheism is performed at least as much across a variety of integrated or intersecting virtual networks as it is within traditional media of print, television or even the annual meetings of atheist organizations. It is as a phenomenon of the Internet age that contemporary atheism is considered in this article.

The sources of first concern are atheist blogs. The atheist blogosphere is a very rich field for the investigation of non-belief, but heretofore it has only received occasional scholarly attention. As a medium for the constitution of non-belief, little literature exists at all. Of special interest are the blogs of PZ Myers and Greta Christina, hosted on *Freethought Blogs*, a major network of atheist bloggers founded by Myers and Ed Brayton, and those of JT Eberhard and Hemant Mehta on *Patheos*, one of the Internet’s largest religion blogging platforms. The selection of these bloggers in particular is based upon two general factors: 1) they are preoccupied with progressive social change; and 2) their writing has a certain status given the frequency of its citation and re-citation within other Internet fora. Sources of secondary concern are the websites of two novel atheist initiatives, the Clergy Project and Openly Secular. These are significant for the way in which they take advantage of the Internet in order to overcome the shortcomings of traditional atheist institutions, and the way that – overtly and covertly – they attempt to depoliticize atheist belonging.

The sources employed are very selective, as a practical necessity, but more importantly because what is attempted here is not a survey of “virtual atheism.” Rather, the sources are meant to illustrate particular discourses within atheism that have come to greater prominence in about the last half dozen years. All the sources originate in the United States although as Internet entities they naturally have a degree of international reach.

Undoubtedly the data employed suffer important limitations with respect to the conclusions that might be drawn from them. A number of issues and themes to be delineated are specific to the (North) American context and thus do not represent atheism as a

phenomenon in other pluralist states. The number of atheist voices is very small so the reach, influence, and prevalence of the discursive formations they advance might be questioned. In fact, as will be shown, the atheism expressed by voices of this kind has been vociferously contested. On the other hand, this article is not concerned with establishing atheism as a social fact; it only evaluates interactive discourses by which the constitution of atheism as such is pursued.

Recent scholarship on atheism indicates that, even with the rise of the Internet, translating atheist identification into demonstrable real world effect remains a difficulty for advocates and organizations (see Cimino and Smith 2011; Kettell 2014). This is necessarily the case, it is argued here, for atheism as a public has no reality outside of its own attentiveness. In drawing such a conclusion, this article is greatly influenced theoretically by Michael Warner's conception of publics and counterpublics (2002). As the article identifies a particular genealogical moment in contemporary atheism, Warner's work serves as a sort of critical discourse analysis which invites the consideration of the power and the limits of Internet-mediated atheism.

Imagining virtual atheism in Warner's terms proves fruitful in several respects. First, it recognizes that the contemporary phenomenon of atheism is, in the first instance, discursive. Second, the forcefully expressed resistance to particular moral, social and political claims for atheism reveals one of the limits of attention for particular atheist discourses; contestation may secure the continued circulation of those discourses, but it also implies a price-point beyond which those who poll as atheist decline any commerce in such ideas. Additionally, as Warner indicates, the existence of a public is no guarantee of agency. This is important insofar as extra-atheist notices of these discourses assume that they are socially significant; but if they are not, what is to be made of the present interest in 'atheism' whatever its shape?

Journalistic and popular notices of atheism tend quite casually to characterize it as a community, identity or a minority. Warner's idea of a public destabilizes such social matters-of-fact permitting a consideration of atheist identification and sociability in other terms:

one can join a church and then stop going. In some cases, one can even be born into one. Publics, by contrast, lacking any institutional being, commence with the moment of attention, must continually predicate renewed attention, and cease to exist when attention is no longer predicated. They are virtual entities, not voluntary associations (2002, p.61-62).

The atheist discourses examined in this article affirm notions of an atheist community, encourage atheist identification, and claim systemic oppression, but it is difficult to see how these exist outside of discourses about them. This is to say that insofar as a public "exists *by virtue of being addressed*" (Warner 2002, p.50) atheism exists only insofar as some audience attends to expressions of it. Reading, linking, writing and commenting within digital media offer some semblance of the communal, but this only occurs in the context of those acts. In Warner's terms, an atheist public "has no existence outside of the activity of its own discursive circulation" (2002, p.75).

Atheists may claim that, thanks to the Internet, the propagation of atheism is more organic, spontaneous, and even more democratic today (see below) than it was when Dawkins, Harris and others published their influential manifestos. But the fact remains that authority still coalesces around particular voices. And despite the fact that ‘indefinite strangers’ have the opportunity to react to these voices, atheist discourse is still formed by those with special access to the means for the management of their own attending public. Such discourses serve their own reproduction first, and therefore the political aims they promote are both self-affirming and in search of further affirmation. The authors examined would not write if they did not earnestly desire to represent atheism in their own images:

There is no speech or performance addressed to a public that does not try to specify in advance, in countless highly condensed ways, the lifeworld of its circulation ... Public discourse says not only: “Let a public exist,” but: “Let it have this character, speak this way, see the world in this way.” It then goes out in search of confirmation that such a public exists ... success being further attempts to cite, circulate, and realize the world-understanding it articulates. (Warner 2002: 82)

This is not to suggest that atheist bloggers simply pursue celebrity. They must believe that rallying a public may lead to action:

Without a faith – justified or not – in selforganized publics, organically linked to our activity in their very existence, capable of being addressed, and capable of action, we would be nothing but the peasants of capital – which of course we might be, and some of us more than others. (Warner 2002, p.52)

However, it is apparent that new mediated forms of atheism have had no more political success than older ones: they do not translate identity into social effect, they simply intensify it (see Smith and Cimino 2012 and 2014).

Insofar as this article conceives of contemporary atheism as one or more publics, “indefinite audiences” that exist “only in relation to texts and their circulation” (Warner 2002, p.50), formally it illustrates three forms of an atheist public. First to be discussed: atheist responses to polling about rates of atheism; metrics suggesting rapid growth lead partisan voices to suggest that these are translatable into political effect. Second: the treatment of mechanisms of ‘coming out atheist’, as a parallel with the gay rights movement; more like within a counterpublic, atheism here is imagined to risk dire social cost rendering it something like an ascriptive identity. Third: social justice concerns as a function of atheism; this “responsible atheism” affirms that mere atheism is meaningless without attention to matters of gender, race, and other identifications. Yet, for all the emphasis on liberation and social justice, responsible atheist discourse – with its American orientation – offers little serious resistance to the neoliberal state and in fact cannot imagine politics outside of such a framework (see Winegard and Winegard 2011). But this equally applies to recent coming out campaigns – especially that promoted by Openly Secular – for the depoliticization of atheism is essential to them. And it applies to atheist enthusiasm for polling, for in the appearance of

growing numbers is imagined the promise of electoral influence. But can atheists as political constituents – as a self-organized public – be anything more than a minor special interest?

While this article focusses upon discourses of progressive atheist identification, the capacity for agency within, for example, libertarian atheism could also be interrogated. For it is argued that intra-atheist contestation of values suggests not a political impasse, it reveals a discursive threshold for the estrangement of progressive and conservative, “militant” and “accommodationist” atheisms. To put the general claim of this article in the strongest terms: American atheism has no capacity to effect social change, not because it is riven with political factionalism, but because its political discourses – as functions of nonbelief – are unlikely to retain sufficient attention to them. In the marketplace of ideas, atheists compete as much among themselves as they do with the religious.

2. An Atheist Public by the Numbers

Not without some reflexivity, not entirely without self-consciousness, and undoubtedly on account of its place as a hyper-mediator in the Internet age, virtual atheism readily embraces the constitutive tools of quantitative social science within its discursive practices in order to realize “the lifeworld of its circulation.” This is expressed most fundamentally in the fetish for the data of polling, that “elaborate apparatus designed to characterize a public as social fact independent of any discursive address or circulation” (Warner 2002, p.54). Warner is additionally instructive on this point: if this atheism is a public, it has “to be understood as mediated by cultural forms;” “some of those forms, such as polling, work by denying their own constitutive role as cultural forms” (2002, p.54). This is not to suggest that atheist appeals to polling are deceived about polling’s constitutive role; rather, this capacity is embraced to a degree as a part of the “faith ... in selforganized publics.” Favourable polls generate enthusiastic responses and give life to the image of atheism as a growing social trend.

No demographic of non-belief has received more attention than that of the “nones,” those usually identified as persons with no religious affiliation. As this old category from numerous 20th century polls has become more and more problematic to statisticians, social scientists and scholars of religion for its lack of specificity, and as its apparent growth alarms some in mainstream media (see Thomson-Deveaux 2013 for example), many atheists (among others) have become increasingly enthusiastic about it, willing to read all kinds of significance into trends pollsters have identified.

Blogger JT Eberhard responds to a *USA Today* report about 2012 Pew data on the nones as follows:

These people are on our side. They’re not religious. But the problem is that they’re not helping us either. They’re apathetic.

And we need them. Think about it, how much easier is it to convince an atheist that religion does damage that is worth caring about than to convince a Christian that god doesn’t exist? We need to get the apathetic ones to care, and that means staying on point

about the damage religion does to the world – specifically, the way the intrusion of religion to government and the school system affects them.

That's when the politicians will listen. (Eberhard 2012)

By a series of elisions, Eberhard blunts the fact that nonbelief as a social fact does not affirm his image of it. The hill he must first climb is not electoral politics; it is the construction of his constituency. If this is the case, one might ask, is Eberhard pursuing an idea or a public?

Hemant Mehta, also blogging on the *Patheos* Atheist Channel, has also looked at the Pew data for the “nones,” and to similar ends. Focussing on Pew's explanations for the rise of the nones, he observes:

there's no mention at all of the Internet. That's a religion destroyer as much as anything else we've ever seen — open access to information, the ability to prove your pastors wrong, the overwhelming number of atheists who make their case online. (Mehta 2012a)

Yet Mehta's own reporting betrays him: open information *via* the Internet neither generates atheists, nor prompts them to any action.

First, it is to be noted that Mehta previously posed the question, “Would You Be an Atheist without the Internet?” on this same blog (2009). Referring to the responses Mehta received, Smith and Cimino are much more circumspect (2012, p.27; see also Cimino and Smith 2014, Kindle Locations 1733 and following). To simplify Smith and Cimino's conclusions, the Internet is not so much responsible for making atheists as it is for the intensification of this identification.

Second, Mehta declines to parse the difference between religion-as-affiliation and religion-as-belief in his characterization of the nones. If he did, he would also have to acknowledge that the Internet has also produced *loci* for new types of religious or spiritual authority (Ravitz 2014; Turner 2007): imagining an atheist political constituency comprising the nones becomes troubled if they turn out to be looking for religion elsewhere.

Furthermore, Mehta himself acknowledges some uncomfortable features within the Pew data: “24% of self-proclaimed atheists/agnostics are “absolutely certain” or “fairly certain” there's a God or a “universal spirit.”” (Mehta 2012a). His response?

Those numbers should be 0% across the board. It just goes to show: Being an atheist isn't the same as being completely rational. We might use the same labels but how we interpret them is far from universal. (Mehta 2012a)

Without acknowledging it, Mehta observes a boundary of estrangement (Warner 2002, p.81, 88). If he cannot recognize almost a quarter of the demographic he seeks to claim for atheism – labelling them irrational – how can he imagine that it might be led to the political engagement he seeks?

To return to the question of the politics of the nones, Mehta cites Pew data indicating that more than 60% of the religiously unaffiliated are registered Democrats or lean Democratic and that a vast majority are progressive on social issues like abortion and same

sex marriage.¹ But then he practically begs for the attention of those progressive nones as well as the attention of Democratic politicians: “these results won’t mean anything unless we can find a way to harness these numbers and use them to achieve our political goals” (Mehta 2012a). In a subsequent post, he declares that “politicians are wasting a unique opportunity by ignoring us” (2012b), and finally concludes almost with resignation that “The danger isn’t that the Nones are all-of-a-sudden going to vote for the other party. The danger is that, if Democrats ignore us long enough, we may not vote at all.”

Mehta and Eberhard see a public in polling data; they want those demographics to attend to their reproduction of them; they imagine that those are translatable into a consensus as social fact; and finally, they think that the existence of such a voting block will lead not only to electoral success but also the alteration of the legislative agenda of future (Democratic) governments.

It is tempting to describe these hopes for recognition and subsequently political influence as naïve or delusional. But even if they are, this is mostly beside the point. Mehta and Eberhard address their own audiences, cheerleading the collective belonging to some growing constituency, while performing the plea for recognition primarily before familiars. Above all else, these discourses on the nones and politics predicate attention to it and its renewal.

Atheist organizations new and old exist, in part, for this very purpose and seek such affirmation through the sale of memberships, magazines, and hosting annual and occasional gatherings. Yet they have failed to register substantial growth reflecting trends reported by pollsters (Cimino and Smith 2014, Chapter 1). The Internet, according to Mehta, promises a fundamental reorganization of non-belief and its coalescence into some kind of force; but, as this article attempts to demonstrate, it is difficult to imagine a correlation between the degree to which the Internet is drawing unbelievers into a body and anything more than the slightest political successes (never mind, for now, the presence of many voices far less progressive than Mehta’s within atheist virtual worlds).

To the degree that atheist discourse circulates “in struggle with its own conditions” (Warner 2002, p.76), novel means for its reproduction must constantly be pursued. In the age of ever evolving social media, such means have been developed that invite the non-religious to identify themselves as members of the publics these media seek to create. A couple of these are examined below, less in their own terms than for their place in the greater world of atheist discursive practice.

3. Coming Out of the Closet and into an Atheist Public

If strangers trouble the existence of an atheist public, if signs of their attention are required to maintain such a public, then creating the means for them to recognize themselves in this public is imperative. Long-standing atheist institutions have struggled with this. Here, two new vehicles are considered: the Clergy Project and Openly Secular are Internet projects which invite identification with non-belief in whatever form participants choose to describe it. More than just novel means to capture a public, these projects are based upon the

seemingly indubitable notion that atheist identification may bear a social cost or stigma, for practicing clergy (obviously) but others (in very religious America) as well.

It is in such terms that atheism continues to be conceived of as mirroring the gay experience. This atheism is perhaps better captured by Warner's conception of a counterpublicⁱⁱ (although I do not think the idea adheres in a very strong way and counterpublics are still publics anyway):

A counterpublic maintains at some level, conscious or not, an awareness of its subordinate status. The cultural horizon against which it marks itself off is not just a general or wider public, but a dominant one The subordinate status of a counterpublic does not simply reflect identities formed elsewhere; participation in such a public is one of the ways its members' identities are formed and transformed. A hierarchy or stigma is the assumed background of practice. One enters at one's own risk. (Warner 2002, p.86-87)

Discourses here emphasize (real or imagined) experiences of bigotry against atheists, hostility in challenges to religious encroachment in the public sphere, and the apparent alienation felt by 'closeted' atheists and the deconverted even if they are 'out'. Individuals have undoubtedly had experiences that were painful and dispiriting. However, the classification of them as a whole, as the ground of an atheist subalternity or counterpublic, merits interrogation. Some undoubtedly 'enter at their own risk' (Warner 2002, p.87), but the fora in which they do so are rendered relatively safe by the Internet's capacity for anonymity; otherwise, the authors of these fora experience little of this risk.

Again, polling as constitutive of atheism as a social fact, and as alienated from the dominant culture, is important. In tandem with statistics that suggest the tremendous growth of atheism, those that demonstrate popular contempt for atheists perversely buoy the hopes of virtual atheists. Some atheists treat all of this polling as of a piece. PZ Myers states:

Atheists are one of the fastest growing groups in the world.ⁱⁱⁱ At the same time, the latest Pew poll shows that they're the most distrusted group in America, and Americans would be less likely to support a Godless presidential candidate than an unfaithful or a pot-smoking one (2014a).

To this may be added polls affirming that: atheists are perceived as a threat to moral values (Jacobs 2014); the religiously unaffiliated and others agree that atheists face a lot of discrimination (Blake 2014); and atheists are among the least trusted segment of society (Mehta 2011a).

Additionally, anecdotes personalizing atheist experience of hostility from the religious – family, friend and foe – circulate and recirculate within atheist fora. Two are particularly notable for the purposes of this article. First: Ryan Bell, Seventh Day Adventist pastor and adjunct professor of theology who decided to spend a "year without god" (Bell 2014); as a result he lost his congregation, his job, and finally what was left of his faith (NPR Staff 2014; Mehta 2014abd). Second: Jessica Ahlquist opposed the display of a prayer banner in her high school; with the resulting law suit and her victory, Ahlquist was attacked personally, in the

media, and received death threats for her actions (“Ahlquist v. Cranston” n.d.; “Jessica Ahlquist” n.d.; Mehta 2012bc).

The political value of these two cases is illustrated by the fact that Hemant Mehta (discussed above) undertook crowdsourced financial campaigns in support of both (Mehta, 2012c; 2014b). More generally, they are significant as respectively each epitomizes the imagined constituencies pursued by the Clergy Project and Openly Secular. In an environment in which atheism appears to be on the rise, and appears to be subject to widespread hostility, these initiatives provide new means for coming out, forming and transforming atheist identities. So, these appropriations of the closet metaphor represent novel means of capturing the attention of an atheist public in ways that, advocates hope, are more stable and intimate.

Beginning with the Clergy Project (TCP), the approach taken is an indirect one. But, by way of introduction, the following is taken from its home page:

Our Mission

The Clergy Project’s Mission is to provide support, community, and hope to current and former religious professionals who no longer hold supernatural beliefs.

Within Our Membership ~

A sense of true community is cultivated and a network of practical support developed for TCP members through our private, safeguarded, multifaceted Online Community. A breath of real hope is discovered as members interact with others and encounter the stories of hundreds of other former believers on similar journeys as their own. Here our Community Participants discover that above all, they are not alone. (The Clergy Project n.d.)

The privacy of TCP makes it difficult to consider it in more depth (for analyses of unbelieving clergy see Dennett and LaScola 2010; 2013) while any such analysis is really beyond the scope of this article. However, before proceeding two more features of the TCP mission are notable. First, it administers a “Transitional Assistance grant” which is endowed by the Stiefel Freethought Foundation (see below). Second, its extra-TCP mediated reach extends to:

- The TCP Facebook Page
- The TCP YouTube Channel
- Partnerships with Likeminded Organizations
- Our Presence at Secular Conventions
- Our Speaking & Interview Schedule
- Narratives Shared on the TCP Website’s “Our Stories” Page
- Tools Provided on the TCP Website’s Resources Page

Altogether, this mission, and particularly the new media shape it has taken, make it something quite novel within the institutionalization of nonbelief, like Openly Secular which is examined below.

For the purposes of this article, TCP is important for the cross-citational fields in which it serves as a template for the organization of ‘coming out’ and a myth of community-foundation. This is illustrated by an article on the progressive news site *AlterNet* written by Greta Christina (2012; reposted 2014b) who also writes on *Freethought Blogs*. Ostensibly the article is about the Clergy Project, and the phenomenon of clergy coming out atheist, and hence she offers this historical summary:

The project was inspired by the 2010 pilot study by Daniel C. Dennett and Linda LaScola, “Preachers Who Are Not Believers,” which exposed and explored the surprisingly common phenomenon of non-believing clergy. The need to give these people support -- and if possible, an exit strategy -- was immediately recognized in the atheist community, and starter funding for the Clergy Project was quickly provided by the Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science. Founded in March of 2011 with 52 members, the Clergy Project currently has over 270 members -- and since recent news stories about it began appearing, in outlets from MSNBC to NPR to the Religious News Service to CNN, applications to join have been going up at an even more dramatic rate. (Christina 2012)

For Christina, the positive choice for atheism is emancipatory and necessary – not unlike the way it is presented by Mehta and Eberhard. She illustrates this with an anecdote well known in atheist circles:

I was in the audience at the American Atheists convention when Teresa MacBain came out. It was one of the most dramatic, most powerful moments I've experienced. There aren't that many people in the world who have that much courage, that much integrity, that much fierce passion for the truth.^{iv} There aren't that many people in the world who are willing to risk losing their families, their communities, their stature, the emotional and philosophical foundation of their lives, even their very livelihood... because they prioritize the truth over their personal well-being.

There is no doubt that the loss of religion and the choice to come out to the fact is fraught for many, particularly in American Evangelical circles. However, the demographics of the nones, as discussed above, demonstrate that the drama and the imperative of nonbelief does not resonate across a broad swath of the demographic. Christina's presentation of the critical choice for truth and atheism is in part a response to the apathy observed by Mehta and Eberhard. But more importantly for present purposes, Christina rehearses a particular theme of atheist address in which she is exceptionally invested.

The *AlterNet* article has an interesting history. Originally posted in June of 2012, it was reposted in November of 2014. Then it was cited by the well-known blogger Andrew Sullivan (Sullivan 2014). At the same time Sullivan cited criticism of it by David Watkins of

the blog *Lawyers, Guns & Money* (Watkins 2014). The following is one of Watkins most salient points:

[The article's] limitations and flaws are largely a function of viewing the phenomenon through the eyes of evangelical atheism. Such a perspective treats non-believing clergy instrumentally and teleologically. There's no evidence any critical energy was directed at the coincidence that the outcome best for Christina's political movement is also, exactly and precisely, what is best for such individuals. Now that they've abandoned religious belief they rightfully and properly belong on team public atheist; they merely need help to find the resources, psychologically, financially, and otherwise, to make that next big step and become what they're supposed to be. (The silliest part of the article is the breathless fantasy of a mass public conversion to atheism by clergy triggering the collapse of organized religion.)

If Christina's article is viewed only as a poor partisan attempt to relate the phenomenon of clergy without faith and to share news of the Clergy Project, then Watkins's vitriolic response appears to have some merit. However, if it is understood only as 'speech addressed to a public', another purpose which it serves might be recognized. To reiterate Warner, "Public discourse says not only: "Let a public exist," but: "Let it have this character, speak this way, see the world in this way." It then goes out in search of confirmation that such a public exists" (2002, p.82).

With this in mind, Watkins's claim that Christina engages in "breathless fantasy" not only misses the point, it adds to the concatenation of texts by which Christina's atheist public might be affirmed. Tut-tutting her "secular eschatology" (LeDrew 2015, Kindle Location 4489) only provides a discursive resistance against which her public might affirm its existence. But it is not simply the generation of an atheist public under Christina's direction that is of interest; rather, it is the promotion of Christina's personal brand through media like *AlterNet* by which an atheist public and the trope of coming out might be evaluated.

In 2012, and even more so in 2014, Christina's report of the Clergy Project for an alternative progressive news site seems a bit stale; after all, she herself indicates that the topic had already come to the attention of mainstream media like NPR and CNN. One need not look far for an explanation for the post and repost. The byline on the original article (Christina 2012) reports only, "Read more of Greta Christina at her blog," and in a reduced typeface. The byline on the repost (Christina 2014b) is expanded to, "Greta Christina is the author of 'Coming Out Atheist: How to Do It, How to Help Each Other, and Why', available in ebook, print, and audiobook," and in a typeface equal to the body of the article. *Coming Out Atheist* was published in April 2014 (Christina 2014a) so it is fair to say that the reposted article serves as marketing for the book; the cross-citation by Sullivan and Watkins is the happy byproduct all marketing/public address hopes for. Christina has also actively promoted cross-citation on her blog by linking to innumerable online reviews of and references to the book.

No doubt Christina is compensated for her work on *AlterNet* and *Freethought Blogs* and certainly for her book. While this is not to suggest that Christina is only in it for the money, nor that the mix of commerce and atheism corrupts the movement, it brings into

question the kind of agency an atheist public is capable of when it is manufactured from consumers of atheist commodities. Certainly it is capable of types of occasional action (like Mehta's crowdsourcing, e.g. Mehta 2014b), but what about the achievement of greater aims? The end of religion and even the turning of elections by atheist constituencies might be dismissed as "breathless fantasy." But atheists like Christina also articulate equally ambitious but more politically focussed social justice goals. Anticipating a closer examination of atheism in such terms: Christina's products have little political potential if for no other reason than in the 'marketplace of atheist ideas' they compete with numerous other offerings often antithetical to the progressivism of Christina and others.

Returning to the appropriation of "coming out," in the hands of Openly Secular this particular mechanism analogizes atheist identity to that of non-heteronormative sexual identities, in which the metaphor originated,^v in a way that occludes the politics of sexual identity, and other identities by extension, which are marginalized within the present socio-political order. Hence, more than competing with alternative politics, progressive atheists like Christina, and Mehta, Eberhard and others, must concede ground in the name of 'big tent' atheism. Anspach, Coe and Thurlow (2007) argue that the appropriation of the metaphor of the closet within atheism threatens the cause of LGBTQ rights. The argument here goes further: the depoliticized initiative of Openly Secular uniquely "masks or compensates for the real powerlessness of human agents in capitalist society" (Warner 2002, p.81), and undermines the progressive politics characteristic of an atheism embracing a broad social justice agenda.

If heretofore non-believers tended to propagate a "secularism" closely resembling its 19th century ideological form, it has increasingly come to be used as a floating signifier. In the middle of 2014, Openly Secular was unveiled with "secular" as a designation shared by its "partners" and "allies," (Winston 2014) and thus claiming for itself something of the constituencies those institutions claim to represent.

The internet organ of this authoritative umbrella was rolled out in September of 2014 as "Openly Secular: Opening Minds, Changing Hearts." Its emphasis is on the freedom of those who would identify as "secular" who, like other previously closeted peoples, ought to be encouraged and supported in their desire to come out. According to the organization's "Vision:"

Discrimination is rampant against those who are secular. Teens are made homeless after being thrown out of their homes; young activists receive death threats; people lose relationships with friends, family, and coworkers for not believing the same We envision a world where there are no social costs for being secular, where families and communities remain whole when some members have moved away from religion or supernaturalism (Openly Secular n.d.).

To accomplish this mission Openly Secular pursues a program of greater visibility:

We believe that increasing visibility of secular people will lower prejudice against them, much as it has for the LGBT community

We share stories of pain to show how discrimination hurts and why it needs to end

We share narratives of joy to demonstrate our values of Acceptance, Reason, and Love
(Openly Secular n.d.).

In a sense, the project shares the aims of the oldest atheist organizations: to raise awareness and consciousness of nonbelief in an intensely religious America. But with the belief that “Discrimination is rampant against those who are secular,”^{vi} it greatly intensifies the appropriation of the closet metaphor that Anspach, Coe and Thurlow attribute to established groups, as “a largely political attempt to raise awareness of, and organize around, their experiences as a marginalized group” (2007, p.103). These authors describe the functioning of the metaphor,

- (1) as a vehicle (or cathartic outlet) for emotional expression;
- (2) as a way to activate a marginalized status; and, in turn
- (3) as a unifying call to action. (2007, p.106)

Openly Secular may be seen to accomplish this in novel fashion with its growing collection of self-posted videos and anecdotes.

However, with this intense personalization under an identification as a unitary minority suffering within a dominant culture, there is little question that discrimination against some other minorities loses its specificity within the project. Consider these remarks on the project:

“We wanted to rise above who is an atheist, who is an agnostic, who is a humanist, who is a secular Jew,” said Todd Stiefel, founder of the Stiefel Freethought Foundation and a main force behind the coalition. “This needed to be about something everyone could rally behind so we intentionally used the word secular because it was one thing we could all agree on” (Winston 2014).

If Openly Secular aims to ‘rise above who is a secular Jew’, then it obviously is not constructed to represent an identity that is, arguably, more than intersectional within American social life. And to the degree that Openly Secular occludes discrimination like anti-Semitism, which is undoubtedly more pernicious, it is fair to ask what fundamental achievement might be earned by the project. Perhaps an America in which nonbelief does not elicit strong opposition – as polls tell us it does – might be an improvement, but what says other operative forces might not otherwise make it worse? Two more points suggest that atheist politics, in any shape, simply lack any comprehensive critique to address fundamental inequality in the contemporary liberal democratic state. First, as Anspach, Coe and Thurlow (2007) persuasively show, the appropriation of the metaphor of the closet is problematic for there is demonstrable tension between LBGTQ and atheist politics. Second, there is plenty in the missions of Openly Secular’s member organizations to give pause to any atheists who consider social justice as part and parcel of their identification. This section concludes with the former issue; the article concludes by discussing the latter.

While Anspach, Coe and Thurlow cannot identify any real cost to LGBTQ causes by the appropriation of the closet metaphor within atheism – for the appropriation is lateral as opposed to from above – they did find “clear instances where the [atheist] movement appeared to be struggling with the ideological and identificational implications of their association with the political agenda of homosexuals” (2007, p.113). These occurred in three of the four organization websites they examined. Two of those three organizations are affiliated with Openly Secular: the American Humanist Association and American Atheists. Hence, Openly Secular’s mission to create a big tent for unbelievers is challenged by the degree to which identification with and intersection of multiple identities is accepted. Yet, elements of Openly Secular seem built, in fact, to impede such acknowledgement.

Insofar as this is true, in Warnerian terms Openly Secular’s choice of identifier – “to be about something everyone could rally behind” (Winston 2014) – is explicitly constructed to occlude intersections in order to minimize the risk of the estrangement of attendees who resist alloying nonbelief with any “identity politics.” Far from the neutral arbitration of competing interests linked by nonbelief, Openly Secular largely takes on the mien of a dominant American public, still highly secular despite nonbelievers’ claims to the contrary. As Warner remarks, “Dominant publics are by definition those that can take their discourse pragmatics and their lifeworlds for granted, misrecognizing the indefinite scope of their expansive address as universality or normalcy” (2002, p.88). Openly Secular advances nothing more revolutionary than the principles of the capitalist secular state except, perhaps, for the wish that the world be more so.

Before completing this larger critique of Openly Secular’s attempts to resolve all political agonism within nonbelief, atheist identities which should trouble this project and which ‘risk their own fate’ remain to be considered. Definitive of these atheisms is the identification with and/or intersection of identities which the discourse of Openly Secular is imagined to transcend. It may be argued, in any case, that these are already compromised within the very mediation that gives these publics life by virtue of the fact that they lack any substantial critique of the socio-economic order to which they belong.

4. A Responsible Atheist Public

If one read only mainstream notices of the New Atheism, the political picture one might get is that of an atheism simply dedicated to generalized secular liberal democratic values. Yet there has been a shift, ostensibly to the left, which has carved out a substantial place in the public of atheism. If any event might be considered responsible for increased attention to this stripe of atheism it is “Elevatorgate”, which revealed to many widespread sexism within the movement, and by extension, racial and economic privilege among its leading lights (see LeDrew 2015, Kindle Locations 4068-4376; Hutchinson 2011, Chapter 7). Resistance to expressions of concern for social justice, from within atheism in particular, has driven their production and reproduction.

As a matter of greater focus as well as of commitment, discourse associated with this turn insists that atheism implies a series of social and moral dispositions without which it is meaningless. Over and against mere atheism, or “dictionary atheism” as coined by PZ Myers (2011), this atheism acknowledges the intersection of identities or at least acknowledges

diversity, and progressive or humanist values. There has been significant dispute about how to brand such atheism; present purposes are served by Myers' own "responsible atheism" with its suggestion that a lack of concern for broader issues of social justice is a moral failure among atheists.

The cast of characters has not really changed, nor have the media or fora in which this atheism is enacted. The change is one of discursive practice. This is not to say that these atheists suddenly discovered a new kind of politics. Rather, it has become increasingly apparent that another means for the capture of strangers in an atheist public must rely upon address directed to complex identifications and entailing the politics accompanying them.

A recent *Salon* article (originally appearing at *Alternet*) entitled, "Forget Christopher Hitchens: Atheism in America is undergoing a radical change" (Hall 2014) characterizes this shift. It consists of the slow but gradual diversification of the atheist movement and the concern in those circles with social justice issues, especially concerning race, gender, and sexual orientation. In Hall's article, Jamila Bey, then communications director of the Secular Student Alliance, says:

There are people who say, 'Why are we talking about racism? We would rather argue that Chupacabra are fake.' And fine, that is their right. On the other hand, I don't get to divorce my critical thinking from my blackness, from my femaleness, from my position as a mother. (Hall 2014)

Hall goes on to argue that to declare atheism, especially in the process of "deconversion," is the result of a "compelling need to talk about reality." And that reality concerns social justice as much as it does the naturalistic origins of the world.

"Old-school atheists," Hall suggests, betray fundamental atheist principles by dismissing social justice issues. But more than that, Dawkins-style atheism is quickly becoming irrelevant. Thus, in Hall's telling, today's atheism is comprehensively political in a way that is noticeably absent among the atheists with which most people are familiar.

But Hall also notes that this social justice turn in atheism is vigorously contested. That is made apparent within the extensive comment thread to Hall's piece. A comment typical of this resistance:

Atheism is disbelief in God. That's it. There is no such thing as a "New Atheism." Atheism has nothing to do with gender, race or class. Atheism is not a comprehensive philosophy about justice or anything else. Being an atheist does not imply any kind of political belief or social belief.

Here Myers "dictionary atheism" is on full display. But more than a quotidian online dispute, such expressions of disagreement between dictionary and responsible atheists represent a theatre of the negotiations by which atheism emerges as little threat to the prevailing socio-economic order and in many ways affirms it.

A subsequent volley concerning the Hall article is worth mentioning. Richard Carrier, better known as a Jesus Mythicist ("Richard Carrier" n.d.), has discussed the Hall article, and responding to a commentator he remarks:

That they [dictionary atheists] complain means they actually want to control the movement. All their talk of dictionary atheism is thus a rhetorical ruse. They aren't really saying atheism should just be atheism. What they are really saying is that movement atheism should adopt their values (Carrier 2014).

In Carrier's (and Myer's) telling, dictionary atheism occludes certain conservative politics to contest more progressive ones. Further exploration would reveal to us that a strong libertarian streak runs through American atheism of the dictionary type (see LeDrew 2015, Chapters 5 and 7). In response to both the claims of religion and the amorality of dictionary atheism, Carrier, Myers and others default to a philosophical position they identify with "humanism" which they imagine as encompassing a concern for social justice in their terms.

Responsible atheists, perhaps, raise some of the most significant issues within atheism, while the Internet-mediated forms discussions of these issues take substantially constrain their full exploration. The rejection of religion, in whatever terms, invites questions of the good. Of course, the question of the basis and substance of the good immediately arises. The traditional atheist default has been a "humanism" in which morality must depend on something other than authority (particularly revelation), responsibility is individual, and the good is to be found within world. Hall ends his Salon essay on this point:

To make ethical decisions without the revelations from a deity means that the responsibility for those decisions ends with you, and no one else. Even more importantly, when you accept that there is no world beyond this one, you have to turn your eyes away from the sky and look at the people around you (Hall 2014).

Yet it must be acknowledged that deriving robust positive ethics (and politics) from such a position is fraught.

But more than that, the vagueness of such humanism serves to carve out a sort of demilitarized zone which blunts the sharp edges of atheisms which estrange attendees by appearing to be too 'left' or too 'right'. Without wading too deeply into modern critique of humanism, it might be demonstrated that this zone, and its perceived neutrality, creates a discursive space in which identity politics and their emancipatory goals are not only blunted, but also co-opted by institutions that aim to sit comfortably within this space. Atheist discourse here regresses to a mean in which it is not so much that American capitalism is affirmed as it is regarded as the natural and neutral order in which secularism and nonbelief may thrive.

A brief examination of some features of Openly Secular's partners reveals a pattern of institutionalized politics that are difficult to reconcile with the social justice concerns of atheists like Christina *et al.* First, recall that Openly Secular is primarily an organ of the Stiefel Foundation. Among the values it affirms according to its website (Stiefel Foundation n.d.) is "Freedom" which is understood as manifest in:

- Democracy
- Equality

- Liberty
- Capitalism
- Justice

Of course, it is hard to read a lot into this series of watchwords of modern liberalism; however, given that much social justice critique demonstrates the uneven access to these fundamentals within marginal populations, in what way is the Foundation a challenge to power? The inclusion of Capitalism in this list, though, reminds us of a fact that may be more significant: the Stiefel Foundation was funded by Todd Stiefel's share of the proceeds of his family's sale of its pharmaceutical company (Merica 2013). Contemporary American atheism is hardly subaltern when backstopped by the proceeds of an industry that has spent about a billion dollars to lobby lawmakers over the last decade ("Pharmaceutical lobby" n.d.).

Restraints upon economic critique at the intersection of multiple atheist interests is illustrated by the restrictions the Student Secular Alliance (SSA) – also an Openly Secular partner – places upon those who would seek affiliation with it:

We share many common concerns with organizations that advocate specific economic principles, including Libertarians, Objectivists, Greens, and others. However, we cannot affiliate with groups that pursue an active economic agenda, be it on the left or right (SSA).

Leaving the right wing signals aside, the notion that economics is verboten within SSA membership makes it clear that "secularism" is to be understood here, and by extension within Openly Secular, as a strident interpretation of the First Amendment and let social change cash out as it may as a result. Religion, it seems, is simply understood as the singular force impeding the realization of a purer American order. How else to explain the presence on the Advisory Board of SSA of Christina and Mehta, and Stiefel and Michael Shermer, well known for his libertarianism (Advisory Board to the Secular Student Alliance n.d.; LeDrew 2015: Kindle Locations 3905-3917)?

Note also the atheists already mentioned who have historical associations with the SSA: JT Eberhard, Jesse Galef, and most importantly Jamila Bey. The latter's shift from employment with SSA to the American Atheists would be unremarkable save for the fact that, under the direction of David Silverman ("David Silverman" n.d.) this elder organization of American atheism has turned recently to the courting of the Republican party ("Ban Lifted" 2015). In 2015, on behalf of American Atheists, Bey addressed the Conservative Political Action Conference:

"Today I stand before you not just as a fellow conservative," Bey said from a podium before the vibrantly red-decked stage. She described some 40 million American voters, mostly millennials, as secular.

"I stand before you as a member of a growing Republican family that has inherited a new generation of potential leaders with millions of voters that we cannot afford to ignore,"

she said. “The law is change or die.” (Winston 2015)

Leaving aside questions about atheist Republican demographics and politics, and the potential effects of conservatism’s embrace of “secularism,” here we find the exact same demand for political recognition that atheists like Eberhard and Mehta make with respect to the Democratic party. More than a simple political divide, this investment in the binary of electoral politics renders atheism into a vague special interest.

The fundamental problem consists in the nature of the American atheist public which necessarily defaults to the narrow and shallow politics that dominate old and new media alike. That explains at least in part Taira’s important observation that, while atheism imitates feminist and LGBTQ movements, it rejects so much of the theory that has motivated them, such as continental philosophy and post-structuralism (2012, p.105).^{vii} Atheism does not necessarily require some kind of Foucauldian turn in order to engage social justice issues credibly. However, in the absence of robust critical theorizing it is difficult to see how any atheist political program consists of much more than an eclectic series of *petit bourgeois* political preferences: without an analysis of power, the perniciousness of any structures other than religion is lost in a struggle that is conceived simply in theological terms. Eschewing critique of the modern secular state and the capitalist economy upon which it is dependent, especially among those claiming an interest in social justice, renders progressive atheist politics incoherent.

Marcus Schulzke’s work on the New Atheism has been concerned with precisely this:

New atheists do not defend a complete philosophy of liberalism, as they focus on social issues and are almost entirely silent about economic issues. Their liberal theory of politics is also not derived from a particular political philosopher or school of thought Their connection with liberalism comes through their attempt to imagine politics as a neutral space in which to debate competing interests (2013, p.789).

While the lack of concern with economics might represent the most substantive weakness in the politics of atheism, its source in a vague or eclectic liberalism points to a more fundamental handicap which inhibits critical discourse about the whole of the Western liberal democratic project. An atheist public is only possible given such ideological plasticity. At the same time, only within such “a circulatory field of estrangement” (Warner 2002, p.81) could Sam Harris – American atheist icon – gamble and lose on a pair of issues that cross the full circumference of the boundary defining the public which has made him such an icon: in 2011 he was taken to task for musing about wealth redistribution (Sandefur 2011); and recently Noam Chomsky called him out for his historically blithe suggestions that American foreign policy failings have been conducted under benevolent intentions (Myers 2015).

Some self-identified atheists have similarly criticized the political program of even the most progressive strains of American atheism, though they are few and lesser known. David Hoelscher points out that in much of what was written supportive of Atheism+^{viii} (pointing to Richard Carrier in particular) next to nothing of substance concerning economic issues was expressed (Hoelscher 2012). Hoelscher goes on to indicate that this is not really surprising: “After all, the problem of widespread systemic economic oppression almost always gets short

shift in America.” The Winegards, taking a more global view, suggest that the real problem is that “the average American cannot think of politics outside of the framework presented by the neoliberal nationalism narrative,” and the New Atheists, equally blinkered by this narrative, “do not fundamentally challenge existing power structures and narratives in modern American society” (Winegard and Winegard 2011). With their additional criticism of American corporate power, it is hard to imagine that they find much to cheer in Openly Secular and its Stiefel Foundation support.

More forceful critique is to be found in the work of the better known atheist Sikivu Hutchinson, especially her *Moral Combat: Black Atheists, Gender Politics, and the Values Wars* (2011). In that book she asserts: “There is little analysis of the relationship between economic disenfranchisement, race, gender, and religiosity in New Atheist or secular humanist critiques of organized religion” (2011, p.199). As a result:

the New Atheism preserves and reproduces the status quo of white supremacy in its arrogant insularity. In this universe, oppressed minorities are more imperiled by their own investment in organized religion than white supremacy. Liberation is not a matter of fighting against white racism, sexism, and classism but of throwing off the shackles of superstition. (2011, p.218)

Hutchinson’s claim need not be accepted in its entirety – and undoubtedly many atheists reject it in full – but to the extent that it is true that atheist discourse in the main begins with “the damage religion does to the world,” in JT Eberhard’s words (2012), its consideration of issues of race, gender, class, *etc.* is at best reductionist and at worst dilettantism.

5. Conclusion

With respect to media and digital culture, this article has drawn attention to an important body of data which has previously only received occasional notice in discussions of the New Atheism. Atheism today is performed at least as much across every form of new media as it has been within traditional forms such as print. As with analyses of every other Internet phenomenon, that of virtual atheism poses many challenges: overwhelming quantity, variable quality, as well as questions of representation and reach all present themselves. Rather than attempt to survey atheism on the Internet, this article has employed select data illustrating certain discursive practices within progressive forms of atheism, which have come to the fore at recent historical moment. The analyses undertaken have sought to demonstrate that translating progressive atheist discourse into political action is severely constrained by its very mediation.

It is not simply that ‘leftist’ atheists face resistance from without (religion) and from within (libertarianism); rather, the publics of any atheism – left or right – exist only by virtue of their address and the degree to which they attend to that address. With the fundamental uncertainty of that attention, any apparently radical disposition puts its renewal at risk. More than this, progressive atheism (especially) exists ideologically “in struggle with its own

conditions” (Warner 2002, p.76). As surprising as the rejection of the theoretical repertoire of identity politics among most progressive atheists is, the virtual absence of traditional materialist critiques of religion, *eg.* Marx, is more so. As has been shown, animus towards such critique, with its basis in economics, is built into some important atheist institutions. It is also apparent among certain “responsible atheists” as well. Perhaps this is, as Warner argues, because a public provides “a sense of active belonging that masks or compensates for the real powerlessness of human agents in capitalist society” (Warner 2002, p.81). This article has suggested that the New Atheism, particularly in its virtual forms, is far less a counterpublic, in Warner’s sense, than it imagines itself to be; the “project identity” (Cimino and Smith 2014, Kindle Location 266) of atheists like Mehta and Eberhard imagines a power to bend the ear of Democratic politicians. But what more than a “faith ... in selforganized publics” produces such confidence?

Notes

ⁱ Mehta then quotes CNN’s *belief BLOG*: “Jesse Galef, communications director for the Secular Student Alliance, said that the growth of the unaffiliated should translate into greater political representation for secular interests.” I return to the SSA below.

ⁱⁱ My use of “counterpublics” perhaps resembles that of Cimino and Smith (2011: 26; 2014) more than that of Warner.

ⁱⁱⁱ Myers is referring to Pew data that charts the rise of the ‘nones’ which he interprets as the rise of atheism.

^{iv} In retrospect these remarks are ironic: shortly after leaving the clergy, MacBain became embroiled in scandal as it was discovered that she had lied on her resume claiming credentials she does not possess (Freedman, 2013).

^v The use of the closet metaphor among atheists is not new. Paul Kurtz, founder of Center for Inquiry was an early adopter (2000); and Richard Dawkins employs it in *The God Delusion* (2006: 4-5).

^{vi} This despite the relatively low instance of denial of opportunities, goods, and services (see Hammer, *et al.*, 2012).

^{vii} This tendency goes back to the Four Horsemen. Dawkins calls poststructuralist theory “haute francophonyism” (Taira 2012: 105) and Harris describes the thought of Chomsky and others as “Leftist Unreason” (Winegard and Winegard 2011).

^{viii} This was perhaps the best known product of Elevatorgate, and equally subject to contestation within atheist circles. For some of the history of this branding of progressive atheism see Hall, 2014, and LeDrew, 2015: Kindle Locations 4184 and following.

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