

# Status Pyramid Schemes

Blithering Genius

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“America First” is the latest right-wing movement to degenerate into an utter cringe-fest. This should not be surprising, because it is just another instance of a recurring pattern.

Ideological movements are fashions. (Ironically, even “traditionalist” movements are fashions.) They are like pyramid schemes, asset bubbles, and passing trends. They arise by crowd dynamics, and they eventually collapse due to crowd dynamics.

People are conformists, but they don’t just follow the herd. They want to be at the front of the herd, not at the back. Also, humans don’t form one huge herd, culturally. People clump into different herds, and those herds compete. People want to be part of a herd, but they also want to stand out. People are complicated. From these complicated social desires, crowd dynamics emerge.

When a fashion starts, it only appeals to a few people: those who really want to stand out from the crowd. If the fashion grows, it appeals to more and more people, because most people want to be part of a group. They aren’t comfortable being weirdos. Most people need social validation of their beliefs and behaviors. But the group doesn’t have to be very big. And if it starts to grow, then it builds momentum, because the barrier to entry decreases as it grows. It slides along the weirdo to normie axis.

The fashion could be an ideology, like MGTOW or the alt-right. It could be a style of dress, or a new type of music. It could be an asset class, such as dot-com stocks or bitcoin. The same dynamics apply. Early adopters are weirdos who are willing to stand out from the crowd, and often want to stand out from the crowd. They are rare. As more people adopt the fashion, it becomes easier to adopt. And a growing fashion looks like “the next big thing”. People start adopting it because they want to be at the front of the herd, not at the back. This creates social momentum that causes the fashion to become more popular, for a while.

The fashion could have some underlying basis or rationale, but it doesn’t have to. Fashions can be generated purely by social feedback from cultural noise, in the same way that audio feedback can turn a little static into a scream.

While the fashion is growing, it has credibility, and it attracts new members for that reason. Once it reaches its natural limit, however, the process reverses. Every movement eventually exhausts the supply of people who might join it. Once it stops growing, there is no longer any reason to join it. The appeal was based on being part of a growing movement, and being ahead of the herd. Nobody wants to join a shrinking movement that will soon be cringe. Instead, people start jumping

off the band-wagon. That further increases the incentive to leave, and the movement collapses by the same feedback loop that created it, running in reverse.

That's why ideological movements tend to go from based to cringe. There are other reasons, such as purity-spiraling, which tends to occur in ideological movements. (See *The Rise and Fall of the Alt-Right*.) Purity-spirals are also caused by crowd dynamics: by the competition for status within the movement, which drives it to become more and more extreme.

Those who recently joined the movement tend to be the first to leave, because they have the least invested in it. They quietly head for the exits, disassociating themselves and pretending they were never really part of it. ("lol, I was just an ironic groyper") Those who joined first tend to be the last to go, because they have the most invested, and can't easily jump off the band-wagon. As the movement collapses, the remaining members (who previously validated each other's delusions of grandeur) now start casting blame at each other for the failure of the movement. This in-fighting reveals the absurdities that were hidden by the crowd delusion before.

People who go through these cycles never seem to learn from them. Humans are strangely blind to social feedback loops and the delusions that they create. Many of the people who jump off the band-wagon will jump on the next one that comes along.

America First is a good example of this human blind-spot. It absorbed many former members of the alt-right, immediately after that movement imploded in pretty much the same way that America First is imploding now.

As the fashion junkies jump on the next band-wagon, they always say "This time it's different".