

Against Algorithmic Enchantment

Marco Visconti · 1 June 2026

I started thinking about this after reading a friend's recent musings on political difference, especially the increasingly difficult question of what we are supposed to do when someone we care about holds views we find politically dangerous, morally ugly, or simply impossible to reconcile with our own sense of justice. The argument, as I understand it, begins from a humane discomfort with the easy answers currently available to us. On one side, there is the anaemic social platitude that politics should not matter very much between decent people, as though a vote were no more revealing than a preference for one restaurant over another; on the other, there is the harder and now much more fashionable position that politics is character, meaning that to vote for harm is already to disclose something decisive about the soul. Human beings are rarely identical with their most visible political position, and in many cases politics may be closer to what she calls "topsoil" than bedrock: contingent, cultivated, worn by circumstance, formed by family, class, fear, media, injury, and the available stories people found when they were vulnerable enough to need one.

That is a serious point, and I do not want to caricature it, because there is moral intelligence in refusing to collapse a person into the worst thing they have come to believe. We all know people whose politics hardened around an old wound, a humiliation never digested, a local economy that collapsed, a parent's prejudice inherited before it could be examined, or an algorithmic diet that did not initially arrive as indoctrination but as companionship. She is also right to distinguish between shouting at strangers online and sitting across a kitchen table from someone whose face still carries a history with yours. These are not the same human act. The feed stages political difference as ritualised combat, while an

actual conversation, in a room where memory has weight and neither party can evaporate into abstraction, can still sometimes preserve the texture of the relationship even when persuasion fails. Her essay is strongest, I think, when it recognises that occult and esoteric communities are a particularly revealing laboratory for these tensions, because they are small, very online, saturated with claims of personal sovereignty, and therefore unusually prone to turning metaphysical disagreement into political fracture.

At this juncture, it becomes necessary to move from describing the roots of political difference to a critical interrogation of the larger forces shaping these dynamics. While the essay thoughtfully acknowledges that individuals arrive at political positions through contingent processes and recognizes the corrosive effects of social media on our capacity for empathy, it does not fully address the systemic mechanisms that exploit such contingency. The deeper issue is that contingency itself has become an exploitable resource. Political topsoil does not simply sit there waiting for weather. It can be poisoned, irrigated, enclosed, raised, and sold back to the people standing on it. One might object that individual moral agency or committed dialogue could still counterbalance such manipulation, preserving authentic debate despite these forces. However, once attention becomes a commodity, fear becomes an asset, grievance becomes a retention strategy, and identity becomes the most profitable form of confinement. At that point, political differences cannot be discussed honestly without discussing advanced capitalism, platform ownership, billionaire-funded ideological infrastructure, and the notable aptitude of the far right for converting diffuse social pain into marketable resentment.

More careful research on algorithms actually helps sharpen this argument, because it prevents us from falling into a technologically simplistic account. For example, the 2023 Meta collaboration study in *Nature* found that when Facebook reduced users' exposure to like-minded sources by about one third during the 2020 US presidential election, exposure to cross-cutting sources increased and exposure to uncivil language decreased. However, there were no measurable effects on eight preregistered attitudinal measures, including affective polarisation and ideological extremity, suggesting that merely changing users' feed content

does not straightforwardly alter their political attitudes. This finding is relevant because it complicates the familiar “echo chambers did everything” narrative by demonstrating that interventions on exposure alone are insufficient to explain or resolve political polarization. In contrast, a later *Nature* field experiment on X found that switching users from a chronological feed to an algorithmic feed for seven weeks shifted political opinions in a more conservative direction on policy priorities, views of Trump-related criminal investigations, and the war in Ukraine, while also leading users to follow conservative activist accounts in ways that persisted after the algorithmic feed was switched off. This indicates that feed algorithms can have durable effects on political orientation and engagement beyond simple exposure to differing viewpoints, underlining the specific mechanisms through which platform design can shape political difference.

So, the point is not that algorithms mechanically implant ideology into passive minds. That claim is too crude, and it lets older structures of class power, political organisation, media capture, and social disintegration disappear behind the lit screen. The sharper claim is that platform capitalism changes the ecology in which political speech is produced, rewarded, distributed and monetised. For example, a large PNAS study of over 2.7 million posts from news accounts and US members of Congress demonstrates that posts about the political out-group were shared or retweeted about twice as often as posts about the in-group, with out-group language emerging as the strongest predictor of shares and retweets. This evidence reinforces the argument that platform incentives shape discourse, privileging antagonism and division over substantive engagement or consensus. Further, a separate study of online moral outrage found that users who received positive social feedback for outrage were more likely to express outrage again later, meaning the platform does not merely reflect anger; it actively cultivates it, training users through attention rewards to become more reliable instruments of polarisation. Together, these findings illustrate that the architecture of platform capitalism systematically intervenes in the production of political difference, not by direct implantation of ideology, but by amplifying patterns of antagonistic behaviour that serve its commercial interests and ultimately reshape the terrain of political discourse.

This is where the far right has shown such cold strategic intelligence. It understood, long before many liberal institutions did, that the attention economy rewards symbolic escalation, emotional compression, and the constant production of enemies. It also understood that the Overton Window is moved less by winning formal arguments than by saturating the atmosphere with claims that initially feel unspeakable, then merely controversial, then refreshingly bold, then commonsensical to those who have inhaled them for long enough. Ico Maly's work on New Right metapolitics describes how far-right actors use digital media as a metapolitical battlefield, where the goal is the circulation and normalisation of ideas, and where "algorithmic activism" becomes the conscious manipulation of platform signals for ideological reach. His case study of Schild & Vrienden explicitly frames such activism as an attempt to stretch the Overton Window within mainstream media.

This is not simply a story about alienated men in bedrooms discovering bad ideas on imageboards, although that is one visible fragment of the larger structure. The machinery is funded, organised, repeated, laundered, and given institutional durability. The Center for Public Integrity reported that Americans for Prosperity, described as the main political arm of Charles and David Koch, spent \$122 million in 2012, more than it had spent during its previous eight years combined; the same report notes that 501(c)(4) "social welfare" nonprofits of this kind can spend heavily on political messaging without publicly identifying donors except under narrow circumstances. The UK Parliament's inquiry into disinformation and fake news documented that Cambridge Analytica was founded in 2012 with backing from Robert Mercer, that Steve Bannon was a former vice president of the company, and that its work centred on data targeting and psychological profiling. Christopher Wylie's supplementary evidence went further, describing SCL's background in information operations as "informational dominance" and the exploitation of mental vulnerabilities, with Cambridge Analytica adapting these strategies for politics and online social networks.

This matters because it changes the moral frame. The frightened person at the end of the table may indeed be lonely, battered by economic precarity, or captured by a story that finally made their resentment feel coherent. But the

machinery that captured them is not confused in the same way. It is deliberate, adaptive, immensely well-resourced, and often insulated from the consequences it helps produce. Late-stage capitalism does not simply abandon the working class, leaving them to drift in the ruins of deindustrialisation, austerity, rentier extraction, the collapse of public goods, and permanent insecurity. It then sells them explanations for their suffering, preferably explanations that turn their gaze away from capital and toward migrants, queer people, trans people, racialised communities, feminists, academics, public sector workers, welfare recipients, and anyone else who can be made to carry the symbolic burden of a broken world.

This is why the language of “political difference” can become dangerously thin. Difference between what, exactly? It is crucial to clarify that disagreements such as a preference for public ownership versus regulated markets, or debates about taxation, welfare design, or climate policy, constitute political differences that fall within the framework of legitimate and arguable public reason. These disagreements, while potentially contentious, still operate through shared norms of discourse and mutual recognition. By sharp contrast, a politics that demands the humiliation, exclusion, or disposability of entire categories of people not only transgresses the boundaries of public reason but fundamentally violates the ethical foundations upon which democratic discourse rests. Such politics is not merely a divergent policy or approach, but a direct enactment of harm, undermining the possibility of mutual respect and shared civic life, even when masked by the language of “concern,” “realism,” “tradition,” “common sense,” or “just asking questions.” To treat both levels of difference—ordinary policy dispute and an ideology that inflicts moral violence—as structurally equivalent is to obscure the ethical distinction and enable the far right to recast ethical harm as mere disagreement.

Occulture makes this problem unusually vivid because esoteric scenes already possess the symbolic vocabulary that reactionary politics loves to steal. We speak of initiation, hierarchy, secrecy, ordeal, lineage, transgression, sovereignty, sacred kingship, aristocracy of spirit, hidden knowledge, and the few who see what the many cannot. None of these motifs is inherently fascist, and many can be handled with extraordinary subtlety, beauty, and emancipatory force. Yet they are

politically available in ways that should make us more cautious than romantic. Amy Hale has written about the “structural compatibilities” between some aspects of Pagan and occult culture and sectors of the radical right, which does not mean that occultism is secretly fascist by nature, but that certain esoteric forms can be bent, without much effort, toward elitism, anti-modern resentment, mythic hierarchy, and the sacralisation of exclusion.

The contemporary market intensifies this danger. Earlier occult fascisms required small presses, private networks, music scenes, salons, lodges, or correspondence circles. Today, the same aesthetic and ideological material can be routed through creator platforms, paid newsletters, private Discords, YouTube memberships, Patreon tiers, limited editions, online schools, conference circuits, and personality-driven publishing ventures. The capital-savvy occultist does not need a billionaire patron to become part of the same ecology, although some figures and institutions certainly do benefit from more direct forms of reactionary support. They only need to notice what the market rewards. Anti-woke provocation works. Masculinist posturing works. Trad aesthetics work. Conspiratorial insinuation works. Denouncing “liberal occultism” or “woke witchcraft” works. Every criticism can be converted into proof of persecution, every loss of social trust into evidence of martyrdom, every refusal of accountability into a performance of forbidden courage.

This is how an online cult of personality becomes a piggybank. The leader tells the audience they are not consumers but initiates, not followers but the few who can withstand the truth. The rhetoric of secrecy becomes a sales funnel. Initiation becomes tiered access. Transgression becomes brand positioning. The old magic glamour of the dangerous book, the forbidden rite, the underground current and the persecuted adept is reused for subscription retention. None of this requires that all members consciously endorse fascism. It would be too simple and in many cases false. The more interesting and more troubling problem is that a market can form around the emotional style of reaction before every actor within it has clarified the ideological destination. People may begin by selling provocation and discover, one profitable step at a time, that the far right already owns much of the road they are walking.

This is also where thelemic ethics is necessary, although not in the shallow sense of invoking “Do what thou wilt” as a talisman of individual licence. Thelema is often misinterpreted, sometimes by its enemies and sometimes by its loudest alleged adherents, as a spiritual permission slip for appetite, domination and self-display. Yet the Book of the Law gives us a more exacting, more difficult formula. “Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law,” “Love is the law, love under will,” and “There is no law beyond Do what thou wilt” are framed, in Crowley’s own introductory commentary, through the image of each star moving in its proper orbit, with each act of love chosen so as to fulfil rather than thwart the true nature of the being concerned. The text also insists that “pure will, unassuaged of purpose, delivered from the lust of result, is every way perfect.”

That phrase, “delivered from the lust of result,” should trouble any occultist whose public identity has become inseparable from metrics, engagement, outrage cycles, audience capture, and monetised grievance. The attention economy is the lust of result made technical, measurable, and addictive. It turns reaction into analytics. It teaches the creator to ask, often unconsciously at first, which enemy will increase reach, which cruelty will sound like courage, which exaggeration will keep the paying audience inflamed, which denunciation will make the leader appear more necessary to the group gathered around them. A Thelemic reading worthy of the name cannot confuse this with Will. Will is not the twitching compulsion to remain visible. Will is not whatever gains subscribers this month. Will is not the capacity to dominate a room, humiliate critics, or keep an audience dependent on your next revelation. Crowley’s Liber II is blunt on this point: “Do what thou wilt” does not mean “Do what you like,” and is described there as both the apotheosis of freedom and “the strictest possible bond.”

The ethical consequence is severe, demanding a thorough application of the Thelemic framework to contemporary issues of power and community. If every man and every woman is a star, then it follows that no teacher, publisher, influencer, lodge officer, guru, priest, or charismatic online personality possesses the ethical authority to subordinate others, reducing their individuality to mere instruments for personal aggrandisement. Thelemic liberty, properly understood, cannot justify a situation in which those with the strongest personalities exploit

the attention, labour, money, erotic fascination, or political confusion of others for their own ends. Rather, Thelema requires the recognition of orbit: the ethical obligation to affirm that each person's Will is unique and inviolable, not a resource to be harvested for another's ambitions. This principle directly challenges hierarchical or cultic dynamics that would subsume individual autonomy in the name of leadership or tradition. Consequently, "Love under Will" assumes explicit political and ethical force, as it demands relationality disciplined by a commitment to the flourishing of the other's purpose. In the Thelemic sense, love is not superficial concord, ideological conformity, or sentimental inclusion, but rather an ethical relationship grounded in truth, autonomy, and respect for the sovereignty of each individual. Any relationship or structure that undermines another's capacity to discern and pursue their authentic Will thereby fails the ethical imperative at the heart of Thelema, no matter how esoteric its self-presentation or how elaborate its initiatory trappings.

Here, we arrive at the essential rebuttal to a purely interpersonal account of political difference. To remain human with the person across from us is good. To recognize that people can be captured by fear, propaganda and social pain is necessary. To refuse the cheap intoxication of denunciation can be an act of discipline, especially in occult communities, where many people seem keen to turn every disagreement into a miniature trial of purity. But compassion becomes politically anaemic when it forgets infrastructure. The person who repeats reactionary talking points may, in some cases, deserve patience; the machine that produces those talking points deserves analysis, resistance and, where necessary, refusal.

Thelemically speaking, this is not a retreat into conventional morality. It is a defence of Will against capture. A politics that feeds on fear obstructs Will by narrowing consciousness. A media economy that monetises resentment obstructs Will by training people to mistake reaction for purpose. A far-right metapolitics that disguises hierarchy as tradition obstructs Will by turning living souls into ranked categories of worth. A cult of personality obstructs Will by convincing followers that proximity to the leader is the same thing as their own initiation. A publishing economy that markets reactionary glamour as forbidden wisdom

obstructs Will by confusing transgression with depth and aesthetic danger with actual liberation.

There is of course a shade in Thelema itself. No serious Thelemite should pretend otherwise. Crowley's corpus contains aristocratic, violent, elitist and politically repellent passages, and the tradition has always been susceptible to misreadings that flatter precisely the kind of exceptionalism that the far right knows how to weaponise. A mature thelemic ethic cannot be built by hiding the difficult material under a velvet cloth. It has to pass through this difficulty with intellectual honesty, asking which parts of the tradition liberate the star into its proper orbit and which parts provide masks for control. The law is for all, but not every interpretation of the law serves the freedom. Several interpretations simply give metaphysical perfume to the oldest forms of coercion.

This is why Thelema, at its best, should make us more resistant to the attention economy rather than more proficient at exploiting it. The injunction to discover and do one's Will demands an austerity that sits uneasily with constant online performance. It requires silence, record keeping, discipline, discrimination, and the willingness to act without applause. It asks the magician to distinguish between the voice of the Holy Guardian Angel and the much louder chorus of market feedback. The feed tells you what performs. The Work asks what is true. The feed rewards acceleration. The Work often requires patience. The feed produces enemies because enemies retain attention. The Work reveals where hatred has become a substitute for direction.

This also reframes the ethics of speech. The issue is not whether occultists should be political, because they always already are, whether consciously or otherwise. The issue is whether our speech increases liberty, clarity, and responsibility, or whether it feeds the engines that profit from confusion. There are moments when one must speak sharply, name fascism where it appears, refuse collaboration, withdraw legitimacy and stop pretending that every provocation is a call to dialogue. There are additional moments when one must resist the narcissistic pleasure of public righteousness, because the performance of being right can become its own form of intoxication. Thelemic ethics does not release us from

discernment; it makes discernment more demanding because it asks us to consider whether our action comes from Will or from fear, vanity, imitation, appetite, resentment, tribal reflex, or the desire to be seen by the crowd as one of the righteous.

So yes, there remains value in speaking to the person beneath the political position, as long as that person can still be reached. There remains value in remembering that many people are less wicked than captured, less coherent than wounded, less ideologically committed than narratively possessed. But the present crisis cannot be understood as a sequence of private misunderstandings between people who simply need to recover the art of conversation. We live in an engineered economy of attention where class power, platform design, ideological funding, influencer monetisation, and symbolic capture meet. Occulture is not exempt from that economy. In many ways, it is especially vulnerable to it, because it already knows how to make alienation feel like election, secrecy feel like intimacy, and hierarchy feel like destiny.

In summary, the central challenge articulated throughout this essay is twofold: we must retain enough humanity to recognize the wounded individual without ignoring the systemic forces that have harmed them, and sustain sufficient compassion to prevent politics from devolving into a form of personal condemnation. This approach advances the thesis that an adequate response to political difference cannot rely solely on interpersonal compassion or ethical nuance, but must also address the structural and material dynamics—particularly those highlighted within contemporary platform capitalism—that shape political identities and conflicts. At the same time, it is necessary to remain critically aware of the broader structures that can instrumentalize dialogue for bad faith purposes. It is equally important to safeguard the esoteric concepts of sovereignty, initiation, lineage, and transgression from being appropriated as reactionary consumer identities, reinforcing the argument that spiritual language should not serve as a vehicle for political or economic domination. For practitioners of Thelema, this requires particular vigilance whenever the language and ideals of Will and Love are manipulated to legitimize domination, demand conformity, commercialize secrecy, foster dependence, or concentrate power in

charismatic figures. Reaffirming the essay's central thesis, I argue that any meaningful response to political difference in the current moment necessitates synthesizing individual ethical engagement with sustained structural critique. Only through this integration can we address the true complexity of political difference—whether in Thelemic contexts or the wider social landscape—and resist the conflation of spiritual ideals with systems of control.

Late-stage capitalism has learned to sell people their own alienation back to them as initiation, and the far right has proved frighteningly adept at giving that alienation a mythic shape. Against that, a serious Thelemic ethics would insist that no one's fear should be harvested as someone else's revenue, no one's suffering should be redirected into hatred of the vulnerable, and no one's star should be reduced to fuel for another person's ascent. That, to my mind, is where any adequate response to political difference must now begin: not with the abandonment of compassion, and certainly not with the fantasy that all differences are morally equal, but with a colder, clearer look at the machinery that has learned to turn wounds into markets, markets into identities, and identities into weapons.

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