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SPECIAL ISSUE: CHALLENGES FACING RIGHT-WING STUDIES

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The Journal of Right-Wing Studies

A Project of UC Berkeley's Center for Right-Wing Studies

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C O N T E N T S

Letter from the Editor

With the arrival in full of the presidential election campaign in the United States—following Donald Trump's thirty-four felony convictions in New York City—in this country at least the question is being called as never before: whether a far-right party can come to power in a liberal democracy with a blueprint to undermine such fundamentals of liberal democracy as minority rights, an independent judiciary, the peaceful transition of power, and much else. Trump's movement is hyperactive in state and local governments, in media, and on the web with a kind of relentless theatricality. I am reminded of the words of an elected official of a European far-right party of a hundred years ago: "[The party] will not let the people rest in peace until they have obtained power."

What happens in the US will act as a lodestar for kindred parties across the globe. The *Journal of Right-Wing Studies* publishes this issue with these developments as a backdrop. A central *JRWS* focus has been to establish right-wing studies as an academic discipline. This Special Issue addresses that goal in two ways. The essays in the issue speak directly to questions researchers of the right encounter, and the research articles pioneer new models and methods in right-wing studies. Beyond that, the issue has been guest edited. That is, three scholars in right-wing studies have solicited and curated the articles and have written the introduction. We are grateful for their collaboration.

Making the journal open to special issues and guest editors reflects our goal that *JRWS* act as a guiding and central focus of the discipline. It is in this spirit that we have welcomed this issue's guest editors, and it is a welcome we look forward to extending to others.

Lawrence Rosenthal
June 5, 2024

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The Curse of Relevance

Challenges Facing Right-Wing Studies

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For at least the past decade, researchers of right-wing ideologies, movements, and media around the world have been met with a familiar refrain from interlocutors outside the field: "Oh! That's so relevant!" While perhaps a blessing in terms of renewed popular interest (e.g., publication opportunities and, albeit to a lesser extent, funding), many right-wing studies scholars would much rather the topic remain arcane and inconsequential.

"The right" has historically been used as an umbrella concept to make sense of a diverse array of political tendencies around the world, although a globally coherent definition has itself proved elusive. Some scholars have associated the right with closely related concepts such as nativism, populism, authoritarianism, and terrorism, variously qualifying its iterations as radical, far, extreme, or mainstream. The term has also been commonly used to refer to pro-capitalist, inegalitarian, chauvinist, and other political formations more broadly (e.g., "conservatism" in the United States and United Kingdom, and "neoliberalism" in other country contexts).[1] Studying such an

1 For illustrative examples, see Justin Gest, "The White Working-Class Minority: A Counter-Narrative," *Politics, Groups, and Identities* 4, no. 1 (2016): 126–43; Elisabeth Ivarsflaten, "What Unites Right-Wing Populists in Western Europe? Re-Examining Grievance Mobilization Models in Seven Successful Cases," *Comparative Political Studies* 41, no. 1 (2008): 3–23; Cas Mudde, *The Far Right Today* (New York: Polity, 2019); Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019); and Jacob Aasland Ravndal and Tore Bjørgo, "Investigating Terrorism from the Extreme Right: A Review of Past and Present Research," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 12, no. 6 (2018): 5–22.

amorphous and difficult-to-define object would be challenging enough. This challenge is exacerbated by our present conjuncture of upheaval and entrenched ideological conflict, in which the academy itself is under attack (often by the very political forces we study). Researchers of the right face tough methodological and practical questions: How might a researcher's own political ideological assumptions shape their analysis (for better or worse)? How might a researcher's own personal identity impact their ability to study a phenomenon that is often premised on excluding, marginalizing, or even eliminating entirely certain social and cultural groups? How ought researchers navigate elusive or outright hostile subjects? How ought researchers protect themselves from threats and other forms of violence imposed by their subjects? As these questions illustrate, the challenges facing scholars of right-wing politics are not merely theoretical and methodological. Researching the right may also involve a heightened vulnerability to physical and psychological harms.

This special issue is designed to engage with some of the many distinct challenges faced by scholars specializing in right-wing politics. Our invited essay contributors—Blu Buchanan, Cas Mudde, Meredith L. Pruden, and Emma Tran—have commendably navigated the complexities of this task by identifying, assessing, and advancing solutions to the difficulties facing those who study and teach "the right." As guest editors, we also felt it was important that the issue include empirical studies that exemplify these challenges and indicate directions for future research in the field. These research articles offer in-depth examination of, and thoughtful reflection on, important methodological and theoretical dilemmas. Hanson-Green and Karčić examine how the representations used to incite and justify violence against Bosnian Muslims in the 1990s are now being exported and utilized to mobilize far-right extremists worldwide. De Winkel and colleagues reflect on the methodological, epistemological, and legal intricacies involved with conducting data-driven humanities research on the right, based on their experiences studying the online platform Gab. Valayden, Walzer, and Moore advance a theory of *ordinary antidemocratic cultures*, seeking to understand how right-wing politics are shaped through rhetorical acts, drawing from their extensive analysis of January 6 riot participants' arrest sheets. Finally, Leeds stages a dialogue between the works of Stuart Hall and Arlie Hochschild with the aim of developing a conceptual heuristic to effectively integrate recent research on the right.

Below, we offer three provocations for the burgeoning field of right-wing studies. We trace its contours, as we see them, along three dimensions: the field itself, its terminologies, and the various social, cultural, and political standpoints of its individual researchers. We note tensions in each that, we contend, point toward the constitutive drives and problems around which our nascent field is emerging. Our aim is not to resolve these tensions but to raise questions and provide researchers with tools for reflexive and deliberate field building going forward.

The Field: Between Judgment and Understanding

The field we are lately calling "right-wing studies" emerged out of a series of intellectual quandaries and political concerns resulting from the rise of fascism, the Second World War, and their aftermaths. In short, it originated in two questions: What makes right-wing authoritarianism popular? And how might we preempt or mitigate its salience and harms? We are imposing this clarity on a field that frankly, until recently, did not act like one. Spanning academic disciplines—history, sociology, psychology, political science, cultural studies, and anthropology, to name a few—as well as journalistic and left-wing or progressive research initiatives, what we "know" about right-wing politics results from myriad, at times contradictory, methods, terminologies, theoretical frameworks, normative positions, and political commitments. This variety complicates any effort to speak in broad terms about the field's contours or tendencies. Nevertheless, for purposes of this provocation, we suggest that many scholarly and journalistic accounts of right-wing politics tend toward one of two drives: one motivated by judgment, the other by understanding.

We use the terms "judgment" and "understanding" in the sense employed by Hannah Arendt.[2] The former refers to "thought in the service of political action,"[3] while the latter refers to an "unending activity by which, in constant change and variation, we come to terms with and reconcile ourselves to reality, that is, try to be at home in the world."[4] Studies of right-wing politics rooted in "judgment" begin from a (sometimes unacknowledged) normative position and tend to comprehend their objects of study as deviant. Studies rooted in "understanding" seek to come to terms with a world in which right-wing politics are comprehensible at all. Studies aligned with the former tend toward externalizing the problem of right-wing politics, rendering its supporters exotic or abnormal. Studies aligned with the latter indicate and reckon with (presuming a non-right-wing "we") our complicity in the very social and cultural forms that yield right-wing political formations. We are not advocating, here, for one tendency or another but

2 We acknowledge that Arendt did not invent these terms from whole cloth but built on long-standing philosophical debates. We further acknowledge that Arendt's conceptualization is subject to considerable disagreement and deliberation among philosophers and political theorists. Litigating those debates is beyond the scope of this brief introduction. For a useful work that situates Arendt within an array of philosophers who were also concerned with the challenges of analyzing political formations in the absence of shared or authoritative standards of reason, judgment, and comprehension, see Tracy B. Strong, *Politics without Vision: Thinking without a Banister in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

3 Peter T. Steinberger, "Hannah Arendt on Judgment," *American Journal of Political Science* 34, no. 3 (1990): 803–821, at 812.

4 Hannah Arendt, "Understanding and Politics (The Difficulties of Understanding)," in *Essays in Understanding: 1930–1954: Formation, Exile, and Totalitarianism*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1994), 307–27, at 308.

simply identifying the tension between them as generative, even perhaps productive, of right-wing studies as a field.

We first encounter this tension in two classic studies aimed at making sense of German National Socialism and its totalitarian mode of governance—both involving and informed by the experiences of Jewish refugee survivors of the Holocaust.

The first, *The Authoritarian Personality*, is a pathbreaking and exhaustive social psychological analysis of "the *potentially fascistic* individual" whose personality structures "render him particularly susceptible to anti-democratic propaganda."[5] The study—a collaboration between social psychologists Nevitt Sanford, Else Frenkel-Brunswik, and Daniel Levinson and Frankfurt School philosopher Theodor Adorno—posited that fascist political support could not be explained by ideology or material interests alone. They devised a personality test, known as the "F-scale," which accounted for several psychosocial dimensions and was designed to determine the degree to which a particular individual might be disposed toward supporting right-wing authoritarian politics and policies. While Adorno and his collaborators opposed biological determinism or fixed conceptions of personalities, positing that inclinations toward fascism were shaped by many social and cultural inputs alongside the personal experiences of an individual, they nevertheless framed high F-scale personalities as pathological and abnormal. "[N]o political-social trend imposes a graver threat to our traditional values and institutions than does fascism," the authors wrote. "[K]nowledge of the personality forces that favor its acceptance may ultimately prove useful in combatting it."[6] *The Authoritarian Personality* is a quintessential example of thought in the service of political action (i.e., judgment). Based on a normative premise, that support for liberal democracy reflects a healthy personality aligned with "traditional values," the study employs empiricist methods with the goal of predictive modeling that might guide efforts at mitigating the widespread acceptance of right-wing authoritarian politics.

If Adorno and his team searched for the causes of fascist support within the personalities of individuals, Hannah Arendt argued against such causal explanations of fascism in her 1954 *Partisan Review* essay "Understanding and Politics." "Understanding," Arendt wrote, "as distinguished from having correct information and scientific knowledge, is a complicated process which never produces unequivocal results."[7] Arendt saw totalitarianism as related to a broader crisis of meaning attendant with modernity. She drew a distinction between common sense (which "presupposes a common world into which we all fit") and logicality (which "claim[s] a reliability altogether independent of the world and the existence of other people"). Nazism, for

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5 T. W. Adorno, Else Frenkel-Brunswik, Daniel J. Levinson, and R. Nevitt Sanford, *The Authoritarian Personality* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1950), 1, original emphasis.

6 Adorno et al., 1.

7 Arendt, "Understanding and Politics," 307.

Arendt, involved the ruthless application of logicality to much older and less novel conceptions of racial superiority and antisemitism, specifically the belief in an iron law of history as driven by racial struggle. She saw "understanding" as a form of investigation and cognition that engaged in the sort of meaning-making and world-building (the process of cultivating intersubjectivity among people) whose absence enabled Nazi totalitarianism to emerge and gain popular support. To be sure, Arendt associated understanding with political action—the "very essence of human freedom," in which people begin something new, boundless, and unpredictable. But understanding, which Arendt considers "the other side of action," cultivates a shared common sense among political actors that allows them to "come to terms with what irrevocably happened and be reconciled with what unavoidably exists."[8] Asking how and why people engage in right-wing political action, for Arendt, is about making sense of a world in which right-wing beliefs and policies are comprehensible in the first place. This understanding is a prerequisite for imagining the world otherwise or anew but neither offers nor implies a concrete program for implementing that vision.

While we give judgment and understanding equal billing here, overall the field of right-wing studies is skewed toward the former. Empirical studies of right-wing politics—seeking causal explanations, rooted in (often underexplicated or at least underexamined) normative frameworks, and with a tendency toward considering right-wing political formations as aberrant and deviant—have long dominated the field. Look no further than the seemingly never-ending taxonomies of right-wing political formations: radical, far, ultra, extreme, fringe, moderate, and so on. The first scholarly book about the "New American Right," published in 1955 and edited by Daniel Bell, extended central assumptions of *The Authoritarian Personality* to explain McCarthy-era conservatism in the United States, what has since been considered by political historians as the modern conservative movement.[9] In it, Richard Hofstadter borrowed the concept of the "pseudo-conservative" from Adorno and his colleagues, claiming that McCarthy-era conservatives were protofascists hiding under a thin veneer of traditional conservative rhetoric. Bell contended that modern conservatism was fundamentally antimodern, motivated by individuals who felt "dispossessed" by progress, while Seymour Martin Lipset coined the phrase "status anxiety" to explain how fear of losing social dominance informed modern conservatism's racist and antisemitic tendencies.[10]

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8 Arendt, 321–22.

9 The anticommunism associated with the Second Red Scare played an instrumental role in the rise of modern conservatism as both an intellectual and social movement. For a history of the former, see George H. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945* (Wilmington, DE: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 1998). For a history of the latter, see Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

10 Daniel Bell, ed., *The Radical Right: The New American Right Expanded and Updated* (New York: Anchor Books, 1963). It is worth noting, perhaps, that both Bell and Lipset became influential neoconservatives by the turn of the twenty-first century.

These psychosocial explanations of modern conservatism remain salient among journalists and some scholars, who have recently dusted them off to explain the rise in popularity of Donald J. Trump, among other contemporary phenomena on the right. This is in spite of the fact that political theorist Michael Rogin, in his book *The Intellectuals and McCarthy* (1967), had long since disproven many of the core assumptions of Bell and his fellow authors. Rogin famously accused such "pluralist" intellectuals of "participating in the status politics they analyzed," and argued that modern conservatism (what he termed the "countersubversive tradition") ought not to be relegated to the political fringe—as pluralists were wont to do—but ought to be considered as existing "at the core of American politics."[11] Rogin's later work epitomizes the project of understanding, as we conceive it. Rather than locate right-wing authoritarianism as exogenous to the US political tradition, Rogin illuminates the centrality of racist and settler-colonial logics at the heart of US "democracy." If the project of judgment within right-wing studies is to frame right-wing politics as a fringe social pathology capable of remedy without disrupting the extant political system, the project of understanding challenges that view by suggesting that right-wing politics emerges from the central logics of the extant political system itself.

A more recent illustration of this dialectic can be found in the dueling questions of journalist Thomas Frank and historian Bethany Moreton, both notable contributors to the field of right-wing studies in the United States. Frank asks, in his 2004 bestseller of the same name, "What's the matter with Kansas?" In her 2009 book, *To Serve God and Wal-Mart*, Moreton retorts, "What matters to Arkansans?"[12] Frank's question rests on a liberal version of vulgar Marxist "false consciousness," which presumes that people ought to act politically based on their material economic interests and sees "cultural issues" like abortion as means by which conservative elites trick their constituents into voting irrationally. Frank's investigation begins with judgment: conservative voters are being duped, how? Moreton, on the other hand, sees no contradiction in conservative voters synthesizing the material and the ideal, and voting accordingly—her work demonstrates how evangelical Christianity and support for laissez-faire capitalism were articulated within US Sunbelt communities due to historically contingent political, economic, and cultural forces that emerged during the Cold War.

Frank and Moreton, Bell and Rogin, Adorno and Arendt: these thinkers and debates demarcate the contours of a central and ongoing discussion within the field of right-wing studies. Is right-wing politics a "far" or "fringe" or "radical" intrusion into

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11 Michael Paul Rogin, *The Intellectuals and McCarthy: The Radical Specter* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1969), 274, 277.

12 Thomas Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004); Bethany Moreton, *To Serve God and Wal-Mart: The Making of Christian Free Enterprise* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

otherwise stable, pluralistic, and egalitarian democratic societies? Or is right-wing politics a mere expression of the core contradictions and repressive tendencies at the heart of liberal democracy? We acknowledge there will be no definitive and universally satisfying answers to either of these questions. Yet, by engaging with our core question—are our studies driven by judgment or understanding?—we can more deliberately and reflexively situate our answers within the established, if underrealized, field.

Terminology: Between Analysis and Euphemism

Situating ourselves more reflexively within the field of "right-wing studies" also requires grappling with its unwieldy array of terminologies. Even the definition of "right," with its varying prefixes and adjectives qualifying degrees of intensity ("far," "radical," "extreme," "ultra"), remains far from settled. Geography presents one challenge. What is left, right, or unmarked in one country context can be perceived as being on the right, left, or center in another. Take the case of Colombia, where the very idea of the welfare state or workers' rights has been construed and is largely perceived in mainstream culture as akin to communism (recently recodified as *castrochavismo*), while in Switzerland—where the far-right Swiss People's Party has been the strongest party in the National Council since 1999—public services, workers' rights, and the welfare state are considered to be part of the natural order of things.[13] History presents another challenge. Something identified with the "right" at one point in time might become unmarked, naturalized, or mainstreamed at another point, or the other way around. The challenges presented by geography and history extend beyond the object of study, encompassing the questions posited, the approach taken, and the language used by the researcher. Imbalances of power between the Global North and Global South are at the heart of the Eurocentrism that skews knowledge production in mainstream English-language academia, and they play a central role in shaping how certain concepts are used and popularized.[14]

13 As Oscar Mazzoleni has noted, the Swiss People's Party certainly criticizes social spending and bureaucracy, not to oppose social benefits themselves but to slam what they call the "profiteers" of the system—such as "*false* refugees," "*false* unemployed individuals," drug addicts, and so forth. See *Nationalisme et populisme en Suisse: La radicalisation de la "nouvelle" UDC* (Lausanne, Switzerland: Presses Polytechniques et Universitaires Romandes, 2008), 74. Despite the embrace of neoliberalism in the last decades of the twentieth century, welfare states (which are part of the legacy of postwar Keynesianism) remain strong in continental Europe. Again, the contrast with Colombia—where the entanglement of "political violence and neoliberal restructuring" has been extreme—could not be starker. See Lesley Gill, *A Century of Violence in a Red City: Popular Struggle, Counterinsurgency, and Human Rights in Colombia* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 23.

14 See Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), and *Black Rights / White Wrongs: The Critique of Racial Liberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

That is to say, the terminology used in right-wing studies often insufficiently engages with the legacies of colonialism and empire.

Take, for instance, "populism." In Western Europe and beyond, it has emerged as a master trope in both academic and popular discourse over the last decade to designate anything considered "politically odious."[15] The term is usually employed to categorize political figures, projects, and parties challenging the liberal status quo, regardless of whether the challenge aims at advocating for justice and downward redistribution or at entrenching various forms of inequality. This unwittingly reinforces Eurocentrism. Placing the institutions and values of liberal democracy at the top of a political philosophical hierarchy elides, or misreads as inferior, non-Western radical forms of democracy.[16] It also obscures the more authoritarian practices at the heart of Western liberal democracy—including both historical and ongoing imperial and colonial projects.[17]

The term is also problematically imprecise. It paints radically opposing projects with the same analytic brush, which is why "populism" typically requires an extra qualifier—left or right, "exclusionary" or "inclusionary," and "identitarian," among others.[18] Nevertheless, within right-wing studies, "populism" often appears "unqualified and as a key definer" to designate right-wing actors in lieu of more precise terms that might better indicate their "more extreme nature."[19] This

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15 Anton Jäger, "The Myth of 'Populism,'" *Jacobin*, March 1, 2018, https://jacobinmag.com/2018/01/populism-douglas-hofstadter-donald-trump-democracy.

16 For an example of scholarship that places liberal democracy at the top of such a hierarchy without acknowledging other types of democracy, see Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 95. Some examples of non-Western, non-liberal, and/or radical democratic formations include Bolivia's Ayllu communitarian democracy, Venezuela's Comunas, Colombia's San José de Apartadó Peace Community, and the Zapatista Caracoles. See, respectively, Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, "Liberal Democracy and Ayllu Democracy in Bolivia: The Case of Northern Potosí," *The Journal of Development Studies* 26, no. 4 (1990): 97–121; George Ciccariello-Maher, *Building the Commune: Radical Democracy in Venezuela* (New York: Verso, 2016); Christopher Courtheyn, *Community of Peace: Performing Geographies of Ecological Dignity in Colombia* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2022); and Walter Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011). For more details on alternative modes of democratic social organization, see Arturo Escobar, *Designs for the Pluriverse: Radical Interdependence, Autonomy, and the Making of Worlds* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).

17 See Domenico Losurdo, *Liberalism: A Counter-History* (New York: Verso, 2014); Aurelien Mondon and Aaron Winter, *Reactionary Democracy: How Racism and the Populist Far-Right Became Mainstream* (New York: Verso, 2020); and Mills, *The Racial Contract* and *Black Rights / White Wrongs*.

18 Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, "Exclusionary vs. Inclusionary Populism: Comparing Contemporary Europe and Latin America," *Government and Opposition* 48, no. 2 (2013): 147–74; Marc Ferro, "Le tentations radicales du populisme contemporain," in *Le retour des populismes: L'état du monde 2019*, ed. Bertrand Badie and Dominique Vidal (Paris: La Découverte, 2019), 73–81.

19 Aurelien Mondon, "Epistemologies of Ignorance in Far Right Studies: The Invisibilisation of Racism and Whiteness in Times of Populist Hype," *Acta Politica* 58, no. 4 (2023): 876–94, at 884–85. For

association of populism with the extreme right wing is often taken for granted. A review of European scholarly literature on the topic identified the common deployment of "populist" as a synonym for extreme right parties and movements whose primary overt political aim is to protect "the identity of the 'Christian Western civilization'" and to mobilize overtly xenophobic and/or anti-Muslim discourses.[20]

Indeed, perhaps related to its increasing use as an epithet, "populist" has become a salient term among right-wing activists themselves. For instance, leaders of the National Rally (formerly the National Front) party in France—first Jean-Marie, then Marine Le Pen—have threatened to sue anyone who describes the party as extreme right.[21] But they have happily embraced the "populist" designation because it serves their longstanding efforts to move from the electoral fringes to the mainstream.[22] Jean-Marie adopted *Le Pen le peuple* (Le Pen the people) as his slogan in 1988, and Marine set on *la voix du peuple, l'esprit de la France* (the voice of the people, the spirit of France) as hers in 2012. While this is certainly tantamount to performing "the people," foregrounding these populist claims in scholarly analyses—as though they are the core of the Le Pen political project—obscures the clear ethnic/racial dimension of their notion of peoplehood.[23] Their "people" necessarily excludes Muslim, Arab, and Black populations, even second- or third-generation individuals born and raised in France but with ancestors in, say, Algeria.[24] As French sociologist Annie Collovald has argued, referring to National Rally / National Front as "populist" has leant the party a "fictional identity," deradicalized in appearance

another study about how "populism" performed the function of euphemizing and trivializing the European extreme right in a six-month "The New Populism" series run in 2018 by the *Guardian*, the British liberal newspaper par excellence, see Katy Brown and Aurelien Mondon, "Populism, the Media, and the Mainstreaming of the Far Right: The Guardian's Coverage of Populism as a Case Study," *Politics* 41, no. 3 (2021): 279–95.

20 Yannis Stavrakakis, Giorgos Katsambekis, Nikos Nikisianis, Alexandros Kioupkiolis, and Thomas Siomos, "Extreme Right-Wing Populism in Europe: Revisiting a Reified Association," *Critical Discourse Studies* 14 no. 4 (2017): 420–39. It is indeed at the right and far-right end of the spectrum that the explicit rejection of Muslims and their religion is most pronounced. In France, this is especially the case among overt supporters of the National Rally / National Front party. See Félicien Faury, *Des électeurs ordinaires: Enquête sur la normalisation de l'extrême droite* (Paris: Seuil, 2024), 118.

21 Cécile Alduy, Annie Collovald, and Jean-Yves Pranchère, "Les faillites du langage," interview by Anne-Lorraine Bujon and Michaël Fœssel, *Esprit* 10 (2023): 65–79, at 68.

22 Brown and Mondon, "Populism," 287.

23 Cécile Alduy and Stéphane Wahnich, *Marine Le Pen prise aux mots: Décryptage du nouveau discours frontiste* (Paris: Seuil, 2015), 171.

24 See Ali Rattansi, *Racism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 102; and Stéphane Wahnich, "Marine Le Pen dévoilée," *La Cause du désir*, no. 112 (2022): 160–71, at 162.

but not in substance.[25] This has resulted in increasing acceptance of their politics because it has contributed to the breaking of certain psychological barriers among constituencies that had traditionally been resistant.[26] Applying "populist" as a mere descriptor of these actors' practices, without critically interrogating the broader racial and ethnic hierarchies that structure most postcolonial Western societies, is detrimental to nonwhite populations that, following dramatic demographic changes in the aftermath of empire, have at this point been part of European nation-states for generations.[27]

Using the term "populism" to describe right-wing political formations can thus function as a sort of analytically unhelpful, and (for the right) politically productive, euphemism for "racism" or "supremacism."[28] A key commonality among right-wing formations around the world is the naturalization of hierarchy to justify the supremacy of certain privileged segments of society.[29] Placing our analytical emphasis on their rhetorical opposition between "people" and "elites" distorts the picture. On the one hand, doing so downplays the racial/ethnic supremacist underpinnings of the projects in question;[30] on the other, doing so obscures the fact that right-wing demands often

25 Alduy, Collovald, and Pranchère, "Les faillites du langage," 68.

26 Cécile Alduy, "Nouveaux discours, nouveaux succès," Pouvoirs 157, no. 2 (2016): 17–29, at 27–28.

27 In this context, another term, "nativism," most comonly defined as an ideology promulgating that "states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group ('the nation')," is also flawed. See Cas Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 19. This definition, like the others, elides that right-wing actors use rhetoric that constructs certain (racialized) native-born populations as "foreigners." For a critical assessment of the ideational approach to "nativism," see George Newth, "Rethinking 'Nativism': Beyond the Ideational Approach," *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* 30, no. 2 (2023): 161–80. Furthermore, in the current moment of intense ideological struggle, the term reinforces the core myth of settler colonialism, namely, that the lands in the North American continent were empty prior to the seventeenth-century arrival of British settlers. See Lorenzo Veracini, "Settler Colonialism," in *The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Imperialism and Anti-Imperialism*, ed. Immanuel Ness and Zak Cope (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 2412–17.

28 See Humberto Cucchetti, Alexandre Dézé, and Emmanuelle Reungoat, *Au nom de peuple? Idées reçues sur le populisme* (Paris: Le Cavalier Bleu, 2021); Stavrakakis et al., "Extreme Right-Wing Populism"; Brown and Mondon, "Populism"; and Alduy and Wahnich, *Marine Le Pen*. For a historical account of the euphemistic tradition within the far right, see Roger Griffin, "'Lingua Quarti Imperii': The Euphemistic Tradition of the Extreme Right," in *Doublespeak: The Rhetoric of the Far Right since 1945*, ed. Matthew Feldman and Paul Jackson (Stuttgart: ibidem Verlag, 2014), 39–60.

29 See Corey Robin, *The Reactionary Mind: Conservatism from Edmund Burke to Donald Trump*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

30 A recent ethnographic study in France has shown the flaws in customary explanations for the twenty-first century electoral rise of the National Rally / National Front that insistently focus on social class and the trope of the left behind of neoliberalism while downplaying racism. See Faury, *Des électeurs ordinaires*.

have a lot to do with elites' agendas rather than popular demands driving "bottom-up pressure."[31]

Populism's dual valences—referring to an analytical concept of some use in understanding right-wing formations, but also to a form of identification that serves the interests of right-wing actors themselves—presents a particular problem for scholars whose terminology and mode of analysis may unwittingly bolster the self-serving rhetorical and conceptual needs of the actors they study. Since rhetoric is a key component of the political game in liberal democracies, it is crucial for scholars of the right to reflect carefully about what terms to utilize to designate and qualify their object of study and to do so from a global and longer-term historicized approach. If as scholars we aim at explaining and analyzing, it seems crucial not to align our conceptual tools with the political objectives of our object of study.

The Researcher: Between Stance and Reception

Researchers studying the right face a unique twofold challenge, namely the need to grapple with the impact of their own standpoint and personal history on their work, and with the reciprocal influence of their work on their personal lives. When it comes to scholars addressing their own positionality and personal history and considering how these factors might affect their work, several complexities emerge. While certain scientific frameworks, especially critical approaches, encourage and even expect explicit acknowledgment of scholars' positionality, others uphold epistemological values that suggest that such introspection may not be well received and could potentially undermine the credibility of the research. Consequently, this complicates engaging in comparative interdisciplinary research, even though, as has been argued before, it would greatly benefit future research in right-wing studies (see Tran's commentary in this issue).[32]

Reflection on one's positionality when studying the right, whether explicit or not, can help prevent researchers from inadvertently sustaining specific biases. Recognizing the researcher's privileged position can be useful to avoid assumptions that one's experiences and interpretations are universally applicable and standard. Alternatively, such biases can limit research's capacity to capture the complexities inherent in right-wing studies. Further, failing to acknowledge the role of factors such as race, class, or historical oppression in the research process can obscure and therefore maintain social inequalities. For example, Gurminder Bhambra defines methodological whiteness as a constraint on scholarly epistemologies, where whiteness is taken for granted as the universal standard, resulting in its conflation with other concepts such as class when

31 Mondon, "Epistemologies of Ignorance," 885.

32 See the contributions in "Right-Wing Studies: A Roundtable on the State of the Field," *Journal of Right-Wing Studies* 1, no. 0 (2023), https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7dc7t9jd.

analyzing the factors driving right-wing movements (e.g., the successes of Trump and Brexit), while overlooking nonwhite populations' experiences of class struggle.[33] Additionally, as this lack of acknowledgment can inadvertently elevate certain narratives and methodologies over others, it reinforces the existing power structures within academia, potentially perpetuating disparities stemming from historical barriers and discrimination.

Furthermore, as the right focuses on attacks against minority groups, researchers whose identities align with these groups or whose personal experiences connect them deeply to these issues might be more compelled to engage in self-reflection. Certainly, they may not have the option to avoid such introspection, resulting in a heavier load and an additional layer of exposure within their work. Because many of the subjects they study often wield power, researchers, especially those presenting identities targeted by the right, independently of their political stance, are particularly exposed to violence, such as doxing and harassment, or live in fear that such actions might take place.[34] Moreover, constant exposure to hateful content and threats can be especially impactful for those who have experienced victimization in the past, while a lack of institutional and structural support may compound this sense of vulnerability (see Buchanan's commentary in this issue).

This leads us to a second distinctive challenge encountered by researchers studying the right, which revolves around managing the impact of this work on their lives. Many scholars specializing in right-wing studies are at an increased risk of encountering situations that jeopardize their physical and mental well-being. As previously mentioned, one of these challenges involves the very real threat of physical violence.[35] This can intensify when scholars make themselves visible to subjects, for instance in the context of recruitment, fieldwork, and other types of data collection.[36] Furthermore, immersing themselves in content marked by intolerance at best, and explicit violence at worst, often triggers feelings of hopelessness that may extend beyond their professional lives.[37] Studying such rhetoric and behavior in contexts in which they may appear

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33 Gurminder K. Bhambra, "Brexit, Trump, and 'Methodological Whiteness': On the Misrecognition of Race and Class," *The British Journal of Sociology* 68 (2017): S214–S232.

34 Elizabeth Pearson, Joe Whittaker, Till Baaken, Sara Zeiger, Farangiz Atamuradova, and Maura Conway, *Online Extremism and Terrorism Researchers' Security, Safety, and Resilience: Findings from the Field* (Vox Pol, 2023), https://voxpol.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Online-Extremism-and-Terrorism-Researchers-Security-Safety-Resilience.pdf.

35 Pearson et al., *Online Extremism*.

36 Thomas Colley and Martin Moore, "The Challenges of Studying 4chan and the Alt-Right: 'Come On In the Water's Fine,'" *New Media & Society* 24, no. 1 (2022): 5–30.

37 Tina Askanius, "Studying the Nordic Resistance Movement: Three Urgent Questions for Researchers of Contemporary Neo-Nazis and Their Media Practices," *Media, Culture & Society* 41, no. 6 (2019): 878–88.

normalized, even normative or desirable, can foster feelings of isolation. These emotions are compounded when the topics under study personally resonate with researchers, serving as a strong motivation for their work but also intensifying its negative effects.

Adding to these difficulties, the potentially solitary nature of scholarly work may amplify the negative emotional impact on researchers of the right, making it crucial to find peers who experience their work similarly.[38] In this context, it is essential to emphasize that scholars, beyond their research responsibilities, are also often tasked with teaching duties in contexts of heightened political polarization, introducing additional complexities for those focusing on the right (see Mudde's commentary in this issue). The challenges associated with teaching the right unfold in response to, and are shaped by, the specific political climate within the scholars' sphere (e.g., within the institution, region, or state). Moreover, these challenges become more intricate, and more apparent, amid the ongoing mainstreaming and normalization of far-right ideologies, resulting in such arguments finding space in class, student-led professor watchlists, or unfavorable anonymous feedback from students sympathetic to the far right in teaching assessments at the end of the semester.

To further complicate this issue, the demands of academic productivity make it increasingly difficult to detach from this work (see Pruden's commentary in this issue). Even when attempting to do so, researchers' complete mental disengagement remains challenging due to the intense nature of the content under analysis, thus contributing to heightened stress levels.[39] In addition to the stress that may arise from potential harm to scholars' physical and mental health, as well as from the limitations on taking breaks that may be imposed by academic productivity demands, another stressor is the inherent complexity of conducting this type of work. Alongside the risks of recruiting subjects for research in the field of right-wing studies, there is the resistance of right-wing individuals to engaging with academic research.[40] Consequently, this difficulty can lead to delays, extended research timelines, or even the termination of studies.

While these challenges exist for many scholars regardless of rank, they can weigh heavily on early-career researchers, who already are under substantial pressure to publish or perish. While acquiring research skills and knowledge and building a substantial publication record to enhance their future job prospects, they may need to learn how to protect themselves. Ironically, taking measures to protect themselves might involve decreasing their visibility, potentially exposing them to negative

38 Kathleen M. Blee, "Studying the Enemy," in *Our Studies, Ourselves*, ed. Barry Glassner and Rosanna Hertz (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 13–23.

39 Paris Martineau, "The Existential Crisis Plaguing Online Extremism Researchers," *Wired*, May 2, 2019, https://www.wired.com/story/existential-crisis-plaguing-online-extremism-researchers/.

40 Kathleen M. Blee, "Ethnographies of the Far Right," *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 36, no. 2 (2007): 119–28.

professional repercussions.[41] Further, they might still lack a network of fellow scholars to offer guidance and support during this learning process. For instance, although the field of right-wing studies is expanding, they might be the only scholars studying these topics within their department, intensifying their sense of isolation. As they may need to advocate for particular research strategies, such as tailored approaches that protect researchers as well as subjects, or potentially unconventional timelines, these feelings may be aggravated when dealing with senior scholars who may be less familiar with these specific challenges.[42]

This special issue aims to initiate a dialogue around these challenges. While admittedly we do not possess definitive solutions, our goal is to shed light on these issues and provide a platform for insightful scholars to begin addressing them. Simultaneously, we aim to foster conversations among researchers employing diverse approaches, enabling them to better understand their own and each other's positions and biases. We see this effort as an important step to initiate interdisciplinary collaboration and ultimately move the field forward. Additionally, we hope that this special issue will support scholars advocating for adjusted guidelines and specific accommodations due to their work studying the right. While we do not claim that this compilation can replace a supportive network of scholars, we hope that it will offer guidance on potential strategies to approach this work. By sharing insights from researchers who have navigated or are currently navigating similar challenges, we aim to illuminate ways to mitigate them and, importantly, provide solace to those undergoing the emotional toll of engaging in this work, assuring them that they are not alone.

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41 Pearson et al., *Online Extremism*.

42 Maura Conway, "Online Extremism and Terrorism Research Ethics: Researcher Safety, Informed Consent, and the Need for Tailored Guidelines," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 33, no. 2 (2021): 367–80.

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ARTICLE

"Remove Kebab"

The Appeal of Serbian Nationalist Ideology among the Global Far Right

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Abstract: *This article examines the appeal of Serbian nationalist ideology among the contemporary far right. We argue that the discursive othering of Bosnian Muslims as "Turks" as well as the Serbian grand narrative presenting the Bosnian War as a civilizational struggle between Christian Europe and Islam are uniquely resonant with the popular anti-Muslim and xenophobic discourses that are mobilizing right-wing extremists across the globe. Through an analysis of Serbian and far-right discourses, we demonstrate how the patterns of representation that were used to incite and justify the violence committed against Bosnian Muslims in the 1990s are being exported to remote corners of the world via the internet, where they merge with extraneous Islamophobic and racist ideologies to inspire a new generation of extremism, hatred, and violence.*

Keywords: Bosnian War, genocide, terrorism, Islamophobia, right-wing extremism

One March afternoon in 2019, an Australian man named Brenton Tarrant murdered fifty-one people at the Al Noor Mosque and the Linwood Islamic Centre in Christchurch, New Zealand.[1] On his rifle, Tarrant had scrawled the names of several Montenegrin

1 While acknowledging the decision of many international academics and journalists to refrain from identifying the perpetrators of such attacks by name in order to avoid contributing to their fame or notoriety, the authors of this article share a different perspective informed by the Balkan postconflict experience. Since the end of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina nearly three decades ago, establishing individual criminal responsibility has been a critical component of transitional justice as well as the struggle to establish a societal consensus on the facts and nature of wartime events. We contend that relegating

folk heroes—Bajo Pivljanin, Marko Miljanov Popović, and Novak Vujošević—all famed for their bloody victories over the Ottoman Turks in the eighteenth century.[2] Also inscribed on Tarrant's weapon were a number of enigmatic phrases including "Hagia Sofia," "turkofagos" (Turk-eater), and "Remove Kebab." This last slogan has become fashionable among global communities of right-wing extremists, used as a metonym for the removal of Muslims from "Western" soil. The slogan, popularized in the form of a meme that was widely circulated on niche corners of the internet, is derived from a Serbian nationalist folk song entitled "From Bihać to Petrovo village." During his drive to the Al Noor Mosque, which he broadcast on Facebook Live, Tarrant could be heard listening to this anthem. Written in 1993, in the midst of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), the song famously urges the Bosnian-Serb leader Radovan Karadžić to lead "his Serbs" to victory against the "Ustaša" and "Turks"—pejorative terms that refer to Croatians and Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims) respectively.

While well known in the Balkans to Serbian nationalists and Muslim populations alike, the cultural references Tarrant employed in his attack are completely alien to most in New Zealand and across much of the world. How, then, did such obscure symbolism come to inspire an act of violence separated by continents, cultures, and decades from its context of origin? In answering this question, this article examines the appeal of Serbian nationalist ideology among contemporary communities of right-wing extremists. We argue that the discursive othering of Bosniaks as "Turks," and the Serbian grand narrative presenting the Bosnian War as part of a historic struggle between Christian European and Islamic civilizations, are uniquely resonant with the popular anti-Muslim and xenophobic discourses that are mobilizing right-wing extremists across the globe. Through an analysis of Serbian and far-right discourses, we demonstrate how the patterns of representation that were used to incite and justify the violence committed against Bosnian Muslims in the 1990s are being exported to remote corners of the world via the internet, where they merge with extraneous Islamophobic and racist ideologies to inspire a new generation of extremism, hatred, and violence.

Serbian Nationalism in the Far-Right Cybersphere

The Serbian nationalist presence on the internet began with only a handful of websites, many of which were operated by members of the Serbian diaspora living in the West. Most notable among these were www.srpska-mreza.com and www.serbianna.com, which became propagandistic strongholds for the pro-Milošević community

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violent perpetrators to anonymity may constitute a form of impunity, potentially facilitating revisionist historical accounts seeking to deny or distort the violence itself and/or glorify the perpetrators.

2 Hariz Halilovich, "Long-Distance Hatred: How the NZ Massacre Echoed Balkan War Crimes," *Transitions Online*, March 19, 2019, https://tol.org/client/article/28295-long-distance-hatred-how-the-nz-massacre-echoed-balkan-war-crimes.html.

following the NATO bombing campaign of 1999. While these websites have proliferated significantly, their content remains largely consistent, centering around narratives of Serbian victimhood, Islamophobia, the illegitimacy of Kosovo, NATO demonization, genocide denial, and historical revisionism of both the 1990s conflict and events of the Second World War.[3] In addition to organizing public events, Serbian ultranationalist groups have been expanding their online presence through internet chatrooms,[4] free content platforms like YouTube and Wikipedia,[5] and social media outlets.[6] The contemporary social media landscape has proved especially conducive to the dissemination of Serbian radical ideology and hate speech in new popular formats including short video clips and memes.[7]

The internet has also facilitated a revival of wartime Serbian nationalist pop culture, in particular songs and anthems that were created during the war and functioned to propagate virulent hatred and anti-Muslim sentiment. Lyrics from Serbian nationalist songs that have been popularized in the far-right cybersphere include "Serbian shells are guided by God's hand"; "the time has come for the Serbian revenge, all the Mosques are flying in the sky"; and, a particular far-right favorite, "I don't like you Alija because you are a Balija."[8] The most famous of such songs is undoubtedly "Od Bihaća do Petrova Sela" (From Bihać to Petrovo village), featuring the line "Karadžić, lead your Serbs,"

3 Notably, Russian actors have made substantial contributions to right-wing revisionism of Second World War history, particularly in the Balkans. See Hikmet Karčić, "Russia's Campaign to Rewrite WWII History Is Dividing the Balkans. Just as Putin Intended," *Haaretz*, September 7, 2020, https://www.haaretz.com/world-news/2020-09-07/ty-article-opinion/.premium/russias-campaign-to-rewrite-wwii-history-is-dividing-the-balkans-as-putin-intended/0000017f-e586-dc7e-adff-f5af8ff20000. Russian president Vladimir Putin's claim during a recent interview that Poland forced the hand of the Nazis in their 1939 invasion is emblematic of these narratives, which are promulgated at the highest echelons of the Kremlin and used to bolster and legitimize its foreign policy objectives. See "Interview to Tucker Carlson," President of Russia (official website), February 9, 2024, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/73411.

4 Srđan Mladenov Jovanović, "The Dveri Movement through a Discursive Lens: Serbia's Contemporary Right-Wing Nationalism," *Comparative Southeast European Studies* 66, no. 4 (2018): 481–502.

5 Richard Rogers, *Digital Methods* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2013), 165–202.

6 Srđan Mladenov Jovanović, "The Portal 'Nationalist' as the Nutshell of Recent Serbian Nationalism," *National Identities* 23, no.2 (2021): 149–62.

7 Hikmet Karčić, "Srebrenica Genocide Denial: From Dodik to TikTok," *TRT World*, March 16, 2021, https://www.trtworld.com/opinion/srebrenica-genocide-denial-from-dodik-to-tiktok-45051; Admir Muslimović, "Srebrenica Pupils Who Published Serb Nationalist Photo Disciplined," *Balkan Insight*, January 20, 2020, https://balkaninsight.com/2020/01/30/srebrenica-pupils-who-published-serb-nationalist-photo-disciplined/.

8 The first is a wartime song by a certain Perica Ivanović. See "Serbian Artillery Is Led by God," April 18, 2017, YouTube video, 2:48, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JFteJlDJvqY. The second is from Miro Semberac's album *Puče puška u sred Semberije*, released by Super Ton in 1993. The third is from Baja Mali Knindža's album *Živeće ovaj narod*, released by Nina Trade in 1992.

which was explicitly referenced by Brenton Tarrant prior to the Christchurch attack. Although YouTube subsequently took down the video, which then had around nine million views, various versions continue to be reuploaded by far right enthusiasts, for whom the song has become a sort of unofficial anthem.

The first "remix" of this music video appeared on YouTube in 2006 and is believed to have been created by Croatian film director Pavle Vranjican as an ironic disparagement of the song's original message. Notably, this video contained images from the trial of wartime Bosnian Serb president Radovan Karadžić before the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), as well as photographs from Bosnian Serb concentration camps originally published in Western media outlets in 1992. In response to this video, a new remix soon appeared entitled "Serbia Strong / God is a Serb." Purged of sardonic imagery, this version restored the original pro-Serb meaning of the nationalist war song and included English-language subtitles of the lyrics.[9]

This video spawned the "Remove Kebab" meme, alternately known as "Serbia Strong," which has emerged as one of the most striking examples of Serbian nationalist ideology's penetration of the global far right through modern modes of cultural communication. The "Remove Kebab" meme was first posted on 4Chan and 8Chan, and has since spread to other platforms, gaining widespread popularity among Serbian diaspora as well as alt-right communities online. The classic iteration of the meme depicts a low-resolution still from the video featuring two Serb soldiers with musical instruments, overlayed with the text "REMOVE KEBAB" (figure 1).

Figure 1. "Remove Kebab" meme. Source: Ristić, "Remove Kebab" (note 9).

9 Katarina Ristić, "Remove Kebab: The Transnational Circulation of Far-Right Memes and the Memory of the Yugoslav Wars," Global Network on Extremism and Technology, June 14, 2023, https://gnet-research.org/2023/06/14/remove-kebab-the-transnational-circulation-of-far-right-memes-and-the-memory-of-the-yugoslav-wars/.

The kebab, or döner kebab, is a Turkish meat dish cooked on a vertical rotisserie that originated in the nineteenth-century Ottoman Empire. Popularized by Turkish immigrants in Europe during the late twentieth century, the dish quickly became a staple of economical late-night street food in many European countries. Recently, however, in what has been termed "gastronomic racism," Muslim-operated kebab shops have come under attack by right-wing politicians in many countries such as France, Austria, and Italy, reflecting broader Islamophobic and anti-immigrant trends.[10] As the "Remove Kebab" meme illustrates, the racial connotations of the dish were already deeply entrenched within far-right discourse, where "kebab" has been used as a pejorative metonym for undesirable Muslim and immigrant populations for over a decade.

Hundreds of stylized variations of the meme continue to circulate on social media, where praise for the Bosnian genocide, Serbian war criminals, and Serbian nationalist ideology is widespread.[11] Conventional social media networks as well as online forums such as Reddit and 4chan are uniting a new, transnational generation of right-wing extremists around the glorification of violence, enabling them to draw inspiration and legitimization from one another's hate-fueled ideologies. What is more, the bonds forged between Balkan and right-wing extremists on the internet are also engendering tangible connections in real life.[12] Recent investigations by the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network have revealed that white supremacist groups from Germany and the UK are actively collaborating with their nationalist counterparts in Serbia to expand their online presence and amplify their shared message of Islamophobia, historical revisionism, and racial hatred.[13]

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10 See Jillian Cavanaugh, "Il y a kébab et kébab : Conflit local et alimentation globale en Italie du nord," *Anthropologie et Sociétés* 37, no. 2 (2013): 193–212; Jyhene Kebsi, "Gastronomic Racism in France and Australia: Food Practices in the War on Muslims," *The Overland Journal*, May 11, 2021, https://overland.org.au/2021/05/gastronomic-racism-in-france-and-australia-food-practices-in-the-war-on-muslims/; "What Explains Europe's Love-Hate Relationship with the Kebab?," *TRTWorld*, 2021, https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/what-explains-europes-love-hate-relationship-with-the-kebab-12752724 (accessed June 26, 2024).

11 Murtaza Hussain, "From El Paso to Sarajevo: How White Nationalists Have Been Inspired by the Genocide of Muslims in Bosnia," *The Intercept*, September 1, 2019, https://theintercept.com/2019/09/01/bosnian-genocide-mass-shootings/.

12 Barbara N. Wiesinger, "The Continuing Presence of the Extreme Right in Post-Milošević Serbia," *Balkanologie* 11, nos. 1–2 (2008): 1–15.

13 Nenad Radicevic, "We Are Their Voice: German Far-Right Builds Balkan Alliance," *Balkan Insight*, October 24, 2019, https://balkaninsight.com/2019/10/24/we-are-their-voice-german-far-right-builds-balkan-alliances/; Jelena Cosic, Lawrence Marzouk, and Ivan Angelovski, "British Nationalist Trains Serb Far-Right for 'Online War,'" *Balkan Insight*, May 1, 2018, https://balkaninsight.com/2018/05/01/british-nationalist-trains-serb-far-right-for-online-war-04-30-2018.

Research Approach

This research employs the qualitative methods of discourse and narrative analysis to examine the various representations underlying both Serbian violence following the collapse of Yugoslavia and more recent episodes of radical right-wing terrorism. Through the dissection of stories, speech, and written language, discourse and narrative analysis reveal the strategies of representation and socially constructed meanings that serve as collective cognitive frameworks through which individuals and groups interpret reality, defining the normative range of individual and collective action. In this section, we lay the theoretical groundwork for this analysis, beginning with an overview of the contemporary far right and the transnational cross-contamination of extremist ideology over the internet. We continue with an elucidation of political narratives and the "othering" of victims as foundational components underlying the transmission of ideology and the commission of violence. In the following section, these dynamics are unveiled through a detailed account of the narratives and representations employed by Serb elites before, during, and in the immediate aftermath of the wars in former Yugoslavia in order to identify the ideational structures that governed the commission of genocide and mass atrocities against Bosniaks. Subsequently, we turn our attention to the ideology of the extreme right, expressed in the communications of growing online communities as well as through the discursive practices embedded in acts of right-wing terrorism. Through this bifold analysis, we locate the organic appeal of Serbian discursive representations among international agents of far-right extremism and highlight the dynamics through which these representations are appropriated and repurposed in the service of a new, radical right-wing agenda.

The Contemporary Transnational Far Right

Bypassing the extensive academic debates surrounding far-right terminology, this research adopts a broad definition of the far right as "a political space whose actors base their ideology and action on the notion of inequality among human beings, combining the supremacy of a particular nation, 'race' or 'civilization' with ambitions for an authoritarian transformation of values and styles of government."[14] This encompasses a wide range of racial and cultural nationalisms characterized by prejudicial attitudes toward religious and ethnic minorities, the LGBTQ+ community, feminists, leftists, and civil society activists, among others.

Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the global far right has been steadily enlarging, resulting in an increase in right-wing populism as well as hate

14 Maik Fielitz and Laura Lotte Laloire, *Trouble on the Far-Right: Contemporary Right-Wing Strategies and Practices in Europe* (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2016), 17–18.

crimes and terrorist attacks against Muslims and minority communities.[15] Influxes of migrants and refugees across Europe have further galvanized xenophobic narratives, which are increasingly infiltrating the mainstream political discourses in many Western democracies.[16] In contrast to earlier historical manifestations, the contemporary far right is a vastly decentralized movement operating beyond the boundaries of traditional command structures. In the twenty-first century, far-right violence is characterized by "lone wolf" and "copycat" attacks, motivated more by ideological influences than organizational directives.[17] The rise of the internet as a means of communication and influence has been crucial to the growth of the far right, allowing extremists to "increasingly communicate and cooperate across borders and show signs of collective learning."[18]

The digital landscape underlying right-wing growth includes a vast array of mainstream and underground social media websites, gaming platforms, and communication channels.[19] As Eitan Azani et al. observe:

> Within this decentralized collective of loosely-connected anonymous activists, the esoteric boundaries between organizations and movements, instruction and inspiration, and satire and incitement are becoming more and more ambiguous. . . . These amorphous networked communities provide for anonymous, unorganized participation in ideologies by a variety of individuals who may or may not engage with formally organized groups. Lone Wolves are the new vanguards of the violent far-right revolution, and ideology is the potent, mobilizing force galvanizing their action. Online interactive participation also serves to connect a myriad [of] right-wing extremist ideologies, creating a nexus of hate-based narratives that expands the pool of potential recruits.[20]

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15 Daniel Köhler, "Right-Wing Extremism and Terrorism in Europe: Current Developments and Issues for the Future," *Prism* 6, no. 2 (2016): 86.

16 Katy Brown, Aurelien Mondon, and Aaron Winter "The Far Right, the Mainstream and Mainstreaming: Towards a Heuristic Framework," *Journal of Political Ideologies* 28, no. 2 (2023): 162–79.

17 Eitan Azani, Liram Koblenz-Stenzler, Lorena Atiyas-Lvovsky, Dan Ganor, Arie Ben-Am, and Delilah Meshualm, *The Far Right: Ideology, Modus Operandi and Development Trends*, International Institute for Counter-Terrorism, September 2020, 2, https://www.ict.org.il/images/The%20Far%20Right%20–%20Ideology.pdf.

18 Julia Ebner, *The Rage: The Vicious Circle of Islamist and Far-Right Extremism* (New York: I. B. Tauris & Co., 2017), 58.

19 See Cynthia Miller-Idriss, *Hate in the Homeland: The New Global Far Right* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020).

20 Azani et al., *The Far Right*, 13.

The exchange of memes, videos, and ideology across borders is a crucial component of the transnational nature of the contemporary far right, where narratives are interwoven across languages and causes, producing "groups and clusters with membership from multiple countries and ideological rationales that are not always consistent."[21] Moreover, these virtual environments not only facilitate exposure to far-flung ideologies and narratives but also magnify the process of radicalization, serving as echo chambers where, through prolonged interaction with those sharing the same opinions and worldviews, individuals are propelled to greater depths of extremism, hatred, and in many cases, violence.[22]

One of the most notable phenomena occurring in these transnational online spaces is the construction of alternative histories, which have come to underlie much of the ideology exchanged on the far right. Louie Dean Valencia-García describes the "alt-histories" of the far right as intentionally distorted narratives "constructed for ideological purposes through the denial of history, the overemphasis of certain historical facts or an incomplete understanding of historical context," which, when weaponized, "are used to exculpate the guilty, casting blame on a marginalised group."[23] As attempts to "impose our present on the past to justify an understanding about the present,"[24] alt-histories are often cyclical and/or teleological in nature, lending themselves to the incorporation of diverse narrative strains far removed in both time and space from their origins.

Narrative and Political Violence

Political narratives are critical to understanding social phenomena, including collective violence. According to Jerome Bruner, socially constructed narratives can be defined as "accounts of a community's collective experiences, embodied in its belief system[,] and represent the collective's symbolically constructed shared identity."[25] As collective strategies of representation that structure human interpretations of reality, narratives lend intellectual coherence to lived experiences, providing a means of "organizing action, episodes, and accounts of action . . . [which] allows for the inclusion of actors' reasons, as well as the causes of happening."[26] During times of conflict, narratives serve

21 Miller-Idriss, *Hate in the Homeland*, 144.

22 See Cass R. Sunstein, *Going to Extremes: How Like Minds Unite and Divide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

23 Louie Dean Valencia-García, "Far-Right Revisionism and the End of History," in *Far-Right Revisionism and the End of History*, ed. Louie Dean Valencia-García (New York: Routledge, 2020), 3–26, at 13–14.

24 Valencia-García, 9.

25 Jerome Bruner, *Acts of Meaning* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 76.

26 Theodore Sarbin, *Narrative Psychology: The Storied Nature of Human Conduct* (New York: Praeger, 1986), 9.

an especially important function. In order to mobilize individuals and collectives to violate social norms and moral codes of conduct, narratives that justify these violations must be constructed and effectively disseminated at all levels of society.[27] Only then can the grassroots perpetrators of extreme violence rationalize the decision to participate in mass atrocities and manage the psychological consequences that surface as a result.

Thus, in times of conflict, mobilizing elites construct and deploy elaborate narratives that "describe the causes of the conflict, its nature, the image of the rival, the conditions needed to win the conflict, and more."[28] Coherently linking historical events to contemporary circumstances is crucial to these narratives. Accounts of past events are manipulated in such a way as to buttress expedient interpretations of contemporary conflicts and justify a community's participation in them.[29] Temporal elements such as the naming of historical epochs, structural representations of time (as linear or circular, for example), and the identification of historical origins and antecedents all function to substantiate the political claims on which conflicts are grounded.[30] In situating present circumstances within a historical continuum, conflict narratives not only describe the origins and development of violence in a coherent and meaningful manner, they also dictate the objectives of the conflict and its trajectory into the future.[31] Often drawing direct connections between exigent circumstances and historical precedents, these narratives also frequently imply the potential of history to be repeated, and thus the dangerous consequences of failing to confront present challenges.

In Serbia, as elsewhere, conflict narratives have been chiefly produced and institutionalized by elite actors in the political, military, and cultural spheres of society. The efficacy with which a narrative takes hold among the general population often depends on the ability of these elite actors to incorporate preexisting ideational structures such as cultural values, identity signifiers, and longstanding historical interpretations. Resonance with cognitive frameworks already firmly established not only increases the mobilizing potential of these narratives within their indigenous contexts but can also facilitate their transmission among extraneous audiences sharing similar repertoires of symbolic associations and narrative cues. In many cases, elites engaged in waging violence deliberately construct narratives to appeal not only to those they are intended

27 Daniel Bar-Tal, Neta Oren, and Rafi Nets-Zehngut, "Sociopsychological Analysis of Conflict-Supporting Narratives: A General Framework," *Journal of Peace Research* 51, no. 5 (2014): 662–75, at 662–63.

28 Bar-Tal, Oren, and Nets-Zehngut, 665.

29 James Liu and Denise Hilton, "How the Past Weighs on the Present: Social Representations of History and Their Role in Identity Politics," *British Journal of Social Psychology* 44, no. 4 (2005): 537–56.

30 Evyatar Zerubavel, *Time Maps: Collective Memory and the Social Shape of the Past* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

31 Daniel Bar-Tal, "Sociopsychological Foundations of Intractable Conflict," *American Behavioral Scientist* 50, no. 11 (2007): 1430–53.

to mobilize, but also to a wider community of political actors from whom they desire support. As Bar-Tal, Oren, and Nets-Zehngut observe:

> The goal is to influence this community, since the in-group needs moral—and often diplomatic—support from international organizations, as well as their tangible assistance with certain resources (both financial and military). Therefore, the in-group needs to persuade the leaders and public of other states and international organizations of the validity of their own conflict-supportive narrative.[32]

This aim is most commonly achieved through the presentation of conflicts as part of a broader civilizational struggle. The identities of the adversarial parties and their respective wartime objectives are generalized so as to imply direct parallels to outside parties and confrontations. A successful example is the "war on terror" narrative,[33] which has been appropriated in various conflict settings for the purpose of eliciting extraneous sympathy and support. The deliberate efforts of mobilizing elites in times of conflict to disseminate their narratives to wider audiences has also been significantly bolstered by the forces of globalization and modern communication technology. In the age of the internet, well-crafted narratives are able to penetrate ever more remote quarters of the globe, and to inspire any of a diverse array of actors who find something relatable or appealing in another's ideology of violence.

The "Othering" of Victims

One of the most important components of conflict narratives is the reconceptualization of the identity of the Other, or the victim group. In a recent work, Maureen Hiebert articulates three often overlapping discursive patterns of victim-group representation that contribute to creating a "permissive socio-political environment" for extreme violence against the Other.[34] The first of these is representing the victim as foreign—either non-native in origin, or a traitorous agent of insidious external power. In this way, the victim group is effectively excluded from the political community and thus denied the rights and benefits of civic belonging, including protection from violence. The second pattern of representation entails portraying the victim as a mortal threat to the political community. The group may be depicted as an all-powerful enemy intent on the

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32 Bar-Tal, Oren, and Nets-Zehngut, "Sociopsychological Analysis," 668.

33 See, for example, Sue-Ann Harding, "Translation and the Circulation of Competing Narratives from the Wars in Chechnya: A Case Study from the 2004 Beslan Hostage Disaster," *Meta* 56, no. 1 (2011): 42–62.

34 Maureen S. Hiebert, *Constructing Genocide and Mass Violence: Society, Crisis, Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 23.

utter annihilation of the perpetrating community, or the threat posed may be construed as demographic or biological. Seemingly in direct contradiction, the third pattern of representation asserts the genetic inferiority or subhuman characteristics of the supposedly all-powerful group. This discourse frequently invokes animalistic metaphors along with imagery of biological deformity and atavism in order to dehumanize the victim and ultimately justify their inhuman brutalization.

Genocide scholar Emir Suljagić has demonstrated the applicability of Hiebert's framework to the discursive reconstruction of Bosniak identity by Bosnian Serb elites before and during the genocidal violence of the 1990s. In a recent article, Suljagić focuses on the transcripts of the Bosnian Serb assembly between October 1991 and December 1995, illuminating the substantial influence of this particular elite body in shaping public perceptions of Bosnian Muslims.[35] Drawing on Hiebert's tripartite model, Suljagić argues that the assembly and its members catalyzed the reconceptualization of Bosniaks as "Turks"—that is, as "cultural aliens whose very existence presented a mortal threat to the existence of the Serb people."[36] Reinforcing this central assertion, the present research expounds on the reconstruction of Bosniak identity within the elite sectors of Serb and Bosnian Serb society. We then proceed to analyze how these patterns of representation interact with the broader Islamophobic and racist discourses on the global far right, aiding the conceptual facilitation of right-wing hatred and terrorism.

The Social Construction of the Bosnian Genocide

Following the collapse of the multiethnic federative republic of Yugoslavia, Serbian nationalist forces waged a three-and-a-half-year war of aggression against the sovereign state of Bosnia and Herzegovina. In addition to the wholescale slaughter of entire populations, prominent features of this campaign included the use of torture, detention camps, forced population transfer, and systematic rape as instruments of genocide.[37] Underpinning this unspeakable and widespread barbarity, the dominant discourse of Serbian nationalist elites drew extensively on historical representations to construct images of Bosniaks, Islam, and the violence itself that were conducive to the perpetration of violence. We begin our analysis of this discourse with the othering of Bosniaks as "Turks," followed by the institutionalization of essentializing and opprobrious representations of Islam. Finally, we conclude the section by examining the overarching grand narrative of the conflict, which continues to permeate Serbian

35 Emir Suljagić, "Genocide by Plebiscite: The Bosnian Serb Assembly and the Social Construction of 'Turks' in Bosnia and Herzegovina," *Journal of Genocide Research* 23, no. 4 (2021): 568–87.

36 Suljagić, 568.

37 For more on camps and the "collective traumatization," see Hikmet Karčić, *Torture, Humiliate, Kill: Inside the Bosnian Serb Camp System* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2022).

nationalist discourse and, increasingly, to inspire admiration for and solidarity with the Serbian nationalist cause among radical right-wing actors worldwide.

Constructing "the Turk"

Serbian national identity began to take shape during the mid-nineteenth century in the context of national liberation from Ottoman rule. As such, the Serbian political and intellectual classes necessarily defined Serb identity in direct opposition to their imperial occupiers—as "the antithesis of everything 'Turkish.'"[38] Despite the relatively tolerant policies of the Ottoman Empire toward its colonies,[39] the narrative of Serbian statehood became increasingly dependent on the rhetorical trope of Ottoman oppression, proverbially expressed as "five hundred years of Turkish slavery." In the 1830s, the Montenegrin poet Petar II Petrović-Njegoš refocused the collective ire of the Serbian people from the Turkish Empire itself to the so-called *poturice*[40]—those in the Balkans who converted to Islam during Ottoman occupation. His notorious epic poem, The Mountain Wreath, tells the story of the wholesale slaughter of the *poturice* on Christmas Eve in the village of Cetinje by Orthodox Montenegrin tribesmen. Although the historicity of the account is dubious, the myth of the massacre has become deeply embedded in the Serbian collective memory and serves as a powerful element of nationalist myth.[41] By casting the Muslim inhabitants of the region as not just traitors to the Serbian state but to the Orthodox religion and thus God himself, Njegoš' work concretized the motif of betrayal in Serbian nationalist discourse.[42] More crucially, it prescribed vengeance in the form of the indiscriminate massacre of Muslims as the appropriate penalty for race treason.

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38 Frederic F. Ancsombe, "The Ottoman Empire in Recent International Politics—II: The Case of Kosovo," *The International History Review* 28, no. 4 (2006): 758.

39 According to Kenneth Harl, "Christians and Jews living in the Ottoman Empire were . . . afforded certain protections, including the right to practice their religion, in exchange for their obedience to the Ottoman sultan. . . . Although there were some notable instances of forced conversions to Islam . . . the Ottoman sultans of the 15th and 16th centuries were exceptionally tolerant, especially in comparison to western Europe bitterly divided by the Reformation. . . . Christians and Jews prospered under Ottoman rule because of the important economic and social roles they played within the empire and because of the Porte's [i.e., the Ottoman court's] own policy." See *The Ottoman Empire* (Chantilly, VA: The Great Courses, 2017), 97–102. See also Peter F. Sugar, *Southeastern Europe under Ottoman Rule, 1354–1804* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1983).

40 Often translated as "those who were Turkified" or "those who became Turks."

41 Dennis Washburn and Kevin Reinhart, *Converting Cultures: Religion, Ideology and Transformations of Modernity* (Boston: Brill, 2007), 87.

42 Petar II Petrović-Njegoš, *The Mountain Wreath*, trans. James W. Wiles (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1930), available at https://www.njegos.org/petrovics/wreath.htm.

As nationalist leaders hastened to galvanize historical grievances in the run-up to the dissolution of Yugoslavia, the use of the terms "Turks" and *poturice* as pejorative labels for Bosnian Muslims became one of the defining features of Serbian nationalist discourse. Although bearing religious and political associations with Islam and the erstwhile Ottoman Empire, these terms chiefly signified an ethnic distinction, casting Bosniaks as both foreign and genetically inferior.

With the outbreak of war in 1992, this language became even more prominent among senior Bosnian Serb officials, as evidenced in their meticulously documented written and oral communications. While a catalogue of examples is outside the scope of the present research, selected statements from the military commander of the Bosnian Serb army, General Ratko Mladić, provide a sufficient sample of the interrelated rhetorical purposes served by this imagery. One such purpose was as an imperative for violence. In labeling someone "a Turk," Bosnian Serb officials implicitly called for his or her extermination. This was expressly articulated by Mladić in his instructions to one senior officer: "[W]henever you see a Turk, take aim at him, and send him off to the al-akhira [afterlife]."[43] Similarly, in April 1994 during the Bosnian Serb operation to take over Goražde, Mladić told his troops unequivocally that "[t]he Turks must disappear from these areas."[44] In a video from 1994, Mladić not only prescribes the proper course of action for dealing with "the Turks" but also demonstrates the pride and relish with which crimes against "Turks" are to be celebrated. As he drives through a decimated town formerly inhabited by Bosniaks, he boasts to his companion of how his forces "kicked the hell out of the Turks. . . . [W]ho gives a fuck about them!" He goes on to say:

> Here is the village of Plane, it used to be Turkish. . . . You film this freely, you know. Let our Serbs see what we have done to them, how we took care of the Turks. In Podrinje we thrashed the Turks. . . . See what a village they got. Look there. . . . Should I slow down a bit so you can film them? . . . Film it. Look what a house this Turk motherfucker had! This is a Turkish house. . . . This was a Turkish house. The one over there was Turkish and that one, all of them.[45]

43 "Transcript of an Intercepted Telephone Conversation between Ratko Mladić and a Certain Gutović," March 28, 1995, Thomas D. Jodd Research Center, University of Connecticut, https://collections.ctdigitalarchive.org/islandora/object/20009%3AP01609#page/1/mode/2up.

44 International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY), Prosecutor v. Radovan Karadžić, Case No. IT-95-5/18-T, Trial Judgement, March 24, 2016, 1064, https://www.icty.org/x/cases/karadzic/tjug/en/160324_judgement.pdf.

45 International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY), Prosecutor v. Ratko Mladić, Case No. IT-09-92-T, Trial Judgement, November 22, 2017, 2266, https://www.icty.org/x/cases/mladic/tjug/en/171122-4of5_1.pdf.

These examples are only a small sampling of the ways imagery of "the Turk" was used by Bosnian Serb elites throughout the war. The institutionalization of these representations within the Bosnian Serb military establishment is likewise evidenced by their proliferation among perpetrators on the ground. Survivor testimonies provide ample evidence of such language as it accompanied the unspeakable acts of violence committed by the rank and file of the Bosnian Serb army. In the course of carrying out acts such as rape, torture, and mass murder, soldiers frequently invoked the imagery of "the Turk" alongside references to their victims' supposed Ottoman heritage.

The level of brutality that the invocation of "the Turk" clearly sanctioned can be partly attributed to historical conceptualizations of Turkish treason and transgression. Equally important are the dehumanizing mechanisms deployed by Serbian elites, which sought to portray Bosniak "Turks" as genetically inferior. By presenting their victims as less human or nonhuman and thereby deserving of inhumane treatment, perpetrators benefitted from a biological as well as historical justification for their horrific crimes. Biljana Plavšić, an influential Serbian intellectual, was a particularly prolific and effective source of such theorizing. Citing her credentials as a professor of biology, she made frequent incendiary and dehumanizing claims about the genetic inferiority of Bosniaks, which, she alleged, justified acts of genocide.

> I'm a biologist, I know genetics, and I know that the Serbs and Muslims are genetically structured in a way that they cannot live together. Ethnic cleansing is a natural phenomenon, and it is not a war crime.[46]

She expounded on this further, asserting:

> It was genetically deformed material that embraced Islam. And now, of course, with each successive generation it simply becomes concentrated. It gets worse and worse. It simply expresses itself and dictates their style of thinking, which is rooted in their genes. And through the centuries, the genes degraded further.[47]

These sentiments likewise permeated the discourse of the Serbian military and were used to justify acts of horrific violence against Bosniaks during the war. Luka Dragičević, a wartime assistant commander, encouraged soldiers laying siege to Sarajevo by stating:

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46 Biljana Plavšić, *Svet*, September 6, 1993; Admir Mulaosmanović, "Islam and Muslims in Greater Serbian Ideology: The Origins of an Antagonism and the Misuse of the Past," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 39, no. 3 (2019): 300–316, at 309.

47 Plavšić, *Svet*; Michael A. Sells, "The Construction of Islam in Serbian Religious Mythology and Its Consequences," in *Islam and Bosnia: Conflict Resolution and Foreign Policy in Multi-Ethnic States*, ed. Maya Shatzmiller (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002), 56–85, at 58.

> We are genetically stronger, better, handsomer and smarter. . . . Remember how many Muslims there were among the ten best pupils, students, soldiers? Precious few. Why? Because they are poturice, and only the weakest among the Serbs became poturice.[48]

In a manner consistent with other episodes of mass violence, Bosniak victims were also frequently conceptualized as a form of biological contagion or disease. Serbian wartime correspondent Zoran Pirićanac, for example, famously accused Bosnian Muslims of bringing a plague to Europe, crassly stating, "Fuck their mothers, what have they brought us? A plague, motherfuckers. . . . Muslims were motherfuckers who brought a plague to Europe."[49] These and similar representations constituted not only a form of dehumanization but also a biological variation on the thematic conceptualizations of Bosniaks as a mortal threat. As previously noted, this "mortal threat" paradigm also manifested in discourses of Bosniak foreignness, and as the next section will demonstrate, culminated in invidious representations of the Islamic religion.

The "All-Destructive Islamic Octopus"

Essentialized constructions of Islam were a critical component of the "othering" of Bosniaks and play an enormous role in the Serbian grand narrative of the conflict in Bosnia. In the Serbian nationalist discourse of the 1990s, Islam was construed as a determining feature of Bosniak identity and action, as well as an existential threat and mortal enemy to the Serbian people. Like constructions of "the Turk," these representations of Islam were produced by elite actors across the Bosnian Serb political establishment and became deeply entrenched in the social fabric of Bosnian Serb society. In the statements of Radovan Karadžić, wartime president of the self-declared Bosnian Serb Republic, we can find numerous emblematic examples of this discourse. In May 1993, for example, Karadžić characterized the war in Bosnia as "a conflict between us and the greatest enemy," who would "absolutely move to eradicate us."[50] Expounding on the theme of Islam as a mortal threat, he later spoke to the Serbian president Slobodan Milošević about the "ancient danger posed by the toxic, all-destructive Islamic octopus," which he claimed was "constant in its irreconcilable poisonousness towards the Serbian Orthodox being."[51]

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48 "Mladic's Witness: Serbs Are Genetically Stronger, Better, Handsomer and Smarter," Sense Transitional Justice Center, July 9, 2014, https://archive.sensecentar.org/vijesti.php?aid=15996.

49 International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY), Prosecutor v. Karadžić, IT-95-5/18, Transcript of May 3, 2012, 28477, https://www.icty.org/x/cases/karadzic/trans/en/120503IT.htm.

50 Assembly of the Serb People in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 31st Session, May 9, 1993, 16, Radovan Karadžić.

51 Prosecutor v. Radovan Karadžić, Trial Judgement, 1030.

The imagery of the octopus has been applied in other historical contexts,[52] serving not only to dehumanize the targeted group but also to cast it as a uniquely alien threat, capable, with its many tentacles, of far-reaching if not global domination. Similarly, the discourse of the Bosniak "all-destructive Islamic octopus" presented Islam as inherently expansionist, totalitarian, and intolerant. Karadžić himself described the "nature of Islam" as "a big effort to equalize everything, for everything to be Islam."[53] The specter of the Islamic state governed by sharia law was portrayed as the ultimate goal of the Bosniak political movement. As early as 1991, Karadžić declared that "even our gloomiest forecasts, which say that [Bosniak president Alija] Izetbegović wants Bosnia-Herzegovina to become an Islamic Republic, are being fulfilled."[54] The fate of any non-Muslim citizens in such a state was likewise presented with fatalistic certainty. Karadžić predicted that if Serbs endeavored to share a state with Bosniaks, they would find themselves "dhimmis, i.e., second- and third-rank citizens."[55] This rhetoric was echoed across the Bosnian Serb establishment. In a 1992 speech, Tomislav Savkić, a high-ranking member of the Serbian Democratic Party (Srpska demokratska stranka, SDS), declared that "Serbs were under threat as they would be killed and eliminated from BiH when an Islamic state was formed."[56] Another SDS official argued that living with Bosniaks in a single state would amount to "packing the Serb people . . . into Islamic reservations and dooming them to decades of squabbles, bloody clashes, and friction with their fundamentalist jailers."[57]

The specter of "fundamentalism" operated alongside that of the Islamic republic within the Serbian discourse of the intrinsically menacing nature of Muslim identity, and Bosniaks were routinely characterized in the language of Islamic radicalism. At the outset of the war, for instance, Serbian nationalist Vojislav Šešelj characterized BiH as unequivocally Serbian, adding that if "any Muslim fundamentalists do not like that, they

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52 See Phil May, "The Mongolian Octopus—Its Grip on Australia," *Bulletin*, August 21, 1886, https://www.nla.gov.au/stories/blog/australia-white-man; Josef Plank, "Churchill as an Octopus," c. 1938, US Library of Congress, http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/churchill/interactive/_html/wc0213.html.

53 Assembly of the Serb People in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 46th Session, November 9–11 and November 23, 1994, 27/2, Radovan Karadžić.

54 Laura Silber and Allan Little, *Yugoslavia: Death of a Nation* (New York: Penguin, 1997), 213.

55 Assembly of the Serb People in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 25th Session, January 19–20, 1993, 4, Radovan Karadžić. Notably, the concept of "dhimmitude" emerged at the end of the twentieth century to refer to the alleged state of perpetual subjugation and discrimination endured by non-Muslim populations under Muslim rule since the eighth century. Widely dismissed by scholars as polemical and historically fallacious, the concept has been embraced by various iterations of Islamophobic extremists. See Reza Zia-Ebrahimi, "When the Elders of Zion Relocated to Eurabia: Conspiratorial Racialisation in Antisemitism and Islamophobia," *Patterns of Prejudice* 52, no. 4 (2018): 314–37.

56 International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY), Prosecutor v. Momčilo Krajišnik, Case No. IT-00-39-T, Trial Judgment, September 27, 2006, 443–44.

57 Assembly of the Serb People in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 25th Session, January 19–20, 1993, 30, Slobodan Bijelić.

will have to pack their suitcases and leave."[58] Attempts to legitimize Serbian violence by framing it as a war against Islamic terrorism were widespread both during and after the conflict. Following the release of photographs that showed Serbian soldiers executing Bosniak civilians in Bijeljina in 1992, for example, the District Council of Bijeljina wrote to the international mediator Cyrus Vance, inviting him to visit Bijeljina. In their invitation, they claimed that the number of victims published in the media was exaggerated and that these victims had been "Muslim Fundamentalists and Albanian Mercenaries."[59] Similarly, the Bijeljina police reports from that time refer to the Bosniaks as Muslim "fanatics," "extremists," and "fundamentalists . . . [who] wanted to establish a Muslim state," adding that they "have stained their hands with the Serbs' blood."[60] A similar narrative was used to justify the genocide committed in Srebrenica in 1995. To this day, the claim that many of Srebrenica's eight thousand Bosniak victims were Islamic terrorists continues to be a discursive staple of the genocide's deniers.[61]

In addition to the threats purportedly posed by Islamic political expansion and radical terrorism, Muslims' allegedly preternaturally high birth rate was a final feature of Serbs' essentialization of Islam, which they argued posed an imminent threat to their continued existence. On the one hand, unnaturally high birth rates were presented as integral to the Muslim character. Karadžić absurdly claimed, for instance, that the Muslim population increases by 1 percent daily because "that is how it is with them."[62] On another occasion, he warned:

> They quadruple through the birth rate, and we Serbs are not up to that. Not only are the Serbs not up to that. . . . Neither Serbs nor Croats together can control through the birth rate the penetration of Islam into Europe, since in five to six years Muslims would make 51 percent of the population of unitary Bosnia.[63]

On the other hand, high birth rates were also described as a deliberate mechanism of Islamic demographic warfare—a premeditated Bosniak plot to dominate and ultimately eradicate the Christian Serb population. This same discourse had been used at the outset of the war to mobilize Serbian nationalists around demographic trends in Kosovo, with claims that "the Serbian nation was dying out" and Serbs in Kosovo

58 Prosecutor v. Radovan Karadžić, Trial Judgement, 1256.

59 Prosecutor v. Radovan Karadžić, Trial Judgement, 237.

60 Prosecutor v. Radovan Karadžić, Trial Judgement, 238.

61 Monica Hanson-Green, "Srebrenica Genocide Denial Report," Srebrenica Memorial Center, 2020, https://weremember.gov.tr/documents/Srebrenica-Genocide-Denial-Report-min.pdf.

62 Prosecutor v. Radovan Karadžić, Trial Judgement, 1056.

63 Assembly of the Serb People in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 17th Session, July 24–26, 1992, 87–88, Radovan Karadžić.

were being "swamped" by Muslim Albanians in what was tantamount to "genocide."[64] The rhetoric of a deliberate Muslim plot to create "ethnically pure" territories played a significant role in inciting the ethnic-nationalist fervor of the late 1980s, and was effectively reproduced to characterize the threat posed by Muslims in Bosnia.[65] For example, citing the Muslim propensity to "overwhelm you with their birth rate and their tricks," Karadžić also asserted that Muslim and Christian populations would have to be separated in "each and every village."[66]

The Serbian Narrative of the Bosnian Genocide

In addition to reconceptualizing the victim group, the Bosnian Serb leadership also sought to incorporate the violence itself into broader historical narratives of Serbian national identity. More specifically, they endeavored to situate the conflict of the 1990s as historically rooted in the era of Ottoman occupation of the region. One common discursive mechanism for establishing this connection was the rhetorical trope of vengeance, wherein the contemporary genocidal campaign against Bosniaks was presented as warranted revenge against the "Turks" for the perceived oppression and injustice experienced by Serbs during the colonial period. Perhaps the most famous example of this pattern of representation occurred on July 11, 1995, when General Ratko Mladić led his army into the United Nations "safe zone" of Srebrenica. Before a crew of television cameras, he declared that "finally, after the Revolt against the Dahis, the time has come to take revenge on the Turks in this region."[67] In a speech delivered in Banja Luka a year prior, senior SDS official Rajko Kasagić capsulized Serbian perceptions of their murderous undertaking in more graphic terms:

> They turned us into Turks and converted us to their religion, they impaled us, and they gouged out our eyes. . . . We want our own house, around which the winds will play freely, and we shall live freely in that house of ours. We can do that, brothers and sisters, and

64 Miloš Macura, "Problemi politike obnavljanja stanovnitva u Srbiji," *Demografski zbornik* (1989), 1.

65 "Petition of Belgrade Intellectuals," January 21, 1986, in Branka Magaš, *The Destruction of Yugoslavia* (London: Verso, 1992), 49–52.

66 Prosecutor v. Krajišnik, Trial Judgement, 323.

67 Prosecutor v. Mladic, Trial Judgement, 1257. *Dahis* were Ottoman Empire renegade elite officers (janissaries) who took power in the Sanjak of Smederevo (Belgrade region) in 1801, rebelled against the Sultan, and terrorized the local population. This led to the First Serbian Uprising in 1804. See the definition of *Dahije* in *Hrvatska enciklopedija (1941–1945)*, ed. T. Ujević, https://hemu.lzmk.hr/Natuknica.aspx?ID=10755.

> we have won that right and we are Orthodox, Serbian Orthodox and justice is on our side.[68]

This quotation illuminates two prominent aspects of the overarching Serbian historical narrative that were used to justify the violence. The first of these is the representation of violence against Bosniaks as a struggle for freedom. The discourse of "liberation" was one common discursive mechanism for establishing this historical connection. A report published by the Bosnian Serb army in 1993 stated that the ultimate goal of all contemporary military operations was "the liberation of territories which are ours and which belong to us by historical birthright."[69] That same year, a representative in the Bosnian Serb assembly noted the "historical importance" of the campaign as "the end of a two-hundred-years long . . . liberation struggle of the Serb people."[70] Territories violently captured by Serbian forces throughout the conflict were likewise routinely characterized by political and military leaders as having been "liberated from the Turks."[71]

In addition to the trope of historical liberation, the second theme illustrated by Kasagić's remark is the religious justification for genocide. That is, not only was their violence justified by the universal principles of retribution and freedom from foreign domination, it was also portrayed as divinely sanctioned. As Karadžić explained, "God himself led us along the road we needed to follow to attain our freedom after five hundred years."[72] The religious discourse not only vindicated already completed atrocities, it also served as a rallying cry for future violence. As SDS member Radislav Brđanin articulated explicitly, "[I]t is the obligation of Serbs over the next hundred years to wipe their feet from the foul non-Christians who have befouled this soil of ours."[73]

These religious sentiments were deeply rooted in historical notions of Serbs as a chosen people, charged by God with a sacred mission. The myth of Serbia as the *Antemurale Christianitatis*, or bulwark of Christendom, has long been a salient component of the Serbian identity discourse. This narrative situates the Serbs as the historical protectors of Christian Europe, burdened with the onerous task of defending the frontiers of Western civilization from the relentless onslaught of Islam. In the Serbian political

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68 International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY), Prosecutor v. Momčilo Krajišnik (Transcript), IT-00-39-T, November 18, 2005, 18788, http://www.icty.org/x/cases/krajisnik/trans/en/051118IT.htm.

69 Prosecutor v. Krajišnik, Trial Judgement, 354–55.

70 Assembly of the Serb People in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 24th Session, January 8, 1993, 28, Dragan Mićić.

71 For example, see Prosecutor v. Radovan Karadžić, 555.

72 Assembly of the Serb People in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 14th Session, March 27, 1992, 11, Radovan Karadžić.

73 Prosecutor v. Radovan Karadžić, Trial Judgment, 548.

and intellectual tradition, this myth has functioned as an interpretive framework for various episodes in national history from the medieval period to the modern.[74] A crucial component of the *antemurale* discourse is the trope of European ingratitude for Serbian sacrifices made on behalf of the Christian world. Congruous with the ethos of a "chosen people" mythology, the *antemurale* myth inexorably entails a degree of suffering and humiliation consistent with myths of divine election. The preservation of Christendom is thus presented as a thankless task, and its protectors as perpetual victims of disrespect and injustice.

The war of aggression against Bosniaks during the 1990s and the response of the international community reinvigorated this discursive strain of Serbian nationalism. In 1993, Vojislav Kuprešanin observed that "for hundreds of years we defended Catholicism against the Turks and their penetration toward Vienna and no one ever thanked us for that."[75] Another member of the Bosnian Serb assembly similarly observed that "as the last bulwark against the penetration of Islam into Europe, ours is a humiliating position in the Europe of today."[76] The violence against Bosnian Muslims was constantly presented as a heroic stand against Islam's penetration into the heartland of Europe, and the growing censure of the international community was increasingly interpreted within the broader framework of ingratitude for Serbian altruism. Karadžić himself lamented at length:

> Nobody has ever offered us any other option but to disappear, to abolish our state, to accept a joint state with Izetbegović, or, rather, with the Muslims and the Croats, and they clearly told us so at the cocktails and lunches: "Gentlemen, it's because we don't want to accept the existence of an Islamic state in Europe!," which means we were sacrificed so that such a state wouldn't exist, so that it would be mixed, which means that we've wasted our own lives and the lives of our generations to neutralize Islam, so that Europe could be a community of happy Christian peoples, while we guard its walls, as a kind of a moat filled with filthy water, with no other purpose to its existence but to neutralize Islam. We haven't accepted this.[77]

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74 Ana Anti, "The Evolution of Boundary: Defining Historical Myths in Serbian Academic and Public Opinion in the 1990s" in *Myths and Boundaries in South-Eastern Europe*, ed. Pål Kolstø (London: Hurst & Company, 2005), 191.

75 Assembly of the Serb People in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 25th Session, January 19–20, 1993, 11, Vojislav Kuprešanin.

76 Assembly of the Serb People in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 25th Session, January 19–20, 1993, 46, Nikola Erceg.

77 Assembly of the Serb People in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 49th Session, February 13, 1995, 78, Radovan Karadžić.

These discursive strains were further catalyzed in the wake of the West's 1995 intervention on the side of the Bosniaks, as well as by the 1999 NATO bombing of Belgrade to end Serbian aggression against Kosovar Albanians. Following these events, the themes of European ingratitude and Serbian indignation metastasized into a broader narrative of a global anti-Serb conspiracy, and Serbian representations of the West became markedly more hostile. Where once they were portrayed as merely insufficiently grateful for Serbian sacrifices made on behalf of Christendom, now Western powers were accused of actively conspiring with Muslims under the guise of multiculturalism in order to further subjugate Serbs. Military intervention against the Serbs was portrayed as an attempt to assert a "New World Order" governed by American hegemony. International efforts to prosecute Serbian war crimes and memorialize victims were explained as an attempt to institutionalize anti-Serb bias. The genocide committed in Srebrenica became a particular focal point for this narrative, with Serbian nationalists continuing to insist that the slaughter of over eight thousand Muslim men and boys was "a staged tragedy with an aim to satanize the Serbs."[78]

Serbian Ideology and the Global Far Right

The murder of fifty-one Muslim worshipers in Christchurch, New Zealand, described at the opening of this article is only one example of recent acts of right-wing terror known to have drawn inspiration from Serbian ideology. In 2011, prior to murdering seventy-seven people in Norway, right-wing terrorist Anders Breivik published a 1,538-page manifesto in which he explicitly praised Serbian war criminals and regurgitated many of the Islamophobic tropes characteristic of Serbian discourse.[79] Three years later, the perpetrator of an attack at the Pennsylvania State Police Barracks, thirty-one-year-old American domestic terrorist Eric Frein, was revealed to be likewise infatuated with the Serbian military and its genocidal campaign against Bosniaks in the 1990s.[80] In this section, we first demonstrate how the preexisting Islamophobic and racist discourses among the global far right complement Serbian constructions of Islam and "Turks," and thus provide fertile ground for the influence of Serbian ideology. Finally, in this

78 Dusan Stojanovic and Radul Radovanovic, "Bosnian Serb Leader Milorad Dodik Disputes 1995 Srebrenica Genocide," *Associated Press*, August 14, 2018, https://apnews.com/b76aa3d8b22747 4aa065ce3464dca714/Bosnian-Serb-leader-denies-scope-of-Srebrenica-massacre.

79 Andrew Berwick [Anders Behring Breivik], *2083: A European Declaration of Independence* (self-pub., London, 2011), available on Internet Archive, accessed June 13, 2024, https://archive.org/details /2083-a-european-declaration-of-independence.

80 Terrie Morgan-Besecker and David Singleton, "Eric Frein Infatuated with Serbian Military," *The Morning Call*, October 12, 2014, https://www.mcall.com/news/local/mc-eric-frein-serbian-20141012 -story.html.

section we analyze the far right's fixation on the Bosnian War, showing how the Serbian narrative of the conflict is uniquely emblematic of the far-right worldview.

Anti-Muslim and Anti-Immigrant Discourses

The Islamophobic rhetoric of the global far right relies on many of the same tropes and representations found in the Serbian nationalist discourse since the 1990s. Islam is portrayed as an existential threat to Western and European society, while Muslim religious identity is constructed as inherently incompatible with modern national identity and political belonging. The terror attacks of September 11 as well as other high-profile instances of Islamic radicalism in the twenty-first century have reinforced and perpetuated these discursive strains, creating an environment of fear and mistrust conducive to the exclusion of Muslims from the Western political community. In the United States and Europe, Islamic communities are frequently portrayed as "a sort of 'fifth column,' a danger to 'our way of life,'" and are accused of giving "succor to enemies within the nation and support to enemies outside."[81] In many Western countries, these stereotypes persist regardless of whether an individual Muslim is a legal resident or natural born citizen.[82] The transnational nature of the Islamic community (*ummah*), as well as some of its members' failure to assimilate to the "Christian values" of their American or European homelands, consigns Muslims in the West to the status of quintessential "other"—a politically and culturally foreign element destabilizing an otherwise unified nation.

It is easy to see how the Serbian nationalist construction of Bosniaks as "Turks" would resonate deeply within this broader strain of Islamophobic discourse. Despite the ethnic, cultural, and linguistic heritage they share with others in the Balkans, Bosniaks are relentlessly portrayed as a foreign, specifically Turkish, element in the midst of a European society. In his sprawling manifesto released prior to his 2011 terror attack, Andres Breivik explicitly demonstrated the appeal of this strain of the Serbian nationalist discourse. The compendium, which speaks adoringly and at great length about the Bosnian genocide, included entire sections like "Who Are the Bosniaks?" and "Historically, Bosnia Is Serbian Land."[83] If mere adherence to Islam is enough to deprive Bosniaks of any entitlement to the lands they have occupied for centuries, the exclusion of far more recently arrived Muslim communities in Western countries from such rights is a foregone conclusion.

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81 George Morgan and Scott Poynting, *Global Islamophobia: Muslims and Moral Panic in the West* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2012), 8.

82 Liz Fekete, *A Suitable Enemy: Racism, Migration and Islamophobia in Europe* (New York: Pluto Press, 2009), 44.

83 It is worth noting that these sections were not Breivik's original compositions but rather were compiled from the online Serbian-American diaspora network Srpska-Mreza, notorious for its Islamophobic content.

Another discursive strategy for the exclusion of Muslims from the political community is the representation of Islam as fundamentally opposed to democracy, human rights, and constitutional values.

> Islamophobic discourse creates a Western subject, understood in terms of a cultural form that cherishes freedom, equality and liberalism, on the one hand, and situates Muslim culture in a context of pre-modern traditions and values that are unable to transcend beyond the structure of Islamic thought, on the other.[84]

In the global right-wing discourse, this is achieved through emphasis on specters such as "sharia law" and "the caliphate," in addition to deviant practices such as honor killing, genital mutilation, and gang rape that persist only in small anomalous segments on the outermost margins of Muslim society.[85] The Serbian narrative that depicts the ineluctable goal of the Bosniak nationalist project as establishing an Islamic republic governed by sharia law fits within this broader discursive strain. It essentializes Islam as not only a monolithic entity devoid of regional nuance or variation but also as an intrinsically expansionary, ravenous force seeking to dominate and transform the entirety of the global political and cultural landscape. The fear generated by this narrative furnished a main justification for the genocidal campaign against Bosniaks in the 1990s and continues to provide a powerful impetus for extremist violence today. Conceptualized as the fear that Islam will "spread its wings,"[86] it is rooted in the apprehension that as a collective, Muslims have the capacity and desire to transform a given territory to their own advantage and at the expense of all others.[87]

This anxiety is not solely political in nature—that is to say, it is not merely the fear of finding oneself in an Islamic state governed by sharia law. The fear that Muslims can fundamentally alter "who we are" and the space in which "we live" is increasingly expressed in cultural terms. Whereas the threat of an Islamic coup in a strong secular democracy requires a strenuous stretch of even a delusional imagination, the idea that Muslims are surreptitiously working to erase indigenous cultures is, while not credible, much more difficult to disprove. This cultural shift within the global Islamophobic discourse has given rise to the normative structuring of a "a hierarchical order, within which individuals are categorized as subjects of superior or inferior cultures."[88] The emphasis on elusive and intangible "cultural" differences has lent itself readily to the

84 Asif Mohiuddin, "Islamophobia and the Discursive Reconstruction of Religious Imagination in Europe, *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 39, no. 2 (2019): 135–56, at 140.

85 Fekete, *Suitable Enemy*, p. 63.

86 Prosecutor v. Radovan Karadžić, Trial Judgment, 1901.

87 Mohiuddin, "Islamophobia," 140.

88 Mohiuddin, 143.

consolidation of anti-Muslim, anti-immigrant, and generally racist narratives, which is catalyzed by pervasive ignorance surrounding nuances of religious, ethnic, and national identity. Invariably fueled by indifference, this ignorance is clearly perceptible in right-wing discourses, where terms referring to religion, ethnic identity, and citizenship status (e.g., "migrant" and refugee) are used interchangeably. The same pattern is evident in the Serbian discourse of the 1990s, where Bosniaks were othered on the basis of religion, perceived foreignness, and constructions of inferiority that utilized both racial and cultural elements.

Thus, it is readily apparent how the Serbian reconfiguration of Bosniak identity in the 1990s aligns with Islamophobic and racist discourses among the contemporary far right. Essentializing narratives of Islam as an expansionist and malign force seeking to subjugate or even eliminate all states and cultures within its reach, as well as common representations of the Muslim "other" as inherently foreign, inferior, and threatening, provide a robust basis for ideological alignment. All of these elements are amplified by the overarching narrative within both Serbian nationalist and international right-wing discourses that depicts an epic historical conflict between the "Muslim East" and the "Christian West"—between foreign ethno-cultural minorities and invariably white defenders of European cultural heritage. According to this narrative, indistinguishable processes of Islamization and racial colonization constitute an exigent and mortal threat to "Christian European culture" and the Western way of life.

The Symbolic Appeal of the Bosnian Genocide

Thus far, we have seen the myriad ways by which Serbian nationalist ideology of the 1990s has been disseminated across time and space to reach remote corners of the right-wing extremist online community. We have also established the inherent compatibility between Serbian nationalist constructions of Islam and Bosniak identity and the racist and Islamophobic discourses inspiring contemporary far-right violence. Although critical, these elements alone cannot fully account for the popularity of Serbian nationalist ideology within movements both geographically and temporally removed from its context of origin. In order to complete our understanding of this phenomenon, it is necessary to undertake a deeper exploration of the symbolic appeal of not only Serbian ideology itself but also the violence it precipitated, and the overarching narrative of this violence developed by the perpetrators.

In many respects, the Serbian nationalist narrative of the Bosnian genocide can be seen as emblematic of the far-right world view. The enthusiasm with which right-wing extremists have incorporated this narrative into their own interpretations of not only history but contemporary politics is evidenced by the parallels expressly drawn by far-right actors between the war in BiH and current conflicts. The previously cited manifesto published by Andres Breivik furnishes one of the most explicit examples. In addition to referring to the Bosnian genocide as a "just cause to fight and oppose Islamic demographic warfare," Breivik also lionized Radovan Karadžić:

> [The Bosnian War] was never about ethnicity but about ridding the country of the genocidal hate ideology known as Islam. . . . [F]or his efforts to rid Serbia of Islam he will always be considered and remembered as an honorable Crusader and a European war hero.[89]

This example illuminates the symbolic interpretation of various aspects of the Serbian narrative among the global far right. Serbia itself is regarded as a paragon of "Christian Europe," despite its history of not only communist atheism but also of exclusion from European political structures. Decades of peaceful cohabitation between Christians and Muslims in BiH during the socialist era are omitted and distorted within the symbolic interpretations of Balkan history promulgated on the far right. Instead, the preferred focal point of these right-wing actors is medieval history, which looms especially large in the Serbian national identity discourse—both in narrative and iconography. This is hardly surprising given the rampant medievalism observed among the far right in recent years,[90] sustained by ahistorical fantasies of the Middle Ages as a golden age of contemporary right-wing values, characterized by blood-and-soil identity, "traditional" gender norms, violent racial hierarchies, and of course, the Crusades.

Among the global far right, the bloody confrontations between Christian and Muslim forces that characterized the medieval period are something of a symbolic obsession, serving as a framework through which they interpret the contemporary world order. As Ariel Koch observes, Western right-wing extremists maintain that the goal of Muslims in the twenty-first century remains "to try to conquer Europe as their ancestors did."[91] As such, the Crusaders, the Christian forces who allied themselves against the perceived incursion of Islam into Europe, are a salient symbol in the identity discourses of the Western far right. This can be seen in the abundance of Crusader symbolism appropriated by right-wing individuals and organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan, which even publishes a periodical called the *Crusader*. "The Crusaders" was also the name chosen by a group of men who were arrested in Kansas in 2016 before they could carry out a planned terror attack against Muslims.[92] Koch enumerates examples of various "Defense Leagues" across Europe who identify with the right-wing "Counter Jihad Movement" and operate under the symbols and slogans of these

89 Berwick [Breivik], *2083*, 1407.

90 See Thomas Blake, "Getting Medieval Post-Charlottesville: Medievalism and the Alt-Right," in *Far-Right Revisionism and the End of History*, ed. Louie Dean Valencia-Garcia (New York: Routledge, 2020), 179–97.

91 Ariel Koch, "The New Crusaders: Contemporary Extreme Right Symbolism and Rhetoric," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 11, no. 5 (2017): 15.

92 Mark Berman, Sarah Larimer, and Cleve R. Wootson Jr., "Three Kansas Men Calling Themselves 'Crusaders' Charged in Terror Plot Targeting Muslim Immigrants," *Washington Post*, October 15, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2016/10/14/three-kansas-men-calling-themselves-crusaders-charged-in-terror-plot-targeting-muslim-immigants.

medieval knights. Crusader shields and similar iconography have become ubiquitous at far-right events, and romanticized notions of medieval Christian European history are now a staple of right-wing online forums. On the internet,

> there is an extensive use of memes and photos of knights, many of whom are accompanied by a caption that threatens to execute a Crusade as a counter-response to Jihad, such as "Jihad Works Both Ways" or "I'll See Your Jihad and I'll Raise You One Crusade," and others who call for a fight against the "Muslim invaders" as was done by their Christian ancestors.[93]

The construction of Byzantium, a foundational pillar of Serbian nationalist identity narratives, has likewise become a prominent feature of global right-wing identity discourses.[94] Since 2017, a white supremacist group called The New Byzantium has been furtively gaining traction in remote corners of the radical right-wing cybersphere. Founded by American neo-Nazi Jason Kessler, the organization offers a classic example of contemporary historical revisionism on the far right. Within these revisionist narratives, the true religious and ethnic diversity that characterized the Byzantine Empire is completely omitted; instead, Byzantium is presented as having been a force for the preservation of white, Christian, European civilization following the fall of Rome. In a similar fashion, Kessler's New Byzantium is "intended to preserve white dominance after what he calls 'the inevitable collapse of the American Empire.'"[95]

Although seamlessly incorporated into the racial ideology of white supremacy, Islamophobia is the foundational component of the Byzantium discourse on the global far right. Across right-wing online platforms, Roland Betancourt observes, "the reconquest of Hagia Sophia is emblematic of the destruction of Islam and the restoration of a mythic white Byzantium."[96] In addition to lauding the genocidal accomplishments of Serbian nationalists in the 1990s, Brenton Tarrant also made extensive references to this narrative. In the manifesto he published prior to committing the 2019 terror attacks in New Zealand, Tarrant wrote, "We are coming for Constantinople, and we will destroy every mosque and minaret in the city. The Hagia Sophia will be free of minarets and Constantinople will be rightfully Christian owned once more."[97]

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93 Koch, "New Crusaders," 16.

94 Roland Betancourt, "Why White Supremacists and QAnon Enthusiasts are Obsessed—but Very Wrong—about the Byzantine Empire," *The Conversation*, March 4, 2021, https://theconversation.com/why-white-supremacists-and-qanon-enthusiasts-are-obsessed-but-very-wrong-about-the-byzantine-empire-154994.

95 Betancourt.

96 Betancourt.

97 Brenton Tarrant, *The Great Replacement*, 37, Charles University (Prague), https://dl1.cuni.cz/pluginfile.php/1192779/mod_resource/content/1/Tarrant_vyber%20%281%29.pdf.

Thus, within a community that widely perceives itself as Crusaders in their own right—the last line of defense against colonizing hordes of Muslims and immigrants—the Serbian myths of the *Antemurale Christianitatis* and Byzantium are expressly appealing. If Serbia functions symbolically as the paragon of white Christian Europe, it is clear how the violence committed in the 1990s against the supposed human remnants of the Ottoman Empire likewise serves an archetypal function. Within this context, the phenomenon of triumphalism or the glorification of the Bosnian genocide that has persisted in the decades following the war takes on a symbolic dimension of its own for radical right-wing communities, who yearn to celebrate their own violent campaigns against Muslims and foreigners with such unbridled relish.

A final element of the Serbian narrative that has taken on emblematic appeal within the discourse of the global far-right interprets the intervention of Western powers on the side of the Bosniaks during the war, as well as the NATO bombing of Serbia in 1999, within the context of a global conspiracy. Rather than limiting the nature of the conspiracy to being anti-Serb, it is here viewed as part of a much more ambitious plot jointly contrived by cosmopolitan liberal elites and minority communities to erode indigenous cultures and national identities. The specter of a "New World Order" designed by a secretive cohort of powerful globalists is a dominant theme in the conspiracy theories buttressing far-right movements in Western countries. By presenting themselves as rebels against this supposed conspiracy and as the victims of an expansionist and corrosive globalist agenda, Serbs have become a natural ally and role model for right-wing individuals and groups aspiring to similarly violent resistance against this imagined global threat to their identities.

Conclusion

In recent years, the conflict-supporting narratives that were used to mobilize and justify Serbian violence during the Bosnian War have become a source of inspiration for right-wing terrorists around the world. In this article, we have examined the various discourses that were used to reconceptualize the identities of Bosniak victims as inherently threatening, genetically inferior foreign elements outside the political community. In addition to these constructions, Bosnian Serb political, military, and intellectual elites characterized the violence as part of a civilizational struggle between Christian Europe and the Muslim East, as well as part of the global war on radical Islamic terrorism. In framing their crimes in these broader contexts, the Serbian establishment actively sought to gain the support and sympathy of the international community. However, when international popular, political, and legal consensus came down on the side of Bosniak victims, Serbs adopted a new discourse of global conspiracy and anti-Serb bias to explain the war's outcome and international perception.

These narratives and ideational constructs have proven appealing to radical right-wing actors worldwide. Through internet forums and social media networks, this ideology has permeated remote corners of the globe and become deeply embedded

within the popular discourse of the extreme right. Beginning with platforms like 4Chan and 8Chan, Serbian Islamophobic and conspiratorial constructs have been disseminated in the form of memes, videos, and other modes of online communication. In the last decade, the perpetrators of numerous acts of right-wing terror in Western countries have made explicit and symbolic references to the Bosnian genocide as a source of inspiration, attesting to the viral potential of ideologies of hatred in the age of globalization.

The success with which Serbian narratives have taken hold among the global far right in recent years is not, however, only attributable to the deliberate efforts to disseminate this ideology on the internet. The fundamental congruity between Serbian ideology and preexisting Islamophobic, xenophobic, and conspiracy discourses across the West also greatly enhances the receptivity of these audiences. Serbian construction of "the Turk" and essentialized characterizations of Islam are uniquely resonant with contemporary right-wing conceptualizations, which also rely heavily on the tropes of foreign invasion, mortal threat, and biological hierarchy to mobilize their constituencies. Furthermore, the Serbian nationalist narrative of the Bosnian genocide is emblematic of the contemporary right-wing worldview. As evidenced by the manifestos and communications of these actors, the "civilizational struggle" between Christianity and Islam, the imminent threat of Islamic radicalism, and the conspiratorial and corrosive nature of the neoliberal order are all integral components of extreme right-wing ontology. The glorification of the Serbian genocide against Bosnian Muslims in the 1990s demonstrates the extent to which these events have been interpreted as emblematic of modern "crusader" ideals, and as laudable examples of how the so-called Muslim and immigrant questions can be effectively dealt with through violence. By understanding the broader appeal of Serbian ideology within the international community of right-wing radicals, we are better able to ascertain the dynamics by which philosophies of hatred metastasize in the era of globalization to inspire acts of violence far removed in both time and space from their contexts of origin.

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ARTICLE

The Gab Project

The Methodological, Epistemological, and Legal Challenges of Studying the Platformized Far Right

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Abstract: *In this article we describe our five-year research project on the notorious radical free speech service and fringe platform Gab. During these years we scraped an entire platform, prepared it into a dataset for analysis, and opened it up to a broader community of students and researchers. Each of these projects provides us not just with a small slice of platformized far-right culture but also with a larger sphere of a fringe platform. However, the overarching goal of the Gab project was to contribute to a methodology for the study of the contemporary platformized far right. The atypical nature of the project posed many methodological, epistemological, and legal challenges. It therefore kicked off an institutional learning process about the possibilities,*

legal boundaries, and best practices for research compliant with General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). In this article we argue that the study of the platformized far right should have a thorough understanding of the medium on which the object is present, as well as the methods with which the object is captured. What is more, scholars that use digital tools and data methods for capture and analysis of web platforms must become literate in operating them. Consequently, data-driven research on the far right is naturally interdisciplinary and therefore cooperative and adherent to the principles of open science.

Keywords: fringe platforms, platformized public sphere, digital humanities, alt-right, critical data studies, Gab

Increasingly, radical free speech social media platforms have come under scrutiny for the societal impact of the far-right and alt-right publics they host.[1] Services such as 4chan, 8chan, Parler, and Kiwifarms have been implicated in acts of offline hate, harassment, or worse.[2] This is also true for radical free speech social media platform Gab. At the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh on October 27, 2018, during the morning Shabbat service, a domestic white supremacist terrorist opened fire and killed eleven people. The police found that the perpetrator had a Gab profile, which he used to disseminate his neo-Nazi views and where he announced his attack through a now infamous post condemning the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS): "HIAS likes to bring invaders in that kill our people. I can't sit by and watch my people get slaughtered. Screw your optics, I'm going in" (Hutchinson et al. 2018; Pagliery and Toropin 2018; Bagavathi et al. 2019; de Winkel 2023, 12).[3] The FBI raided the homes of Gab users who were in contact with the Pittsburgh killer and found heavy weaponry at one of them (Sommer 2018; Weill 2019). Due to the tragic attack, the possible dangers of radical free speech

1 We use "far right" as an umbrella term to describe the right that is "anti-system" or hostile to liberal democracy. "Alt-right" is an abbreviation of "alternative right." The term is a denominator for the loose affiliation of different online far-right groups, spawn from internet troll culture, with a common style, common tactics, and a common political identity. Most "mainstream" social media are also used to incite offline violence and hate; however, "radical free speech" platforms practice a governance style of inaction, condoning hate speech and political radicalism as part of their identity (de Winkel 2023, 77, 85–87).

2 In 2014, 4chan circulated celebrity nude pictures that were harvested in an iCloud hack (Patrick 2022). 8chan has been involved in plenty of scandals, including episodes involving death threats, doxing, political violence and terrorism, and child pornography. The message board gained notoriety through the infamous Gamergate harassment campaign (McLaughlin 2019; Rieger et al. 2021). Parler was used for the dissemination of the "Stop the Steal" conspiracy that led to the January 6, 2021, attack on the United States Capitol (Otala et al. 2021). Kiwifarms has been implicated in the stalking, doxing, and threat campaigns mounted against its critics and trans people, ostensibly with the aim of moving their victims to commit suicide (Breland 2023; Hern 2022).

3 As explained in "Fringe Platforms" (de Winkel 2023, 12, 63), HIAS provides humanitarian aid and assistance to refugees, which triggers in white supremacists the hoary antisemitic trope that Jewish citizens are diluting the whiteness of a nation through immigration.

platforms such as Gab took hold in public consciousness. Cries for regulation ensued, and moderation of the larger Web was amped up. Journalists reframed their reporting about Gab; once merely a platform for the deplatformed, Gab was now regarded as an echo chamber of the alt-right. Two contrasting narratives emerged about the role of Gab in the online public sphere—either it had a facilitating role as an ecosystem for discourse, or it played a more active role as a radical(izing) technology. These narratives echo the questions raised by political scientists and media scholars on how to study the platformized far right.

With the transition to a platformized public sphere (de Winkel 2023), the rise of a body of technologically and methodologically savvy humanities scholarship (e.g., the digital humanities, critical data studies, platform studies) has become ever more valuable. The possibilities offered by these new fields to scholarship on the far right were quickly embraced, not least because in the last ten years its object of study has been a moving target. The rise of the alt-right signified the far right's successful establishment on the contemporary Web. Initially inhabiting mainstream social media, these alt-right publics were compelled, in the wake of several waves of deplatforming, to search for their own services, eventually regrouping as the "Alt-Tech movement" (de Winkel 2023, 75–76). This development is best described as the infrastructural turn of the alt-right (Donovan, Lewis, and Friedberg 2019). The platformized public sphere thus presents scholars of the far right with new publics, new cultures, a new vernacular, and new technology—that is, with a new object of analysis "shaped and remediated by pre-existent imaginaries,"[4] both the same as and different from previous incarnations of the far right. The technological newness of this datafied object in a platformized environment forces scholars to apply new methods and to view the phenomenon through new lenses.

In this article we describe our efforts, results, and experiences performing data-driven research on the platformized far right as humanities scholars. Our case study is the aforementioned radical platform Gab. For this reason, the many research projects conducted on the Gab dataset over the past five years are encapsulated under the moniker "the Gab project." We will tell the story of the Gab project in the following order. In the first section we introduce and elaborate on the Gab platform. In the second section we describe the onset of the Gab project, the data capture, and the many subprojects performed on our dataset (this section includes all our empirical work and results). In the third section we describe the legal and epistemological challenges of data-driven humanities research through the narrative of our own trajectory. And finally, in the fourth section, we present our conclusions on Gab and propose several methodological guidelines for the study of the platformized far right. Through this article we hope

4 This is the description by the KNIR's Dr. Bonaria Urban of populist and nationalist collective identity. See "We Are the People: Transnational Imaginaries of (Anti-)Fascism and Populism," Koninklijk Nederlands Instituut Rome (KNIR), accessed June 3, 2024, https://www.knir.it/nl/cursus/we-are-the-people.

not only to do justice to our empirical work but also to disclose the methodological, epistemological, and legal journey entailed by this data-driven humanities research, a type of research that, at the time it was conducted, was unconventional and therefore uncomfortable given the structures available for faculty researchers.

The Platform Gab

Gab is a social networking site modeled after Twitter,[5] but parts of its design and affordances resemble those of the social news website and forum Reddit, known as the "front page of the Internet." Gab as a social medium thus aspires to be a networking site and news aggregator. The platform's core features, similar to those of most of its social media counterparts, include the ability to create user profiles, follow other users, participate in groups, and post or send text messages (Jasser et al. 2021). Additionally, Gab offers a news hub (Gab Trends), a blog (Gab News), a YouTube-like video platform (Gab TV), an online marketplace, its own pay service (GabPay), paid premium accounts (Gab Pro), a web browser and browser extension (Dissenter—a fork of Brave), and an online shop (Dissenter Shop) (de Wilde de Ligny 2022). These features exemplify Alt-Tech's striving to create its own web infrastructures, separate from those of Big Tech.

Launched in 2016, Gab soon became one of the most notorious social media platforms due to the abundance of hate speech and political radicalism present on the service, as well as the platform's public quarrel with Silicon Valley elites (de Winkel 2023, 18, 61–62). After Gab was implicated in the Pittsburgh synagogue shooting in 2018 it had to suspend operation for several days because many of its partner services cut ties. A seemingly independent platform service was thus pushed offline. This process, called "deplatformization," entails a systemic effort by Big Tech companies to push radical and controversial platforms—and their communities—to the fringes of the platform ecosystem by denying them access to basic infrastructural services needed to function online (Van Dijck, de Winkel, and Schäfer 2021, 2). Gab resurfaced a week later and eventually switched its software infrastructure to run on a forked version of Mastodon in 2019 (Van Dijck, de Winkel, and Schäfer 2021, 2024).

Like many alternative free speech platforms, Gab moderates what its users post to a far lesser extent than mainstream platforms, leading to the increased presence of far-right publics and content (Zannettou et al. 2018) Even so, the service rejects being characterized as an alt-right Twitter and denies that it has any political affiliation. Rather, Gab initially framed itself as a platform for the deplatformed and subsequently as a Christian nationalist platform.[6] However, academics (Zannettou et al. 2018; Zhou et al.

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5 Since 2023, Twitter has been known officially as X, but we will refer to the platform as Twitter in what follows since all analyses predate the name change.

6 The self-proclaimed Christian nationalism of Gab is a form of badly concealed Christian fundamentalism and antisemitism, as shown by the following three quotes from Makuch (2019): 1) "We don't

2019; Munn 2019; Zeng and Schäfer 2021), journalists (Makuch 2019; Dougherty and Hayden 2019), and intelligence agencies (Nationaal Coördinator Terrorismebestrijding en Veiligheid 2018; Department of Homeland Security 2019, 10) alike describe Gab as a far-right platform. Research shows that Gab hosts far-right celebrities and publics, including explicit Nazis and white supremacists, and that it has a high percentage of hate speech (Zannettou et al. 2018; Zhou et al. 2019; Makuch 2019). Additionally, the communications of Gab CEO and founder Andrew Torba have involved plenty of white supremacist and antisemitic rhetoric, as well as amplification of right-wing conspiracies (Dickson and Wilson 2018). Moreover, Gab almost exclusively partners with far-right and conspiracy channels, figures, and services. The disparity between its political extremism and expressed self-image is likely a matter of deception. Typically for the alt-right, Gab engages in the ludic and tactical practice of signaling its own far-right ideology through dog whistles,[7] which grants it a veil of plausible deniability regarding incendiary claims while reaching its primary audience and attracting attention from journalists.[8]

Despite Gab's obvious political radicalism, a focus solely on its toxicity and far-right politics would yield a limited view of this sort of space. Work that engages with the platformized far right as part of the larger dynamics in the public sphere (Donovan 2019; Donovan, Lewis, and Friedberg 2019; Figenschou and Ihlebæk 2019; Van Dijck, de Winkel, and Schäfer 2021, 2024) reveals aspects of far-right platforms the usual lens does not. Analyses of communities, content, (hate) speech, and influencers engage with the far right at the level of the platform, while work that analyzes the far right at the level of a platform ecology instead emphasizes infrastructures, political economy, power structures, and ecosystems. For these reasons, de Winkel (2023) chose to analyze Gab as an antagonistic or contentious platform, conceptualizing it as a "fringe platform." In the context of technology platforms, "fringe" characterizes technologies on the far reaches

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want people who are atheists. We don't want people who are Jewish. We don't want people who are, you know, nonbelievers, agnostic, whatever. This is an explicitly Christian movement because this is an explicitly Christian country." 2) "Our generation of Christians is not buying dispensational Zionist lies, we do not have a pessimistic eschatology." 3) "They're trying to subvert Christian nationalism. Turn off Ben Shapiro. This is not a Judeo-Christian movement. Those two terms are actually contradictory."

7 A dog whistle is a style of multivocal communication (Albertson 2015) where the full message is only heard by those for whom it is meant, with the rest of the audience remaining oblivious to the undertones. Alt-right dog whistles often conceal antisemitic or otherwise racist remarks or references to fascist theory.

8 A good example of this practice is Gab's former logo, a frog called "Gabby." This image dog-whistles the alt-right figure of Pepe the Frog, which has been declared a hate symbol by the Anti-Defamation League. However, every time Gab executives are confronted with the *alleged* meaning of the logo, they come up with a different meaning for the symbol. One particularly outrageous explanation claims that Gabby is a reference to the plagues in the story of Moses. Such "trolling" attracts attention from journalists, who will feel the urge to find out the symbol's true meaning, while simultaneously creating confusion among mainstream audiences and a feeling of superiority among the alt-right publics who get the joke.

of the Web, ideologically, infrastructurally, and in terms of power. Fringe platforms are defined as

> alternative platform services that were established as an explicit critique of the ideological premises and practices of mainstream platform services [and] that attempt to cause a shift in the norms of the platform ecology they contest by offering an ideologically different technology. (de Winkel 2023, 35)

Many fringe platforms are radical free speech spaces that facilitate right-wing extremism, much like Gab does, but the terminology "fringe platforms" is not reserved for any one specific political affiliation. What distinguishes fringe platforms is their explicit contestation vis-à-vis their mainstream counterparts. Fringe platforms are founded to challenge the norms of mainstream social media platforms by offering a space with different norms (de Winkel 2023, 18). As we will see in the next section, research that addresses these far-right services in the context of the broader platform ecology allows for interpretations and lenses that extend beyond the borders of their discursive spheres.

The Gab Project

In November 2018, Data School, a research and education platform of Utrecht University,[9] started a research project on Gab.ai. Under the supervision of Dr. Mirko Tobias Schäfer, a team led by Tim de Winkel initiated the project "Data-Mining Hate-Speech, or Analyzing Speech, Images and Interactions on Gab.ai, the 'Twitter of the Alt Right,'" henceforth called "the Gab project." We were awarded a grant in the focus area of Applied Data Science,[10] the main portion of which was used to hire an external expert for the necessary data capture, involving the scraping of the entire Gab platform's 17 million posts and 770,000 profiles.

After the deliverables of the grant were met, we decided to prolong the project, seeking 1) to research the far-right social media platform Gab through several different projects, and 2) to understand what it takes, as data-savvy humanities scholars, to research far-right media services within the contemporary platform ecology. We opened up our data, infrastructure, and expertise to staff and students who wanted to contribute to the Gab project and who possessed their own questions and research projects. Ultimately, the project ran for almost five years, and it will be finalized with the publication of this article. The Gab project has contributed to a dissertation (de Winkel 2023), several

9 Data School was formerly known as Utrecht Data School (UDS).

10 Specifically, we worked in the special interest group (SIG) Text Mining led by Dr. Pim Huijnen and Jan de Boer. See the Utrecht University Applied Data Science website at https://www.uu.nl/en/research/applied-data-science/research/research-grants.

masters theses and internships,[11] a journalistic article in a Dutch weekly (Boeschoten and Van den Ven 2019), and several presentations at academic conferences (Blekkenhorst et al. 2019; Salazar and de Winkel 2019; de Winkel et al. 2019; Gorzeman 2019). In this section we explain our process of data capture, all the subprojects performed on the dataset, which includes the bulk of our empirical work and data analyses, and some theoretical contributions. Many of the subprojects, including the analyses and results, have not yet been published as written texts.

Scraping the Platform

The scraping process met with both institutional and technical challenges. Despite those hurdles our primary goals were reuse, accessibility, and ease of usage. We wrote our toolkit in Python due to its popularity within the digital humanities, thus making it easier for colleagues within the field to understand, deploy, and adapt our tools. For similar reasons, in particular the ease of setup, we opted for MongoDB as the database to store the scraping results. Our dataset—too large to process on a desktop computer, too small to justify supercomputers—required renting computing infrastructure from a Dutch commercial provider. The initial plan was to use an existing scraper for the Gab platform; however, due to the interactive nature of the Gab website, regular web scraping techniques would not suffice.[12] Instead, we resorted to reverse-engineering the—undocumented—backend application programming interface (API) used by the Gab website to retrieve its data. By the time we discovered which relevant functions were accessible, what data they provided, and, perhaps most importantly, what rate limiting was implemented on retrieving said data, we had already written such substantial amounts of code for reverse-engineering and testing purposes that it was easier for us to reuse this code to build a scraper from scratch ourselves. The gabber toolkit was born.

The scraper was designed to work as follows. It would be fed a point of entry—a profile—and crawl to all connections this node had made to other nodes—users, groups, posts—making those nodes the new points of entry. The scraping process is completed once the entire network is scraped and no new nodes are found. Since the structure of a network allows for a "circular" data crawl, the scraper was programmed to compare each new data entry to the already existing dataset in order to prevent "doubles." If a data entry already existed, it was not written into the dataset and was therefore not used—again—as a new point of entry. After roughly two weeks of scraping, performing many iterations, we found ourselves in possession of a database filled with every post

11 See "Theses" in section 3.

12 Simply stated, existing public scrapers would collect all that was visible on the page, but, as we know, social media only show a fraction of their posts. After a certain number of posts—for example, ten—a user has to click "load more" to show another ten "Gabs." A scraper based on the backend API of the platform itself does not have this problem.

and profile of every non-isolated user and group publicly available on Gab. The question then became how to make sense out of these millions of database records.

After some harsh lessons in the importance of proper database indexing, several tools were written to analyze and enrich the dataset as well as to extract specific data. In particular, community detection algorithms were run to identify and export clusters based on following, repost, comment, and quote relationships. HateSonar,[13] a multiclass classifier based on crowdsourced data (Davidson et al. 2017), was used to detect hate speech and add metadata with classification and confidence to all posts; LDA (Latent Dirichlet Allocation) topic modeling was applied to all identified clusters; and hashtags were extracted and counted both globally and per cluster. These operations provided an overview of the different communities within Gab and laid the foundation for further research. Additionally, we performed activity counts and hyperlink analysis and experimented with network analysis in order to map communities. So that our scraping and analysis of Gab would be of educational value, we published the toolkit,[14] ensuring that the basic documentation and an abundant number of inline comments allowed for ease of understanding. Finalizing the development project, we presented the toolkit before the SIG Text Mining and focus area Applied Data Science.

Migrating Publics

With the amping up of regulation and moderating of mainstream social media, most notably Twitter, worries emerged that an exodus of Twitter and other deplatformed users would gather on Gab, and that this new platform would form a pipeline to right-wing extremism. Blekkenhorst et al. (2019) performed exploratory research into users arriving at Gab after being banned from Twitter in order to find some basis for accurately accessing these migrating publics and the Twitter-to-Gab pipeline. The first step of this research process was identifying Gab users who had been banned from Twitter. Attempts to link Gab users to banned Twitter accounts proved unsuccessful. With username diverging between platforms, and it being unclear whether and when banned accounts still publicly appeared on Twitter, there was no way to be certain, based on publicly available data, whether particular Twitter and Gab accounts corresponded to the same "real world" person. We ended up using the Gabbers' own admissions as indications of who had been banned from Twitter. Querying the database of all Gab posts and profiles for the string "twitter"—later supplemented by pejorative derivatives such as "Twatter" or "Shitter"—and subsequently performing a close reading of random samples of the results revealed that many Gab users who had apparently been banned

13 See HateSonar's open-source software at https://github.com/Hironsan/HateSonar (last released on July 1, 2020).

14 The Gabber toolkit published by the Center for Digital Humanities is available at https://github.com/CentreForDigitalHumanities/gabber (published on June 12, 2019).

from Twitter indeed addressed their bans in one of their first Gab posts. Another option was that Gab users mentioned a Twitter ban in their profile, seemingly as a badge of honor. Through this method, we were able to compose queries that identified at least the self-proclaimed banned Twitter users on Gab, of which we found 29,412.

Once these self-proclaimed banned Twitter users were identified, questions arose: Did these people actually stay on Gab? And if so, did they find footholds in unambiguously right-wing extremist communities? By analyzing the activity and lifespan of the accounts of the deplatformed publics, we showed that while the number of people who turn to Gab after being banned on Twitter might be significant, those who actually stay on Gab represent a far smaller group. Out of the 29,412 accounts, 11,042 showed no further public activity on Gab after the first week of their arrival on the platform, and only 3,452 were still active when the scrape was performed. Further community detection analysis and toxicity analyses revealed that of the ex-Twitter users who remained on the Gab platform, over 10 percent found a foothold in clearly right-wing extremist communities.

In every community detection analysis that was performed—be it based on repost, follow, quote, or comment relationships—one sizeable cluster was identified that had notably more hate speech than the others. Using the results of the topic modeling as well as random sampling of its posts, this cluster was identified as being neo-Nazi in nature. Of the 3,452 self-proclaimed banned Twitter users who actually stayed on Gab, 398 ended up as part of this neo-Nazi cluster. Of the 29,412 users who turned to Gab after presumably having been banned from Twitter, 37 percent were no longer active on Gab after the first week, and only 12 percent actually remained active users on Gab.[15] Despite this attrition, over 1 percent of these users ended up in a right-wing extremist community. These results do not indicate a strong waterbed effect or a robust Twitter-to-Gab pipeline, contrary to what critics of deplatforming often caution against.[16]

Being Nonradical on a Radical Platform

Analyses of the Gab project generally show elevated levels of hate speech and political posting on the fringe platform as compared to its mainstream counterparts (Zannettou et al. 2018; Zhou et al. 2019; Munn 2019; Zeng and Schäfer 2021). Salazar and de Winkel (2019) reengaged with the image of Gab as a radical space by researching the opposite presupposition. Whereas previous academic contributions considered Gab to be a homogenous platform and explored the connections between its users and alt-right

15 Again, Gab consisted of 770,000 profiles at the time of the scrape, meaning that under 4 percent of Gab users at that time were self-proclaimed deplatformed publics.

16 The "waterbed effect" refers to the idea that deplatformed content or users do not actually disappear from the web but just move to different spaces. It implies that the act of deplatforming is as useful as pushing down a lump in a waterbed.

political activity, they focused on the fragmented publics and nonradical activity. They asked, "Can you be nonradical on a radical platform?" By turning the question around they attempted to show, and thus account for, the manner in which a question to a large degree determines the answer.

To see whether Gab could also be a platform for non-right-wing publics, nonextremist content, or even nonpolitical discourse, Salazar and de Winkel focused on Gab "groups." Users on Gab have the opportunity to create or join groups, and to communicate with other members in a members-only part of the service. These occasional communities can revolve around any topic, ranging from discussing shared hobbies and interests to being instructive about the forum or bringing together people from a specific community, country, or region. By investigating whether these groups on Gab provide spaces to discuss a variety of non-right-wing topics, Salazar and de Winkel question the perceived homogeneity of far-right spaces on fringe platforms, and they show that these groups provide a rationale for research on communities or partial publics.

The Gab scrape provided 1,631 groups, of which 1,310 were discarded because they had 100 or fewer posts. The 321 groups left—with a combined 810,570 posts—were categorized qualitatively into six categories, based on the group title and a close reading of content samples. The largest category, named *topical*, included 155 different groups that each focused on one specific topic, interest, or hobby—such as pets, comics, cannabis, or computer technology. The second largest category consisted of 87 *explicitly political* groups, meaning that it was clear from these groups' names or descriptions that they were meant to talk about a given political issue or about politics itself. The third largest category, which was called *identitarian*, contained the 35 identity-driven groups—for example "Manly Men of Gab," "Traditional Lifestyle," and "Christianity."[17] A fourth category was made up of the 24 groups that revolve around the *nationality or locality* of the users. The fifth category consisted of the 17 groups that center on forum *communication*, such as "Introduce Yourself," "Breaking News," or "Gab on Android." (A sixth category consisted of only three groups categorized as *miscellaneous*.) The three smallest categories of groups—*forum communication*, *nationality or locality*, and *miscellaneous*—are rather typical for groups on social media platforms. But the three largest categories—*topical*, *explicitly political*, and *identitarian*—might be a good indicator of whether nonradical and nonpolitical speech is possible on Gab. Especially salient is the high number of topical communities because this significant footprint

17 The differentiation between political and identitarian groups is somewhat contrived, especially in the far-right context. However, they wanted to allow for the hypothesis that you could be nonradical and/or nonpolitical on a politically radical platform; moreover, there is a difference in political explicitness between a "Trump2020" group and a "traditional lifestyle" group. For that reason, we used the definition of "identitarian" in the *Collins English Dictionary online*, which gives "concerned with promoting the interests of one's own cultural group," as a categorization. See https://www.collinsdictionary.com/us/dictionary/english/identitarian (accessed June 1, 2024).

suggests that almost half of the forum is organized around people's nonpolitical interests. And while the identitarian groups often carry a strong political connotation, since identity is—especially on Gab—political by nature, the topical groups seem rather neutral, sometimes even innocent. After the categorization, they performed a series of computational analyses on this corpus, including determining the number of active users, visualizing which groups shared active members, and calculating the distribution of hate speech. Findings on user participation and hate speech confirmed earlier findings of elevated toxicity as well as greater activity in the identitarian, political, and national groups, confirming the notion that social media platforms, and especially Gab, are used for political discourse (Salazar and de Winkel 2019; de Winkel et al. 2019). A network analysis (figure 1) reveals that the platform was broadly divided into two major spheres, namely the topical groups and the explicitly political groups. The division between the political—and many of the identitarian—groups and the topical groups suggests that those who comment in the political groups often comment in other political groups, while users in topical groups generally tend to be more active in other topical groups than they are in political groups. So, if we assume that the topical groups are indeed relatively nonradical and nonpolitical, we can also assume that the active users in such groups have a considerably less radical and political platform experience on Gab in general.

The network shows ample connections between the political groups and the nonpolitical groups, indicating that Gabbers in fact meet in shared spaces instead of inhabiting segmented trenches. One could suppose that Gab is a heterogenous platform in terms of discourse and usage; nonetheless, it is hard to believe that members of nonpolitical groups are drawn to Gab for the opportunities it provides—for example—to share their photography. Gab is too small, too inactive, too controversial, and too political for such goals. In all likelihood, users are drawn to Gab because they are looking for an alternative social network that suits their political affiliation, and which will allow them to escape the censorship regulations found on mainstream social media platforms. So, while partial publics are present on this fringe platform, they do not "prove" that Gab functions as an alternative sphere for discourse, instead of as a far-right radical(izing) platform.

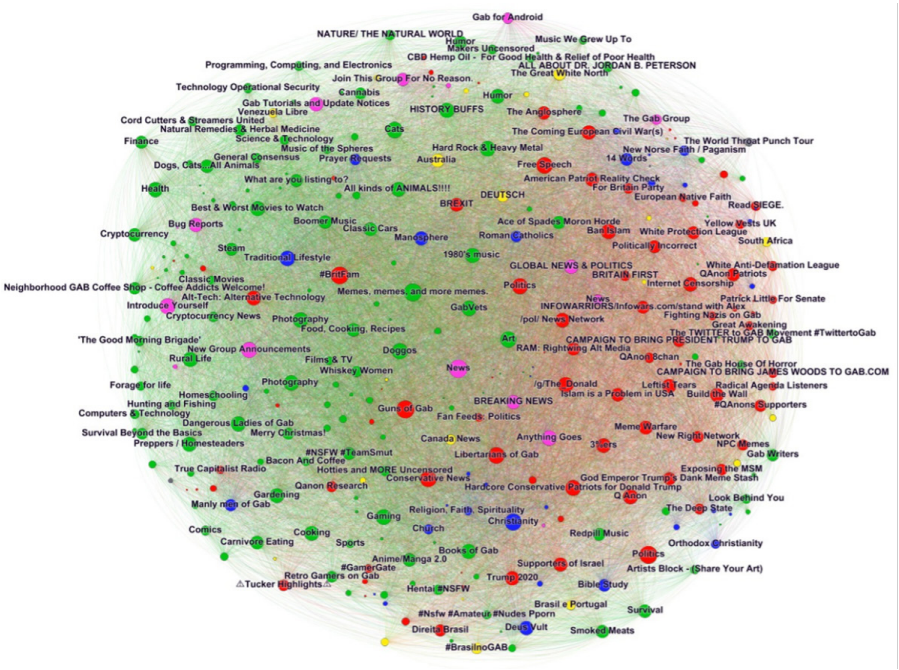

Figure 1. The network graph represents the landscape of the groups on Gab. Groups that are close have a high probability of sharing a relatively high number of active users. All 321 groups that made the final selection are represented by a node in the graph, and the edges that connect the nodes of the network represent the activity of shared users. We used the force-directed layout algorithm called "force atlas 2" of the network analysis software Gephi (Bastian, Heymann, and Jacomy 2009), and so the logics of the network are therefore based on gravitational forces, where the nodes reject each other and the edges can be likened to bands pulling the nodes toward each other. The more connections two nodes make, the closer they are pulled toward each other (Jacomy et al. 2014). Source: authors' construction.

Truth Claims on Gab

With its stated focus on freedom of speech, both Gab's technical architecture and its regulatory framework are aimed at the uninhibited dissemination of user content. However, even a brief glimpse at its content reveals Gab to be a gathering place for racism, antisemitism, and other forms of hate speech, together with an array of conspiracies: in all, it is a disturbing example of the troublesome relationship toward truth that has come to be popularly known as post-truth. Gab's view of itself as "defenders of free speech, individual liberty, and truth" was articulated in a 2017 blog post:

> In the free market of ideas, the best ideas will always win. When those ideas start to rise and challenge the establishment, they have no choice but to silence and censor. They have no choice but to purge any ideology that does not conform to their own echo chamber

> bubble world. They do not and cannot relate to the average middle class family that can barely put food on the table. **They care only about three things: money, power, and control.** Enough is enough. The time is now for patriots and free thinkers inside and outside of Silicon Valley to **organize, communicate in a safe way, and start building.**[18]

Gab appeals to the "marketplace of ideas," a central concept within US free speech law, especially since 1969, when it formed the theoretical foundation for the US Supreme Court to overturn the conviction of a Ku Klux Klan leader on charges of advocating violence.[19] In contrast, Zannettou et al. (2018, 1) characterize Gab's focus on free speech as "merely a shield behind which its alt-right users hide." Accordingly, it would be prudent to question whether Gab can in fact be seen as a "marketplace of ideas" and whether Gab's users are actually committed to such free exchange, or whether the emphasis on free speech should be seen through a different framework.

Gorzeman's (2019) empirical and philosophical inquiry into Gab engages with the plausibility of the radical platform as a "marketplace of ideas" by indexing differing and conflicting ideas and opinions. To make this assessment, all hashtags used in posts on Gab were extracted, counted, indexed, and presented. A frequency list of all Gab hashtags was subsequently used to search for hashtags both favoring and opposing the politics of former US president Donald Trump, who was—and still is—a major topic within the Gab community. The most common hashtag found on Gab, with 682,750 occurrences, was #maga, clearly indicating support for Trump. By stark contrast, the most frequent hashtag opposing Trump, #nevertrump (referring to opposition to Trump, mostly among Republicans and other conservatives), comes in at 658th place, with only 2,424 occurrences. The hashtag #hillary ranks 30th, with a total of 35,286 occurrences, but the close reading of samples shows it to be used almost exclusively to criticize Hillary Clinton rather than to support opposition to Trump. In a marketplace of ideas we would expect to see competition between differing ideas. While differing and conflicting ideas exist on Gab, on one of the platform's most central topics they are extremely out of balance, so much so that one cannot plausibly imagine Gab as a marketplace of ideas.

To make sense of whether and how freedom of speech and the construction of truth are entangled on Gab, a corpus of hashtags that can be understood as "truth claims"—such as the hashtag #truth—was built, resulting in a collection of signifiers that all fulfill

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18 The post, from August 10, 2017, has since been deleted from *Medium* but is archived at https://web.archive.org/web/20180203222908/https://medium.com/@getongab/announcing-the-alt-tech-alliance-18bebe89c60a (accessed June 1, 2024, original emphasis).

19 See Brandenburg v. Ohio, 395 U.S. 444 (1969), Justia US Supreme Court Center, accessed June 1, 2024, https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/395/444/.

some rhetorical function linked to the truth claims made or referred to in the posts. By organizing these hashtags in a graph, where each hashtag is represented as a node and each co-occurrence is represented by an edge, and after filtering out all the nodes with a relatively low number of edges, we can see the most dominant co-occurrences (figure 2). Of particular interest are #freespeech, #speakfreely, and #censorship. Seeing these hashtags so prominently intertwined with #truth would seem to suggest that Gab users commit to an entanglement of truth with freedom of speech.

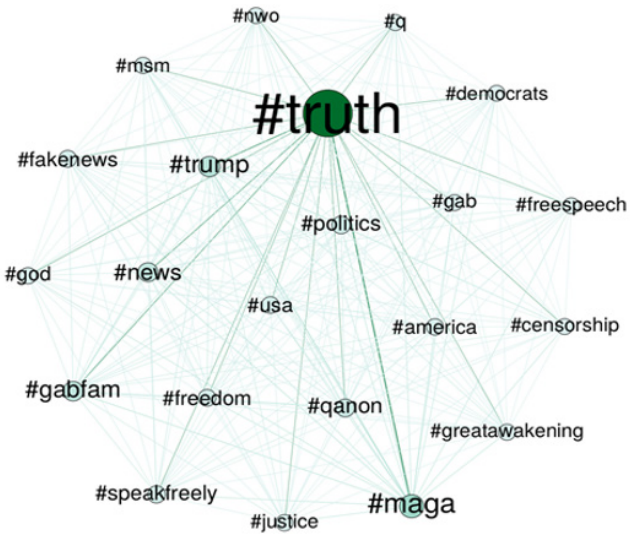

Figure 2. A co-occurrence graph of the selected corpus of hashtags; line weight reflects the number of co-occurrences between hashtags. Source: authors' construction.

Gab, which describes itself as a free speech platform for "defenders of truth," asserts, in effect, that it is a platform for the parrhesiastes, a term embraced by Gab project researchers to name one who practices "boldness or freedom of speech."[20] With almost no regulation of content and prevalent use of pseudonyms disguising posters' identities, Gab does seem to provide the ideal conditions for its users to speak freely and frankly. But precisely by providing such a safe haven, it appears to have also undermined the very possibility of a meaningful confrontation in speaking truth to power, that is,

20 The definition of "parrhesia" is from *Merriam-Webster Dictionary online*, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/parrhesia (accessed June 1, 2024). In parrhesia, truth, free speech, and speaking freely are closely entangled with one another. The fruitful discussion that followed the publication of Foucault's lectures on parrhesia, and in particular the works of Seitz (2016) and Simpson (2012), have given rise to a nuanced view of the particular sort of "truth" that is spoken in parrhesia, and its relation to power and subjectivity.

the very possibility of parrhesia. Foucault (2001) argues that "[s]omeone . . . merits consideration as a parrhesiastes only if there is a risk or danger for him in telling the truth." But on a platform like Gab, where free speech is nearly absolutely guaranteed, and moreover where the vast majority of users post under pseudonyms, it becomes hard to imagine any real risk or danger in speaking freely and frankly, except perhaps for certain extreme cases that merit criminal prosecution. Furthermore, Gab is an online platform, and such technologically mediated communication generally results in less inhibited speech than in face-to-face settings. Euripides characterizes a "bad" parrhesiastes as, in Foucault's words, "someone who has a tongue, but not a door," that is, someone with poor judgment who does not know when not to speak (Foucault 1983). We argue that the technological nature of Gab presents users with a tongue while holding open the door: it creates an environment devoid of many inhibitions that could otherwise aid in better judgment about when and when not to speak. In short, the racist—but parrhesiastic—rhetoric on Gab serves as encouragement, support, and opportunity for others to "freely" make racist truth claims, thus contributing to the emergence of a new regime of truth. The focus on free speech on Gab is thus more than a shield that its alt-right users can hide behind. Parrhesia is used as a rhetorical device that opens up space for political subjugation. When we focus on free speech not as a commitment to freedom of speech as a human right but rather as a promotion of parrhesiastic activity, it becomes clear how free speech fits within the political project of the alt-right—namely as a technique for political subjugation. The condition that Gab creates as a platform is the ability to safely break with nomos—the laws, norms, or conventions governing human conduct—without the need to accept any risk that would require one to have an existential stake in the matter, providing the ideal breeding ground for the technique of rhetorical parrhesia to flourish.

Theses

Three theses have been finalized as part of the Gab project. The first thesis is "Moderating Online Extremism on Fringe and Mainstream Platforms: An Analysis of Governance by Gab and Twitter" by Melissa Blekkenhorst (2019). In her research, Blekkenhorst compared the moderation on Gab and on its mainstream counterpart Twitter. By analyzing the guidelines, affordances, and enforcement efforts of both social media platforms she concluded that, though both platforms struggle with the responsibility of enabling free speech while attempting to prevent extremism, illegality, and disruption, Gab possesses a fundamentally different ideology and has divergent goals when compared to Twitter. Blekkenhorst calls for a deeper investigation into fringe platforms like Gab, specifically into their role within online public discourse and their motivations, which seem clandestine but are nonetheless very important to their moderation practices.

The second thesis, Sofie de Wilde de Ligny's (2022) "An Analysis of How Fringe Platform Gab.com Relates to the Process of Platformization," explores the

development of Gab's infrastructure and links the rise of fringe platforms to the process of platformization, or "the rise of the platform as the dominant infrastructural and economic model of the social web" (Helmond 2015, 1). Although platformization has been intensively studied and theorized in recent years (Van Dijck, de Winkel, and Schäfer 2021; Helmond 2015), de Wilde de Ligny stresses that the theoretical framework of platformization has been applied only to Big Tech or mainstream services. The inclusion of fringe platforms in the theoretical purview of platformization allows for new angles and a broader scope on the Web. Through a platform infrastructure analysis, she traces and maps Gab's technical infrastructure and finds a notable absence of platform mechanisms and API-business partners. Instead, the fringe platform increasingly uses—and offers—services from its own tech sphere. De Wilde de Ligny concludes that however much Gab may wish to separate itself from the Big Tech companies—by using and offering alternative services—the mainstream and fringe will still be part of the same online dynamic in the platform ecosystem.

The Gab project's third thesis, Thomas ten Heuvel's (2019) "Gab.ai: Het Platform waar Hate Speech een Recht is" (Gab.ai: The platform where hate speech is a right), uses text-mining methods to reveal the ideological positions and targets of speakers on Gab. By assigning a toxicity score to more than two million posts, Ten Heuvel filtered and analyzed posts containing hate speech, showing that hate speech on Gab is frequently aimed at Jews, Muslims, and people of color.[21] Furthermore, Ten Heuvel shows that the posters' ideological positions are highly white nationalist, conservative, and racist in nature. The analysis also reveals Gab users to be strong advocates for free speech who strongly oppose censorship and political correctness. At the same time, paradoxically, they attack and seek to silence people with other ideological beliefs. Free speech therefore seems to be used as a justification for spreading racist and antisemitic views. Ten Heuvel concludes that although Gab styles itself as a platform for free speech and individual freedom, it is in fact an echo chamber where hate speech is a right.

Researching Platforms in the 2020s

While every subproject was an investigation into Gab as an alt-right or fringe platform, the Gab project's overarching goal with the computational methods employed to create and research our dataset was to develop a methodological framework for researching the platformized far right through data practices. As stated in the introduction, when the far right was platformized its manner of communication and the dissemination of its views—along with its tactics, vernacular, and ultimately its culture—were

21 Ten Heuvel used the Google API called "Perspective" to determine toxicity, defined as a "rude, disrespectful, or unreasonable comment that is likely to make people leave a discussion." See "Attributes and Language," Perspective, https://support.perspectiveapi.com/s/about-the-api-attributes-and-languages?language=en_US (accessed June 26, 2024).

transformed. To ask how one can research a far-right platform is, at least partly, to ask how to research a platformized community or movement. Because our datafied object warranted the use of data methodology, we had to incorporate insights and frameworks from the fields of the digital humanities, critical data studies, and platform studies. In this section we discuss data-driven humanities research conducted on the platformized far right. The structure of this section is aligned with the two types of challenges we encountered: institutional challenges, which were mostly legal and will be discussed first, and epistemological challenges that come with conducting data-driven humanities research.

Legal and Institutional Challenges

The first institutional challenge was a lack of resources and infrastructure. On the platform side, there were no application interfaces that would allow us to easily access data, and on the university side, there was a lack of expertise in collecting data through other techniques. As stated, the data collection was eventually made possible through a modest grant made by Utrecht University, which allowed us to hire an expert who could reverse-engineer the undocumented backend API of the Gab website. At that time no one on our faculty possessed the necessary skills to perform this task, and only due to the Data School's extensive professional network were we able to employ someone with requisite expertise at such an affordable price. A university research group lacking half a decade of data-driven research with various outside partners would probably not have been able to get the Gab project off the ground. Given the volatility of the platform ecosystem, the project at hand also presented a welcome opportunity to learn more about accessing platforms that do not provide well-documented APIs (Perriam, Birkbak, and Freeman 2020; Tromble 2021), since we assume that platform researchers will encounter such challenges more often. We believe it is epistemologically problematic to largely focus on easily accessible platforms.

Ethical and legal issues presented another challenge (see Krotov, Johnson, and Silva 2020). Novel data repositories and the means to access them can challenge research integrity and require rigorous ethical consideration (Van Schie, Westra, Schäfer 2017). Web scraping became a controversial issue, with platform providers often challenging researchers and questioning their justifications for data collection (e.g., Luscombe, Dick, and Walby 2022). Compiling and capturing a dataset of a web platform are routine activities in social media research (e.g., Marres and Weltevrede 2013), but we were adamantly committed to using this project as an exemplary case for doing ethical data research and for complying with academic integrity standards (Algra et al. 2018; Franzke et al. 2020) and GDPR (General Data Protection Regulation) regulations. We consulted a privacy lawyer for developing a GDPR-compliant research process.[22]

22 This lawyer later developed a "research justification, methodology, and integrity" manual for this

With an eye to contract law, the scraping was in line with Gab's own terms of use, as the platform did not prohibit automated data collection at the time of scraping.[23] We carried out a data protection impact assessment and developed a data management plan prior to the data collection. Both endeavors were necessary for compliance with our university's guidelines. Our data collection meets the terms of the GDPR's exceptions for research purposes.[24] Of course, researchers must take appropriate precautions to prevent breaches of privacy. Drawing from our data protection impact assessment, we concluded that many usernames were pseudonyms that did not represent the users' real identities. In addition, we decided to anonymize the dataset, as the general dynamics of Gab as a communication platform were more relevant to our project than individual users.

While commercial entities are required to inform users about data collection, the GDPR allows researchers to make their findings public through general publications about their research activities or by publishing their research in scholarly journals and disseminating their work at conferences. Data collection thus can take place without informing the data subject prior to the data scrape. This is permitted under the terms of the GDPR when the gathering of such information would appear otherwise infeasible or if data and research quality would be negatively affected. Of course, there was no way to inform hundreds of thousands of—largely anonymous—account holders on a far-right platform in advance of a data scrape. Legally, the data collection was covered because the research interest was legitimate and because Gab's terms of use did not prohibit data collection. To ensure GDPR compliance and data protection, we conducted ethical deliberations about the research project and its method and process, applied data minimization through the anonymization of the dataset, restricted access to the dataset to researchers working on the project, and stored the data in a secure environment using the research "workspace" compartments available via the research data management service Yoda, developed at Utrecht University.[25] We wrote up a detailed research plan and closely documented the data collection process. In addition, a public seminar was held to inform interested parties about the project, its research design, and the data collection; the seminar complemented its public informational role

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kind of digital humanities research and web scraping, at least in part as a result of the Gab project. It has now become a set of official guidelines for data collection at Utrecht University. See Gerritsen (2021).

23 Gab's terms of service are archived at https://archive.ph/PZEqE (last updated August 18, 2016).

24 As per Article 43 of the Dutch law "Uitvoeringswet Algemene verordening gegevensbescherming," Overheid.nl Wettenbank, accessed June 1, 2024, https://wetten.overheid.nl/jci1.3:c:BWBR0040940&hoofdstuk=4&artikel=43&z=2018-05-25&g=2018-05-25.

25 See Ton Smeele and Lazlo Westerhof, "Using iRods to Manage, Share and Publish Research Data: Yoda," Utrecht University, n.d., accessed June 1, 2024, https://irods.org/uploads/2018/Smeele-UtrechtUni-Yoda-paper.pdf.

by educating our colleagues regarding practices of research design, data management, and GDPR compliance for research projects requiring web scraping.

Throughout the process, we kept in contact with the privacy officer as well as the privacy advisers and data managers at the university. It turned out that a lack of jurisprudence, the fear of significant penalties, and an unfamiliarity with social media research were at the root of many difficult but valuable conversations between our research team and the university's privacy and data team. The minimization of liability sometimes seemed at odds with guaranteeing the fundamental right to research. Our project therefore initiated an institutional learning process about the possibilities, legal boundaries, and best practices for GDPR-compliant research. It launched, albeit slowly, the development of a dedicated ethics board for social media data research.

Epistemological and Ethical Challenges

Studying cultural phenomena through data analysis affects the methodology employed (Van Es and Schäfer 2017). We need the lessons provided by the field of critical data studies to address the methodological and—to an even greater extent—the epistemological challenges posed by such a transformation. First, capturing all the data points of a social media service in a dataset means that you have altered your object of analysis and must now reverse-engineer the dataset back into the online public and/or discourse. All our choices regarding data capture, data storage, data analysis, and data presentation—from our programming language to our visualization software—are axiomatically part of, and inseparable from, our research object. A thorough and critical review of the array of data-driven methods we use within the humanities must become part and parcel of the research process (Van Es, Schäfer, and Wieringa 2021). We will refrain from declaring a new methodological tradition or coining new terminology, but the involvement of the entire process of data methodology (capture, storage, selection, analysis, visualization) and the limited use of ready-made and/or commercial tools and packages seems to deploy the framework that critical data studies aims to teach. Second, although we scraped an entire forum, by no means do we now possess a god's-eye perspective. Haraway (1988) has long reminded us that the god-trick fallacy of seeing everything as if from nowhere—whereby the researcher or analyst imagines not being situated in the world but serving as a convergence point of objective observation—is especially potent in technology-enhanced vision and representations of big data knowledge (Leurs 2017) such as data visualizations (Kennedy et al. 2016). Therefore, the challenge is to fully understand within our methodology that we do not in fact see the entirety of the platform, we see only our dataset. A distant reading perspective is better described as a bird's-eye view: this metaphor encompasses the notion that a bird sees a great deal due to a very specific position in the world, even if this same bird sees very little of what is visible from another perspective, namely the one we have on the ground and up close.

Finally, we must not confuse the map with the territory. A user is not the same as a person, and likewise a datafied social media public is not equivalent to an offline community or culture. An online public is both socioculturally and technologically shaped and is cocreated by the medium on which it has assembled (de Winkel 2023, 40). The affordances and algorithms, and all the political and economic incentives they embody, are just as much part of the activity and community as social actors such as users, publics, and influencers. These considerations are more fundamental yet less obvious than the challenges posed by the white noise of bots or trolls or any other disruptive, misleading, or automated activity. A dataset like ours becomes meaningful when the distance separating the object from the digital presence of that object, and from the representation of that presence in the dataset, are thoroughly understood. As Caplan (2016, 6) concludes,

> [W]e should be warned: although data is neither map nor territory, it can foster their confusion. It is a seductive mode of representation that can easily trap an intellectual milieu terrified by representation, providing a method for running away from its history and its own activity in the present.

So, the far right does not become known to us in this dataset, but the interpretation of the data analyses can take place within the context of the medium and when the interpretations are applicable to the datafied object. We are able to analyze traits of the platformized far right. For example, the assertion that 1 percent of members of the deplatformed publics of Twitter joins a neo-Nazi cluster on Gab is meaningful within the framework of online migration and the waterbed effect. It does not specify for us whether the Twitter publics were radicalized by their deplatforming or, alternatively, were neo-Nazis to begin with and then found a community. The usage of new methodologies such as data analyses thus leaves the researcher vulnerable to epistemological misunderstanding. Employing such a methodology requires an in-depth understanding of what you are studying and a familiarity with the field of critical data studies. Additionally, since the far right is increasingly often also a platformized object of study, we might incorporate the lessons provided by the field of platform studies—most notably, the understanding that a platform is a multidimensional ecosystem, determined not solely by user activity and technology but also by economic and governance models (Van Dijck 2013). To study a social media platform is also to study the data economy (Gerlitz and Helmond 2013), partnerships (Van der Vlist 2022), and infrastructures (Plantin et al. 2018). De Winkel (2023), developing this framework, argues that far-right fringe platforms such as Gab should be studied as part of the larger platformized public sphere and through the power dynamic between a dominant center and the fringes—taking to heart Federico Finchelstein's (2019, 2021) suggestion that fascist ideologies are best studied from the margins. An example of such research on the far right would be the subproject of migrating publics, since it applies a

cross-platform lens and acknowledges the dispersed and translocal nature of the online far right.

Finally, there are research ethics and considerations specifically warranted by study of the far right. We decided to largely suspend judgment with regard to their radicalism, without ignoring the toxicity and danger that fascism and adjacent ideologies present for free and open societies. The posture of suspended judgment is due to our desire to maintain our curiosity and open-mindedness toward the dataset and our research object, but such generosity is never extended to the actual politics of the far right.[26] Additionally, researching the online far right brings with it the possibility of virality. An important goal of far-right content producers is to have their content circulate as long and widely as possible. The online far right needs mainstream actors to disseminate their radicalism to a broader audience. This point is made most strikingly by Whitney Phillips (2018), whose report "The Oxygen of Amplification" implores center-left media, including journalists and editors, to stop giving oxygen to hate speech: even as they debunk or critically cover alt-right channels and discourses, their reporting on such noxious content nonetheless signal-boosts the far right. Journalists and scholars are often baited into investigating and explaining their content, which is packaged in such a way that the general public takes note of their tropes and presence without fully understanding their underlying dynamics. Far-right publics, for their part, often immediately recognize the meaning behind the far-right content and are emboldened by seeing a far-right presence in the mainstream. We have withheld spectacular details and sources of far-right propaganda, such as manifestos, in order to avoid being useful idiots for their cause. Every research subcomponent of the Gab project was aimed at finding the structure instead of particular cases, and this is especially true of the two subprojects on Gab's publics (migrating publics) and discourse (truth-telling). Research that focuses on what happens *on* a far-right platform, rather than what happens *with* a far-right platform, has a greater risk of highlighting the spectacular and the horrific, thereby perpetuating attention to such repellent content and platforming that which ought not to be amplified.

Conclusion and Discussion

Over a period of five years, we ran a research project analyzing the far-right service Gab. Our Gab project included scraping this entire social media platform into a dataset and the employment of a spectrum of data methods. The analyses disclosed Gab to be a far-right social media platform deeply rooted in alt-right culture. Data analyses show Gab to have high percentages of hate speech and political speech, low levels of user participation, and very limited moderation, yielding a platform full of

26 De Winkel (2023, 14) is very clear on this point in his dissertation: "[W]e are dealing with violent and illiberal extremism here, and . . . I condemn and oppose the far-right, openly and vehemently."

noise and toxicity. Although text and network analyses had shown that nonradical and nonpolitical discourse and activity are certainly possible and are in fact present on Gab, we refuted that their presence is indicative of any flourishing public sphere or diversity of opinion. Subsequently, we confirmed this refutation of diversity through a hashtag analysis. Furthermore, we argue that the platform creates conditions where it is safe to engage in racism, antisemitism, and sexism. While Gab disguises itself as ostensibly a platform for free speech and individual freedom, it is an echo chamber where hate speech is encouraged. This "rhetorical parrhesia"—speaking freely without consequence—functions as a device of political subjugation and thus is aligned with the political project of the alt-right. Engaging with the notion of Gab as a radicalizing platform, we investigated the migrating publics that were deplatformed on Twitter and are now present on Gab. However, these analyses cannot unambiguously confirm that deplatforming users off of Twitter might cause them to be radicalized on Gab. The majority of those from deplatformed publics who land on Gab do not stay there for long—presumably for however long they are banned—and only a very small percentage joins an overtly neo-Nazi community.

However, the Gab project was not interested solely in researching a single alt-right platform. The overarching goal of all the subprojects and the plethora of analyses was to contribute to a methodology for the study of the contemporary online far right. As scholars working at the intersection of media and the far right, we recognized both the challenges and the necessity of doing this type of data-driven research. Taking our atypical project as a case study, we went through all the structures of our institution to experience and document how to perform data analyses as humanities scholars. Our first contribution to data-driven far-right scholarship is our appeal to incorporate the fields of critical data studies and platform studies when analyzing the platformized far right. Researching the far right in the new decade is going to involve—to some extent—researching the platformized far right, alt-right, and Alt-Tech. Since the research object of scholars of the far right is now partly datafied, the field has to take notice of the possibilities of data methods, or at least be related to research that does. This is not an appeal to solely perform data analyses, but scholars that do use digital tools and data methods for the capture and analysis of web platforms must become literate in operating them. Other fields that become relevant with the study of a datafied object—specifically social media data—are data ethics and law. Humanities scholars who apply data science methods must also develop an understanding of their legal responsibilities and the practices of compliant research. In addition, their research institutions must be able to provide the necessary legal support to defend their fundamental right to research and to advise, effectively and competently, on proper conduct. Institutions can either build structures that bolster the legal and methodological foundations of this type of research or, indeed, open up unspecified money grants for anomaly research. However, the presence of financing for data science does not mean legal bodies, facilitating services, or departmental research agendas are necessarily prepared for this research. We advise

universities to allocate time and resources to build tool repositories and create flexible access to computational resources and legal support.

In addition, we want to state the importance of open and interdisciplinary science for this type of study. The Gab project would not have been possible without these principles. There is a lot of valuable output besides the publication of journal articles, and we have made extensive efforts to guarantee the accessibility, usability, and reusability of our work. The caveat is that currently, and until further notice, the dataset is reserved for internal reuse only in order to guarantee good practice.[27] The dataset has been of great value and has already contributed greatly to knowledge transfer, and the same holds true for the toolbox. It is of great importance that all programming should come with loads of comments and documentation; tools, scrapers, and the dataset itself should be explained. Writing the code is only 30 percent of the work, with the rest devoted to explaining your code and facilitating use. Digital humanities research and data-driven scholarship are, intrinsically, forms of interdisciplinary research and therefore warrant cooperation. Contrary to popular belief, data science usually increases the workload of those engaged in it. Additionally, it is unrealistic and unadvisable to demand that everybody learn to code. Cooperation and interdisciplinary scholarship, however, are well equipped to overcome these challenges.

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27 Internal reuse does not mean only researchers from the Data School can use the data; rather, it means that we keep this dataset on our infrastructures. For access or request of transparency, please contact dataschool@uu.nl.

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ARTICLE

The Ordinariness of January 6

Rhetorics of Participation in Antidemocratic Culture

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Abstract: *The January 6, 2021, Capitol riot appeared as an extraordinary and shocking event to many American citizens. In fact, the various framings of the riot such as "insurrection," "sedition," or "domestic terrorism" seem to confirm the unprecedented nature of the day. By contrast, in this article we argue that January 6 can be understood in terms of its ordinariness, that is, as "the most ordinary thing that could happen" when viewed in the context of right-wing politics. We first argue that the reliance on a universalized dichotomy between authoritarianism and democracy in current research on right-wing politics in the United States tends to reify those terms, and thus miss the ordinary and routine dimension of antidemocratic practices. We subsequently propose the concept* antidemocratic cultures *to understand how right-wing political dispositions are fabricated through and mediated by rhetorical acts including speech, written texts, and embodied everyday practice. We analyze the* rhetoric of participation *of riot participants by reading their text messages, social media posts, and interviews with law enforcement and news media, as detailed in their arrest sheets. The rhetoric of participation of riot participants reveals how political dispositions are fabricated through ordinary language use and how these identities congeal in antidemocratic cultures. In the last section, we further discuss how a theory of antidemocratic cultures provides a novel framework to understand contemporary right-wing politics.*

Keywords: antidemocratic culture, rhetoric, January 6, authoritarianism, democracy, US Capitol riot

> Yesterday's "sacrileges" in our temple of democracy—oh, poor defiled city on the hill, etc.—constituted an "insurrection" only in the sense of dark comedy. What was essentially a big biker gang dressed as circus performers and war-surplus barbarians—including the guy with a painted face posing as horned bison in a fur coat—stormed the ultimate country club, squatted on Pence's throne, chased Senators into the sewers, casually picked their noses and rifled files and, above all, shot endless selfies to send to the dudes back home. Otherwise they didn't have a clue."
>
> —Mike Davis (2021)

The spectacle, shock, and horror of Trump supporters storming the US Capitol on January 6, 2021, has overshadowed the fact that the event was one out of forty-five protests at state capitols and elsewhere in thirty-two states on that day (Tanner and Burghart 2021). As the Capitol riot unfolded, pundits scrambled to give meaning to an apparently unprecedented event. Critical commentaries about extremist or far-right politics since then have attempted to assign a singular meaning to the Capitol riot by applying a unitary analytical approach. In this approach, we can know the meaning of the riot in the following ways: it was an "insurrection" engineered by Donald Trump (January 6th Committee 2022), guided by a "patriotic counter-revolutionary" "political mindset" (Pape 2022b) that was fomented by a "white supremacist" political ideology (Belew and Gutierrez 2021) and proof of predicted, but now realized, "fascism" (Stanley 2018, 2021), "tyranny" (Snyder 2017, 2021), or "Christian nationalism" (Baptist Joint Committee 2022). Attempts to shoehorn the riot into a unitary analytical category have produced "January 6" as an "event," an epistemological object that can represent a broader societal context (Jeppesen et al. 2022).

In our view, treating the riot as an event that can be analyzed through unitary categories gives us little insight into its *meaning* for the participants and as political practice. Unitary and universalized analyses are limited on two counts. First, those who claim that the riot was inspired by patriotism or white supremacy fail to explain how the participants understood these concepts and whether they saw them as part of their (dynamic and fluid) identities (what we will refer to as their dispositions and stances). Second, unitary analyses often measure the beliefs or actions of the rioters against a normative understanding of democracy (and, by extension, authoritarianism); again, the rioters' understanding of political discourse is flattened out in order to maintain the (liberal) framework through which democratic politics is normatively defined—an approach that Mike Davis satirizes in the epigraph above. Even there, Davis exaggerates by claiming that the rioters "didn't have a clue." They might have been strategically clueless, but the riot was meaningful to the participants.

Our argument is that the meaningfulness of the Capitol riot to the participants and its significance as a political practice provide clues to the ordinariness of American

extremist right-wing politics. The extremist right-wing discourse and activities that proliferated during the Trump years, and that seemed to reach their nadir on January 6, have prompted much anxiety about the rise of fascism or a looming second civil war (Walter 2022). Even when not imagining such catastrophic outcomes, critics characterize the rise of such politics as a threat to the future of the United States as a political formation—one believed to be moving from democracy to authoritarianism. This approach assumes that democracy and authoritarianism have clear normative definitions and meanings. Rejecting such an assumption, as well as a fixed understanding of right-wing politics according to a singular ideology, we argue that today's American extremist right-wing politics is rooted in political identity formation and cultural practices. In our understanding, the larger meaning of the riot, and thus the nature of the political right, is clearer if we start by understanding political identity and cultural practices rather than with an a priori definition of extremism or right-wing politics.

As active processes of self-making and self-styling, political identities are fabricated through ordinary, routine, and everyday social struggles online and offline. It is the power of such fabricated political identities—and the power to fashion them—that are meaningful to social actors. They represent the basic scaffolds upon which the architecture of right-wing politics is built via a highly mediated and participatory culture (Jenkins 2009; see also Starbird, Ahmer, and Wilson 2019). By characterizing right-wing politics as ordinary, we do not seek to downplay the egregious nature and consequences of the January 6 attack on the Capitol. On the contrary, by emphasizing the ordinary we seek to show that such an attack is possible again because right-wing politics does not emerge solely from extraordinary efforts at propaganda, or from ideas with impeccable logical consistency, or from well-financed and skillful organizations. By ordinariness, we mean the ubiquitous but elusive everydayness of sociopolitical practices. These are practices that we notice in the everyday but often consider to be undeserving of critical thought because of their triviality. The ordinary also consists of practices that we witness and that arrest us but that we choose to pass over in silence for fear of breaking a social convention or upsetting the flow of social life. By conceptualizing ordinariness in this way, we seek to highlight how habitual processes of identification (for example, the ways in which we identify self and other, who poses a threat, and where we are safe) and the routine reproduction of a normative social order (the maintenance of separations, appropriate social distances, and relations of ordering) already embed an everyday right-wing politics that was spectacularly expressed on January 6. The threat from the right is not based upon a choice between two political formations—democracy or authoritarianism—but rather rests upon the very ordinary stances that people fabricate for themselves.

In this article, we reconstruct the political dispositions of the participants of the January 6 Capitol riot from New York State (NYS) by analyzing the reasons that rioters gave for their actions on that day. In the first section, we critique the tendency to analyze right-wing politics in terms of a strict universalized dichotomy between authoritarianism and democracy, and we argue for a different interpretation of political

life. We subsequently propose the concept of *antidemocratic cultures* to understand how right-wing political dispositions are fabricated through and mediated by rhetorical acts, including speech, written texts, and embodied everyday practice.[1] We then present a discussion of our research methods and dataset and discuss how they allow us to understand such political stances and practices. In the third section, we analyze the *rhetoric of participation* of NYS riot participants by reading their text messages, social media posts, and interviews with law enforcement and news media as detailed in their arrest sheets, which are criminal complaints accompanied by statements of fact and of information. The rhetoric of participation of NYS riot participants reveals how political dispositions are fashioned out of ordinary language usage and how these identities congeal in antidemocratic cultures. We analyze our findings in the last section and propose a theory of *ordinary antidemocratic cultures* to better understand right-wing politics today.

Authoritarianism and Democracy

Typically, critics of right-wing politics in the US frame their argument through an axis that runs left to right, from democracy to authoritarianism. Since the election of Trump, this authoritarian/democratic dichotomy has shaped concerns about the "erosion of democratic norms" (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2019; Brown, Gordon, and Pensky 2018), populism (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017), conspiracy theorizing and political lies (Ben-Ghiat 2020, 111), digital culture and practice (Fielitz and Thurston 2019), and disinformation (Marwick and Lewis 2017). Academic and mainstream commentators warn of growing authoritarianism in the US (Ben-Ghiat 2020). Such an approach has been common to the analysis of "the radical right" in the US since World War II (Bell [1955] 2002, see essays by Hofstadter [1955] 2002 and Lipset [1955] 2002), and it was pioneered by the publication of *The Authoritarian Personality* (*AP*, hereafter) by Theodor Adorno and his colleagues ([1950] 2019).

As Max Horkheimer ([1950] 2019, lxxii) observed in the preface to the *AP*, the "authoritarian type of man" was threatening to "replace the individualistic and democratic type prevalent in the past century and a half of our civilization." This dichotomy between the authoritarian and the democratic personality structures the *AP*. A totally administered society creates a disposition toward authoritarianism in all spheres of life, starting with the family and radiating to interpersonal and supernatural relations, and finally to political existence. Accordingly, authoritarianism became necessary to force the individual to adjust, and thus be submissive, to the needs of a

1 Our approach to rhetoric is grounded in contemporary rhetorical theory and its emphasis on non-agentic, distributed, ecological meaning-making. As Thomas Rickert (2013, 34) defines it, rhetoric is "an emergent result of environmentally situated and interactive engagements, redolent of a world that affects us, that persuades us to symbolicity."

capitalist social structure at the very moment when "technical civilization" had created a "stage of enlightenment" that would have allowed individuals "to become true subjects if the control mechanism would be superseded at any point" (Adorno et al. [1950] 2019, lxv). Although the *AP* provides a theory of subjectivity—the conformist, submissive (to the strong), domineering (to the weak), and hierarchical mode of being as a way to deal with the increasing irrationality of a totally administered society (Adorno 1974)—the logic of the explanatory framework is buttressed by the authoritarian/democratic dichotomy. Adorno and his colleagues in the Frankfurt School posited that a democratic possibility emerged for social subjects because of the post-Enlightenment triumph of reason and autonomy over the domination of religion and absolutism, only for those same subjects to be disciplined into new modes of submission in the name of rationalization and efficiency. Thus, the potential democratic subject is continuously captured by an authoritarian net.

We find much relevant to our study in the *AP*—particularly the notions of "susceptibility" and "antidemocratic potential"—but we go beyond the authoritarian/democratic distinction to shape our analysis of contemporary right-wing politics. This distinction has become the silent—and thus normative—background for critiquing right-wing politics. By not directly challenging this distinction, scholars of right-wing politics lock in a number of assumptions. First, by failing to question the authoritarian/democratic dichotomy, researchers risk naturalizing historically constituted political forms and practices. The meanings of democracy and antidemocracy are historically and relationally situated—early modern democratic practices took shape, acquired distinctive meanings, and gained particular salience in relation to absolutism. Those meanings thus emerge in the context of social struggles and are never predetermined beforehand. For example, Rydgren (2018, 23–24) characterizes "right-wing extremism" in terms of an opposition to "democracy" as such, or to "the way existing democratic institutions actually work." This characterization allows Rydgren to argue that "the radical right" (a subcategory of right-wing extremism) rejects "the pluralistic values of liberal democracy" in favor of "a general sociocultural authoritarianism." Appealing as the characterization is, it nonetheless passes over in silence liberal democracy's paradoxical relationship with heterogeneity and difference (Goldberg 1993; Scott 1996). This paradox manifests itself in the disciplinary function of pluralism to rein in and manage democratic demands for greater inclusion, recognition, and equality (Connolly 2005). For example, the discourse and practice of pluralism celebrates diversity and tolerance, but only "within settled contexts of conflict and collective action" (Connolly 1995, xiii; see also Brown 2009). This approach to pluralism seeks to contain the social struggles through which political protagonists question and transform the meanings of democracy and authoritarianism.

Second, by failing to problematize the authoritarian/democratic dichotomy, researchers operationalize a normative conception of (liberal) democracy that discursively and ideologically naturalizes its meanings. Normative meanings of democracy can reduce politics to a number of procedures and practices such as voting or the functioning of certain institutions such as parliaments (see Pateman 1970). While Jan-Werner Müller

(2021, 3–5) does not reduce the political to the procedural, he nevertheless frames the rise of "right-wing populism" and its "authoritarian-populist art of governance" in terms of "threats to democracy." Yet, this dichotomous characterization again ignores the "arts of governance" operational in the industrial factory, the household, or the prison that critics ranging from Karl Marx to Michel Foucault (as well as their intellectual heirs) have characterized as despotic or authoritarian. These despotic forms of governance have lived not only in authoritarian regimes but within the capillaries of democratic power. As such, normative understandings can disguise how antidemocratic practices operate within democracies in very normal and ordinary ways, without the need for "exceptional" measures (Mondon and Winter 2020).

Therefore, we propose the concept of *antidemocratic cultures* to analyze contemporary forms of right-wing politics. Antidemocratic cultures—like all cultural formations—are open, fluid, and always changing. Before illustrating how we use antidemocratic cultures to analyze contemporary right-wing politics, let us clarify what we do not mean by this term. In our definition of antidemocratic cultures, we are not referring to political backlashes against democracy, such as how reactionary movements counter democratic advances (Hirschman 1991). In addition, we are not talking about a theory of democratic containment by constitutions, laws, or historical amnesia, that is, measures taken to tame the disruptive and disorderly nature of democracy (Wolin 1994; see also Brown 1995; Cover 1983). It should also be noted that we do not mean, as did writers in antiquity and as do their modern heirs (Berman 2018), that democracy becomes mob rule, whereupon its unruliness overwhelms the institutions that constrain it. Democracy, in our understanding, and following Wolin (1994) and others such as Graeber (2007), Honig (1993), and Negri (1999), is agonistic and essentially disruptive. It institutes forms of social organization that sustain acts of disruption, excess, or refusal without threatening democracy's own conditions of possibility. Democracy, in this sense, is an organized disorder; it is a politics that exceeds its characterization as a form of government/governance.

Thus, by antidemocratic cultures we mean a historical phenomenon whereby democracy turns its modes of action *against* itself. In other words, the disruptive, excessive, and dissenting character of democratic practices are weaponized against the very social forms instituted to enable disruption, excess, and dissent. Antidemocratic cultures are defined by conditions in which everyday cultural practices and ordinary social interactions modify the cultural matrix that makes democratic practice possible. To be sure, January 6 was unprecedented, shocking, and extraordinary, but it only revealed the extent to which antidemocratic cultures had permeated and shaped dispositions and associated identities that were already inhabited in an ordinary, everyday fashion. We speak of antidemocratic cultures rather than politics because the issue is the possibility of democracy rather than a political choice for a form of government. In our understanding, cultures refer to modes of being and desiring, the ways a collective communicates its collectivity to self and others, and its meaning-making practices. We use this capacious sense of antidemocratic cultures—not too dissimilar from the

AP's notion of "susceptibility" to fascism—to grasp the manifestation of right-wing politics in its so-called shocking dimension (January 6 or the proliferation of extremist organizations) but also as an ordinary phenomenon that rarely makes the headlines. We thus understand antidemocratic cultures in terms of the ways that citizens fabricate their political dispositions—and hence their self-understanding as members of a community in public and intimate spaces—through a range of rhetorical, social, and aesthetic practices.

Methodology

The fabrication of dispositions and identities is accomplished through rhetorical practice (Arendt [1963] 2006; Bourdieu 1991; Butler 1997; Foucault 1972). Rhetoric, therefore, is not only representational but also contributes to the "invention . . . of cultures" (Clifford 1986, 2). Accordingly, we argue that antidemocratic cultures are shaped by rhetorical strategies that not only reflect the dispositions of the actors but constitute them as political subjects.[2] Examples of such strategies include the crafting of "formulaic" statements that create "unassailable speech" (Riley 2005); the use of clichés that foreclose the capacity for political judgment (Arendt [1963] 2006); a tendency toward paranoid and catastrophizing modes of argumentation that offer all-or-nothing solutions; the repetition of simplistic dichotomies that infantilizes communication; and appeals to an innocence that dehistoricizes the social world (see Berlant 1997). All of these rhetorical strategies of "pure persuasion" (Burke 1969) shut down deliberative engagement.[3] Antidemocratic cultures can be analyzed through these and other rhetorical strategies and networks that people use to understand themselves and to write themselves into the social world. Our argument expands on the above rhetorical strategies to offer additional rhetorical patterns that connect digital and physical spaces. We aim to move the conversation about antidemocratic participation beyond disaggregated, single-factor, demographic analyses and the fixed ideological categories created by those analyses, which have the paradoxical potential to reify the rhetoric of

2 Historians of the conservative revival of the 1950s have shown how internal migrants in Orange County and Dallas fabricated a new set of identities based on a new suburban lifestyle, the embrace of Cold War militarism, the experience of financial success due to an individualist ethos, and a belief that the free market guaranteed a new sense of empowerment. Hence, these "suburban warriors" adopted a militant attitude against anything that threatened this newly acquired sense of self—communism, civil rights, federalism, and ultimately, the very notion of equality (McGirr 2001; see also Miller 2015). From the crafting of such identities there arose deep antidemocratic values and dispositions: the suburban warriors opposed forms of equality that exceeded its formal exercise; they developed militant dispositions against collectivization, aware that their relative advantages were the product of federal spending and that its expansion would wipe out those newly acquired privileges; and they developed their own narrative of empowerment as tax-paying citizens who compete for resources and opportunities on the free market.

3 As William Duffy argues, following Kenneth Burke and Jonathan Butler, "pure persuasion is more of a *withdrawal* from rather than *engagement*" (2023, 2, emphasis in original).

the far right. Instead, we focus on relational and networked rhetorics of participation and the rhetorical ecosystems of those arrested in NYS for participating in the January 6 Capitol riot.[4] This inductive rhetorical analysis enables us to see the ways ordinary people compose their networked antidemocratic identities.[5]

New materialist theories of rhetoric are particularly helpful in understanding how rhetorical networks and pathways lead to certain kinds of rhetorical identity construction. Rather than starting with universalized and oppositional ideological categories, we trace rhetorical practices to identify pathways and networks, what we are calling *rhetorics of participation*, in order to demonstrate how January 6 participants defined their political dispositions through networked everyday rhetoric and practice. This offers a more dynamic and nuanced sense of how antidemocratic culture is constructed by ordinary citizens and focuses on the ways the social is more than a sum of its parts, and on the ways the individual cannot be reduced to totalizing categories.

This analysis can help to identify and name the ways texts, and thus their rhetorical framing and doxa, create and travel within and across discursive networks, pedagogically and performatively. In other words, when the January 6 rhetorical actors take up language such as "you're making us do this" or "nothing to see here," they are both participating in the circulation of that discourse as well as transforming and remaking it (and their own identities) as they participate in their social network. Each time these discursive pathways are networked, they are made meaningful in a new context and thus do not adhere to master categories of fixed ideology. As Bruno Latour (2005, 4–5) argues, these "assemblages" of "many connecting elements circulating inside tiny conduits" together create the social, not as a fixed object of study but as a nontotalizing network of relations comprised of what Latour calls actants.[6] We take up Latour's (2011, 800) actor-network theory, then, as a useful methodology to "redistribute and reallocate action" and agency to a network of actants who do not exist outside of the network and without whom the network does not exist. Doing so enables us to recognize how ordinary rhetoric use is constitutive, and it allows us to think outside of preexisting ideo-ontological categories like "white supremacist" or even "far right."

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4 As Wendy Hesford, Adela Licona, and Christa Teston (2018, 3) argue in *Precarious Rhetorics*, "a rhetorical approach to [dichotomous] divisions reconfigures them such that they can be understood as relational rather than simply as oppositional."

5 As Bruno Latour (2005, 11–12) argues, "in situations where . . . group boundaries are uncertain, when the range of entities to be taken into account fluctuates, the sociology of the social is no longer able to trace actors' new associations. At this point, the last thing to do would be to limit in advance the shape, size, heterogeneity, and combination of associations." He argues that we must forego imposing the kind of attractive order that "limit[s] actors to the role of informers offering cases of some well-known types," and instead that we must "follow the actors themselves" by tracing their associations to "learn from them what the collective existence has become in their hands."

6 In Latour's (2017, 7) words, "An actant can literally be anything provided it is granted to be the source of an action."

We focused on NYS because it offers multiple opportunities to challenge the traditional categories through which we understand divides in American politics today. As a so-called blue state, NYS nonetheless confounds the traditional red/blue, liberal/conservative divides. Although it is a large state with the fourth most electoral college votes, which have traditionally gone Democratic, it has strong pockets of Republican voters and significant economic and social diversity and variation. Because 6 percent of those charged hailed from NYS—70 out of 1,106 arrestees nationwide at the time of writing—it provides a significant and varied dataset. Nationwide, January 6 participants were from geographically dispersed areas, with some clustering around urban centers. According to a county-by-county study of the Capitol riot, most arrestees came from areas that generally vote Democratic in presidential elections (Pape 2022a). Antidemocratic politics is thus not simply a product of the "left behind" or rural areas of the United States: it is a spatially dispersed phenomenon that cuts across geographical scales (local, national, international), powered by new (digital) modes of community formation. NYS follows the national pattern with clusters of participants from Long Island, the lower Hudson Valley region, and western New York around Buffalo and Rochester.

We analyzed all seventy of the arrest sheets from NYS residents that were publicly accessible on the Department of Justice's website in 2023.[7] Of the Capitol rioters arrested from NYS, at the time of writing, only three were known to be affiliated with extremist organizations: two were Proud Boys members, and the third was an Oath Keeper. Despite no records of extremist membership, another arrestee made social media references to the Three Percenters. Therefore, 96 percent of those arrested were "ordinary" citizens. We mean "ordinary" in the sense that they did not belong to organized ideological groups. The majority consisted of citizens who viewed themselves as exercising their political right rather than performing as "operatives." Ordinariness, as we discuss below, is also a socially constructed ethos that is crucial to identity formation.

The January 6 arrest sheets offer substantial information about how the arrestees characterize their political dispositions and how they describe why they were at/in the Capitol. The arrest sheets contain social media posts; SMS messages to acquaintances, friends, and family; and in some cases interviews with law enforcement or the media. There are practical reasons to read from the arrest sheets. The first wave of arrests caused many January 6 participants to delete their social media accounts. Law enforcement retrieved the messages and videos. In the arrest sheets, private SMS messages of arrestees were made available since many were found because of a tip-off from a friend, coworker, or relative. Those SMS messages are valuable because they reveal an intimate or private dimension of the self-narration that is usually not displayed publicly on social media. Those messages would be inaccessible without the arrest sheets. The January

7 The site is updated as participants are identified and charges are filed. See "Capitol Breach Cases," United States Attorney's Office (District of Columbia), Department of Justice, accessed December 17, 2023, https://www.justice.gov/usao-dc/capitol-breach-cases.

6 databases, maintained by the Department of Justice (DOJ), National Public Radio (NPR), and Just Security, offer regularly updated datasets. While the NPR and Just Security sites offer extensive contextual information, such as timelines and journalistic accounts, the DOJ site focuses solely on the criminal complaints against identified participants. Taken as a whole, these written texts from DOJ files provide excerpts of self-narrative, if not ethnographic accounts, of January 6 participants. Although the databases refer to arrestees by name, in this article we omit names in order to emphasize rhetorical practices rather than individuals.

The DOJ database of arrests and charges also has limitations. The excerpts from arrestees' speech and writing have been preselected by the arrest sheet authors, typically investigating FBI agents, from all available media reporting and social media messages. And the database is constantly being updated as the government makes new arrests and files new charges, and as cases proceed through the court system. Despite these limitations, NYS, with seventy cases, offers a sizable number for rhetorical analysis. In addition, the rhetorical dispositions represented in the arrest sheets conform broadly to those cited in other studies and media reports across the political spectrum. We anticipate that a comparable analysis of the rhetoric of participants from other large states with a significant number of arrestees would yield similar insights. The significance of our study is the approach to those dispositions by analyzing their rhetorical stances rather than slating them into preexisting and ostensibly fixed ideological categories.

This study employed qualitative methods in interpreting data from arrest sheets of January 6 participants from NYS. Our research team organized the data from the arrest sheets for each person arrested in NYS according to name, reasons/justifications for participation, charges, and what led to their arrest.[8] Each arrest record was then coded by five people. As a first step, we extracted descriptive and justificatory texts from the arrest sheets, including capturing direct quotes and rhetoric from arrestees' social media posts, video captions, hashtags, and social media handles. Descriptive content consists of the choice of labels for videos and photos. Justificatory content refers to reasons for entering the Capitol and intentions once inside. This discourse was then coded by the rhetorical positioning of the arrestee using affective categories such as "bragging," "casual," and "aggressive."

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8 The authors thankfully acknowledge the dedicated support of the undergraduate students Emily King, Alex Moon, Sara Parkhurst, and Rui Zheng, who worked with us to code all of the NYS arrest sheets, and of graduate students Chuning Xie and Ryan Stears, who created layers of maps of arrestees' origins in relation to 2020 political, economic, and demographic data. The concept of the ordinary emerged throughout our discussions with the student coders and, indeed, was one of the features that most struck them. Recreating the maps of the familiar categories—such as race, party affiliation and voting preferences, and socioeconomic status—used in many studies of the January 6 Capitol breach demonstrated to us the necessity of a different analytical approach to understand and chart how anti-democratic culture finds expression.

Finally, through an inductive rhetorical analysis of the different forms of texts, patterns of more specific but ordinary rhetorical positioning emerged. These categories are: a) Sense of Community, including referencing attending with partners, friends, and family; b) Active Stance, including rhetoric of "making a stand," "making a point," "taking back" or "fighting back," and "being where the action is"; c) Passive Stance, including "you're making us do this," or "doing the country a service"; d) Ethos, including rhetorics of police as normative order, and rhetorics of patriotism, values, and social order such as those who "believe in the impossible" or those picking up trash; e) Hyperbolic Stance, including rhetoric of egocentrism, self-aggrandizement, glory, history, liberty, and excitement; f) Minimizing Stance, including a rhetoric of innocence and "nothing to see here," or bragging about not being charged; and finally g) Violent Stance, including rhetoric of violence and militancy. These rhetorical positions—some of the participants displayed multiple, overlapping stances—were then used to reconstruct the political and rhetorical networks of participation of Capitol rioters.

Our study is informed by interdisciplinary approaches including rhetorical, humanistic, and social science research developed over the last thirty years. We draw on theory that questions the relevance of approaches that posit dichotomies such as nature versus culture or individual versus society. This research instead points out the need to historicize notions such as individualization and society, and categories such as race, gender, or class (see Bauman 2001; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002; Latour 2004; Urry 2012). We aim to analyze the rhetoric of participation in order to reveal how antidemocratic cultures are built through rhetorical networks via modes of stylization and self-making (Nuttall 2004). Although we name those modes in terms of rhetorical stances as described above (and detailed more fully below), we emphasize that the terminology arises from arrestees' participatory rhetoric, which is itself a dynamic form of self-making.

The Ordinariness of January 6

Sense of Community, Active Stance, and Passive Stance

For one NYS arrestee (case 1:21-mj-644), the Capitol riot was a family affair justified through a sense of participation in community: he went to Washington, DC, with his brother, dad, and uncle, riding a bus with other protesters. He is fairly typical of the January 6 participants. He had no known extremist affiliation, understood the protests as a political and social occasion (according to our analysis of the NYS arrestees dataset, 24 percent went to DC with friends or family), is a white male, and was an avid poster on social media. However, it was his rhetoric of participation—the reasons and justifications he provided for being at the Capitol, as well as the language through which he styled his political disposition—that typifies him as an ordinary bloke. At the outset, he presents himself as a peaceful citizen who will only use violence in self-defense. But, in a video posted to Instagram (case 1:21-mj-644, 3), he declares: "Listen brothers

and sisters, we come in peace today. But I swear to God, if the Antifa touches me, or my family, I'll headbutt them in the f . . . [inaudible] bro. Straight elbow, left hook." Community identification in this example grounds both passive and active stances, and the posts demonstrate how rhetorical stances can be dynamic, shifting, and overlapping.

After the George Floyd protests in summer 2020, opponents of racial justice began justifying violence and other extralegal actions by claiming the right to self-defense against a violent and malevolent left represented by antifascists and Black Lives Matter (BLM). In contrast to "peaceful" citizens, this amorphous left, the argument goes, is attacking counterprotesters and their families. The rhetorical juxtaposition of a peaceful self and a violent left creates a militant identity. The arrestee quoted above justifies this transformation from passive to active stance and even violent participation through the rhetoric of community belonging. The peaceful self is produced as something personal and intimate ("me and my family"), whereas the left is transformed into something impersonal and destructive. Additionally, the video's addressees are "brothers and sisters," which suggests intimacy and familiarity amid an extraordinary event (preventing the election from being stolen, as he states in another video).

Ethos

Normalcy, ordinariness, and authenticity represent modes of identification within a social order, or ethos. As in the case of the participant quoted above, intimacy projects a form of earnestness about the action. It is not the motivation behind the action—the ratiocination that allows one to act deliberately (and justly)—but the authenticity or ethos of the person that counts. Because authenticity gives a sense of normalcy and ordinariness to a person (he or she embodies a normative identity), it reassures the "brothers and sisters" of the just cause. This just cause cannot be divorced from the previous summer's racial justice protests (hence the reference to "Antifa" above). As the Floyd protests made clear, the normative social order is one created by policing (Neocleous 2000). Such a social order defines who can claim a right to self-defense (Kaba 2014; Dorlin 2017), who can claim humanity (Wall 2019), and who represents threats (Goldberg 2009). These normative assumptions represent the ordinary background against which January 6 participants shape their identity. Even when they oppose the federal government, as do those in the militia movement (Belew 2018), they nonetheless believe that police *ought* to protect and assist them as the righteous embodiment of the political and social order. Invoking this ethos in another video, the same arrestee (case 1:21-mj-644, 8) discussed above presents the following narrative: "Today my group and I were key players in conducting peaceful pushes. The game plan was to talk the offices [*sic*] and tell the [*sic*] to STOP FOLLOWING ORDERS AND UPHOLD THE CONSTITUTION. . . . When they didn't listen we pushed through (without hitting them of course) we did these peaceful pushes all the way into the capital [*sic*] building." In this narrative lies a set of dispositions in relation to police officers. The speaker believes that he and his group can order police officers to stand down. The

repetition of "peaceful" betrays naive ideas about the police-protester relation—a set of beliefs that contrasts with the narratives of a terrifying ordeal presented by Capitol police officers present at the scene (Fanone and Shiffman 2022).

On the other hand, there is nothing naive about the belief that police officers should behave in a certain way. Many participants we analyzed construct their identity through the normative order of policing, so the "game plan" (talking to the officers) forms part of a structure of expectations. A *structure of expectations* is formed from routine beliefs and practices in the everyday: policing is seen as a force that creates an exclusionary order that benefits a subsection of the population.[9] As the speaker above asks police to "STOP FOLLOWING ORDERS AND UPHOLD THE CONSTITUTION," he places their actions on that day at odds with what is expected of them regularly. That is, in following orders (from a presumably malevolent force in the Democratic Party, now hijacked by the left), police officers are neglecting their everyday and ordinary duty to secure the social order. When police follow illegitimate orders, they must prepare for resistance, as the transcript of a video (posted to social media, and available in the arrest sheet) of the abovementioned arrestee makes clear: "Peep my war cry at the end as we push through this riot team *after* they didn't listen to us" (case 1:21-mj-644, 9, our emphasis). Again, the "after" shows a clear structure of expectations and the thinking that underpins the encounter with police. A Black Lives Matter protester demanding that a police line part would put a serious strain on the imagination.

Although the dominant image of January 6 shows protesters battling police, we emphasize policing as a normative order and as a more salient characteristic of antidemocratic cultures. In one video from the body cam of a Washington, DC, Metropolitan Police Department officer, the same arrestee (case 1:21-mj-644, 18) is heard shouting, "We're on the same team." This rhetoric, or a version of it, can be read in the transcribed videos included in the arrest sheets of a number of riot participants. That Capitol police officers did not simply let them through seemed to enrage several rioters. For example, another NYS participant (case 1:21-cr-208, 2) is captured on police officers' body cams yelling, "You fucking piece of shit. You fucking commie motherfuckers, man. . . . Come on, take your shit off. Take your shit off." This explains

9 The police, according to this narrative, ought to naturally side with those who are defending the Constitution and exercising their rights as Americans. In right-wing politics, the "law enforcement" function of the police takes a rather amorphous definition. The police are not supposed to uphold the laws created by a parliament through representative democratic politics; rather, policing serves a higher function. Its goal is to uphold the true law of the land, namely the constitutional rights bestowed to the legitimate and sovereign people. Therefore, only those that the practice of policing confirms (through its differential treatment of the population) as the legitimate and sovereign people belong to the normative social order. This explains the expectations that the political right has of the police: cops should respect that higher law rather than democratically created legal orders, however exclusionary such laws may be. Terms such as "law enforcement" and "law and order," because they are created on the terrain of social struggles, have different meanings to different political actors, ranging from everyday antidemocratic beliefs to the extreme ones of far-right militias such as the Oath Keepers.

the apparently contradictory images from the Capitol: a mass of "thin blue line" or "blue lives matter" flags coupled with the violent battles against the line of police officers. Yet, there is nothing contradictory in the assault on police officers: their motto is to "serve and protect," but who police really serve and protect reflects the structure of expectations that triggers the violence. And yet another arrestee (case 1:21-cr-193, 4) yells to a capitol police officer in one of his videos, "You serve this country. Are you even proud of yourself? Are you guys even proud of yourselves? Who are you serving: Who are you guys serving? We are the people! Why are you not protecting us? . . . This is a communist act right here." When this expectation is not met, police become "commie motherfuckers" or unpatriotic. Hence, patriotism is understood as staunch belief and commitment to a certain kind of normative social order. We can also note the use of "you guys," which denotes a familiarity with police officers, one that speaks to a "one of us" worldview that knows who is (and is not) encompassed in the normative order. The structure of expectations around policing is central, in that case, to the formation of political identity. It forms a core component of the crafting of antidemocratic cultures.

Hyperbolic Stance

Beyond the rhetoric of police as normative order and ethos, hyperbole, often in terms of self-aggrandizement, was also a common rhetorical pathway in the rhetorical network through which riot participants framed and constructed their identity. Take, for example, the rhetoric contained in the transcript of a conversation with family members recorded by one participant. After going through a series of justifications about why the Capitol had to be stormed, he declares: "There needs to be the right hearings, a special counsel, something has to be done and today was a huge step toward it." He declares in conclusion, "That's just a brief f****** story of what happened. We'll tell the full thing tomorrow, but it was epic as f***, today was epic" (case 1:21-mj-644, 25). The notion of an "epic" day was a common rhetorical strategy among a number of participants (one in five of our sample). Hyperbole and ordinariness intersect in these comments. The self-aggrandizement and hyperbolic statements serve to project an idealized notion of democratic participation: one that is based on participation and spectacle but where consequences become unimaginable.

The hyperbolic stance also reflects participants' sense of meaningful belonging in something bigger than themselves, the chance as an ordinary person to partake in something extraordinary. As another participant (case 1:22-cr-82, 4, figure 3) told a poster on his Instagram account (included as screenshots in the arrest sheets), "[M]y story is better than anything Netflix is putting out so enjoy the show!" When asked what he was doing at the Capitol, the reply was matter-of-fact: "Participating in Government." When told that there would be consequences, he seemed blasé about the fact that the authorities could take action against those who stormed the Capitol: "Lol they can come and get me; I didn't break or vandalize." Similarly, another participant (case 1:21-mj-84, 6–7) posted a selfie with the caption "Outside Pelosi's office," followed by the

tongue-in-cheek comment, "Nothing to see here." In the words of yet another rioter (case 1:21-cr-83, 9), "We took the Capitol and it was glorious." That characterization reflects affective stances not captured by categories such as violent extremism. It evokes joyful participation, honor, and a deep sense of purpose as opposed to anger and hate or a fixed ideology. The Facebook post of still another (case 1:21-mj-128, 10) read, "This will be the most historic event of my life." The fact that riot participants were actively communicating a sense of impunity in the heat of the moment shows the extent to which antidemocratic culture—demonstrated by political practice without accountability—is embedded in ordinariness and how this culture manifested itself within the extraordinary event of January 6. This sense of impunity reveals the presence of an everyday right-wing politics that is all the more imperceptible to ideological analysis because it appears so ordinary. The ordinariness of antidemocratic cultures means that sociopolitical practices that express themselves in a joyful and purposeful sense of self and community go unrecognized by categories of analysis that foreground hate.

Many commentaries about the Capitol riot so far have accentuated the historic and extraordinary nature of the events. This is reflected above in the rhetoric of self-aggrandizement, namely in the idea that this is a uniquely historic and glorious event. On its own the rhetoric of self-aggrandizement could reassert a (liberal) discourse that the country wavered in the two months after the 2020 elections, but that the institutions proved to be resilient enough to put the nation back on its righteous path (Bowden and Teague 2022). However, as Cedric Robinson (2019, 152) once argued in relation to the historiography of fascism, an "exemplary" narrative portrays liberal democracies as the rescuer of the West from its moment of weakness. Such a narrative tends to occlude the fact that "militarism, imperialism, racialist authoritarianism, choreographed mob violence, millenarian crypto-Christian mysticism, and a nostalgic nationalism" were not an "aberration" but central to the formation of "the West" (see also Césaire [1955] 2000; Du Bois [1947] 2007; and Padmore 1936). As such, we caution that the rhetoric of self-aggrandizement, and hence the so-called extraordinariness of January 6, needs to be read within a context of normality and ordinariness.

Minimizing Stance

The ordinary is also reflected in forms of what we call the rhetoric of minimization, typically enunciated through claims of innocence, which plague the justificatory strategies of January 6 participants. This form of innocence was later popularized by Tucker Carlson and other self-styled right-wing figures who have described the Capitol riot as no more than a tourist trip by "sightseers." Yet, it was already there in the rhetoric of the participants. For example, one arrestee (case 1:21-mj-38, 5) told the FBI that he considered his time in the Capitol as a "little adventure." The sense of innocence is also reinforced when participants express (in their social media posts included as transcripts in the arrest sheets) that they committed no offense, that authorities "can come and get

me, I didn't steal anything" (case 1:22-cr-82, 4, figure 4), that "I didn't touch anything" (case 1:21-cr-652, 4), and that "I simply walked into the lobby of the capital [*sic*]" (case 1:21-cr-56, 7). One of the participants we cite above (case 1:21-mj-644, 13) was even more certain of his innocence: "Ill [*sic*] also talk about how I got out of it with NO CHARGES and nothing on my record and got out of DC without being in a jail cell." Others, of a more conspiracist bent, were in denial over what happened, asserting that this was the work of "antifa" (case 1:21-cr-652, 4) or that it was a "false flag" operation (case 1:21-cr-418, 4, figure 2). Conspiracy thinking is a form of political agency (Dean 2009), a way to explain and divide the world, according to which there are those who commit crimes and those who are righteous, and thus innocent of wrongdoing. Within this framework of innocence and minimization, the Capitol riot does not appear as extraordinary but instead as the most ordinary thing to do.

If the rioters at the Capitol assume that they can act *without consequences*, it is because, we argue, January 6 participants have crafted a political disposition they understand as innocent. Belief in the normative order created by policing ("we are on the same team") can only operate through a certain distancing from history and politics. A naive unawareness of policing's history of violence is central to the fabrication of a political stance—what is at times clunkily called privilege—that sees the social order as necessarily just. Innocence as a form of rhetorical minimization therefore refers to a state of sheltered existence that is separate from the world of social antagonisms and struggles. It is the existence made possible, but yet untroubled, by violence, policing, and exploitation. Any attempts to politicize the innocent life—by historicizing and criticizing its conditions of possibility—appear perverse and unreasonable (Dorfman and Mattelart [1971] 1975). Yet, democracy depends on the politicization of social conditions: it is the process through which normality and everydayness are made matters of public concern. Democracy also requires dissent, and hence a critique of what is taken to be the facticity of the social world. So, *ordinary innocence* must always keep democracy at arm's length because accepting politicization and dissent would destroy the very conditions of possibility for the innocent life. It is this sense of keeping democracy at a distance in the everyday that makes storming the Capitol not an extraordinary event but the most normal thing that can be done. It explains rioters' feeling that they "did nothing wrong."

To be sure, there is a certain hubris, a blending of minimization and hyperbole, to storming the Capitol and declaring that we "did nothing wrong." This hubristic aspect can be understood, we argue, as an active rhetorical stance. A significant number of NYS January 6 participants (close to a third: twenty-two of the seventy), use the active voice—language that borders on a militant disposition—to justify their presence inside the Capitol. But even in this case, the use of the active voice and the sense of militancy only reinforce the idea of ordinariness within an extraordinary event. For some, the active voice is extremely vague, even as it justifies the events of the day. One participant (case 1:21-mj-33, 3), for example, declares in a video narrative that "[w]e did what we needed to do. We made our point . . . and we got out." Another (case 1:21-cr-

338, 7) confessed to FBI agents that he "wanted to be where the action was." A third went inside the Capitol with his mother. They were found because they had stolen two "emergency escape hoods" (they come in a sealed bag with a high-visibility strip) from the building. In his interview with the FBI, this participant (case 1:21-cr-722, 8) says, "I think everybody was going there for about the same reason I was, just to have your voice heard." There is something pathetic about the banality of the reason compared to what is seen as a historic event. The active stance—to be where the action was or to have one's voice heard—in sharp contrast with the innocent disposition that we discussed above highlights how the ordinary aspect of political identity formation is reflected in such banality.

Violent Stance

A similar ordinariness is also reflected in one female participant's (those cited above are male) almost comical narrative of storming the Capitol with her brother. Here banality sits comfortably with a clichéd violence and militancy. On January 5, this participant (case 1:22-mj-226, 5), who operates a dude ranch in upstate New York, asked on Facebook: "Does anyone have friends near Washington DC where I could keep my horses for a night?" When she entered the Capitol, she posted a series of Tik Tok videos with hashtags such as "cowgirls for Trump" and "rise up." Her captions on the videos read "We will not be silent" and "Still stormed the Capitol," followed by a later Facebook post: "It is better to die fighting for freedom then [*sic*] to live as a slave. It is better to die a prisoner fighting for what is right then [*sic*] to die a follower of the enslaver" (6). In her interview with the FBI, she says that she stormed the Capitol simply because the door was open and there was no law enforcement preventing her from entering. In one of the videos filmed outside, she is heard telling her brother: "go ahead, . . . twirl." She also posted a video accompanied by the following audio narration: "What the media doesn't want to show. . . . Picking trash inside the Capitol after two trash cans were tipped over. And yes, this was moments after the storming of the Capitol." Striking in all this is the militant rhetoric—"die fighting for freedom," "we will not be silent"—coupled with a nonchalance about the trip.

In what way did this participant understand herself as being silenced? In many ways, she embodied a normative social order, one that has made a place for her to the extent that she does not need to think outside of it, or consider whether others are excluded. She planned to have her horses with her, which displays an incapacity to think and a lack of imagination about what was supposed to happen at a large-scale protest against the outcome of elections (e.g., protests against the Bush elections in 2001 and 2005 were accompanied by mass arrests). Moreover, while she acknowledges the act of "storming the Capitol," the fact that she states that she entered the building because the door was open betrays certain thoughtless assumptions about what one is entitled to do. Moreover, she displays an awareness of the audience watching ("what the media doesn't want to show"), and hence of the need to show that the storming of the

Capitol remained a civil event conducted by people who believe in decorum (a sense of bourgeois normativity) because she (and therefore the crowd itself) is picking up trash. It is through this combination of the rhetorical stances of militancy and innocence, and other strategies of minimization, that the January 6 riot appears both extraordinary and normal.

The juxtaposition of the rhetorical pathways of violence and minimization thus becomes a powerful dimension of identity formation across the rhetorical network. This pattern is repeated in several NYS January 6 participants. Another female participant (case 1:21-cr-652, 4), for example, stated on Facebook: "I was inside but I have video of all the time I was in there. I didn't touch or break anything, *but* [our emphasis] I got video of Trump supporters stopping antifa from breaking stuff. We are the news now. I AM A CITIZEN JOURNALIST and I have a duty to my general and POTUS to be there to capture the truth. If I go to jail, I GO WITH PRIDE." She also states that she was there in support of "taking back America." Here, the "but" juxtaposes militancy and innocence: Yes, we did something unlawful (and we want to overthrow an election), "but" we did it in a civil way. I go to jail with "pride" because we ultimately stood up for what is true about America. We are essentially civil and orderly ("didn't break anything"), and we are not going to stand by while the country's normative order is rendered alien to us. The emphasis on not breaking things is made in contrast with the 2020 George Floyd protests, which saw acts of civil disobedience and a rebellion against the normative order fabricated by police. In this participant's discourse of minimization, there is always the unspoken presence of the racial justice protests—as if the actions of January 6 are rendered legitimate when contrasted with the previous summer's unrest.

Conclusion: Antidemocratic Cultures

To many participants, the January 6 Capitol riot represents both an extraordinary event and the most ordinary thing that could happen. In our argument, the key to understanding contemporary politics and the rhetorical network that fed the Capitol riot lies in explaining what appears to be the contradictory coexistence of the extraordinary with ordinariness. Why did January 6 appear at once "epic," "historic," or "better than Netflix," and simultaneously as a "little adventure" or as something that one can get away with ("Nothing to see here")? What kind of political identity formations and rhetorical stances sustain a belief that police officers at the Capitol should get out of the way of protesters, or that they should obey the orders of people who are trying to illegally occupy the legislative chambers? Equally, what kind of rhetorical networks form the social practices that shape such political identities? And, from what kind of social order and rhetorico-cultural formation do such practices emerge that make January 6 appear as an ordinary act in the eyes of the participants? Such questions, we argue, are better understood through a notion of antidemocratic cultures shaped through decentralized rhetorical networks than through the authoritarian/democratic logic.

As we have shown, the majority of January 6 participants do not understand themselves as authoritarians or white supremacists but rather as defenders of the social order, freedom fighters, ordinary citizens carrying out a civic duty, or, more banally, as adventurers or curiosity seekers. They did not march on the Capitol to choose a new form of government (authoritarianism) over democracy. Many believed that they were defending democracy when they stormed the Capitol to prevent the legislators from certifying what they believed was a rigged election. Yet, what they were defending was at best an abstraction: January 6 participants were more intent on defending an everyday culture, as represented by the rhetorical stances that we analyzed, displaying profound antidemocratic commitments and dispositions. Protesters' adherence to narratives of election irregularities follows from the expectation that President Trump represents a normative culture. Moving beyond the authoritarian/democratic logic, we argue that the dispositions underlying participants' everyday social practices form part of their rhetoric of participation. The rhetoric of self-defense is a disposition whose condition of possibility is one's relation to a normative and exclusionary social order. The rhetoric of minimization reveals how one relates to the social order, namely, belonging is defined by who can be presumed innocent and who is presumed guilty. Similarly, the rhetoric of violence and militancy reveals a disposition fashioned by an ordinary understanding of who can justly "fight for freedom," claim "self-defense," and oppose the government. In this way, this article contributes significantly to new materialist rhetorical theory, especially of social movements and the public sphere, because it demonstrates the everyday nature of the ways in which these citizens construct antidemocratic culture outside of oppositional categories and spectacular events.

Latour's rhetorical actor-network theory, utilized here, offers a methodology that deconstructs binaries and operates through the dispersed agentic frames of rhetorical positioning identified above. In other words, the analysis of the January 6 rhetorical network as an amorphous social movement enables us to identify antidemocratic cultures as an ecology of various participants and nodes of action that, through participation in these rhetorical networks, creates a social identity that is constantly becoming or being created. Such rhetoric is constitutive of political identities and social practices because they are fundamental to shaping self and belonging. As a result, practices of identification are always contrasted with the identities of those deemed illegitimate by a normative social order. The rhetoric of militancy, for instance, contrasts with the modes of identification (the demands, the history of fighting for justice, the call for multiracial solidarity) central to Black Lives Matter. The contemporary right-wing rhetoric of "taking the country back," "upholding the Constitution," and "dying for freedom" actively contests the place of Black (and multiracial) struggles in US history. Similarly, the struggle for racial and economic justice appears as utterly alien to the social order as communism. To be sure, the purported foreignness of communism and racial justice has a long history in right-wing politics (Del Visco 2019; see also Horne 2021). In some strands of right-wing discourse, the poor and racial others have often been viewed as vulnerable to radical ideas because of the nefarious propaganda

of communists (who themselves infiltrate from outside the US). However, for some contemporary political extremists, Barack Obama's presidency, especially its rhetoricity and symbolic dimension (Lowndes 2013), appeared to confirm a radical demographic and cultural change to such an extent that the US social order itself had become foreign. Militancy is therefore presented as a mode of identification against an alien reality that by right belongs to "ordinary" Americans.

The perceived transformation of the social order into an alien reality lies at the center of what we have called antidemocratic cultures. As multiple theorists have noted, we are witnessing the denial of a common reality and loss of a shared world (Adorno et al. [1950] 2019, 665; Arendt [1963] 2006; Mbembe 2013, 258). Those who deny reality are often said to have been manipulated or exposed to propaganda, so they hold false or mistaken beliefs about the world. Such hypotheses often presume a certain passivity on the part of those who are manipulated. However, in our understanding, to deny a common reality is to actively make oneself untouched and unpersuaded by the actual world through a set of social practices. The rhetorical stances and networks that we discuss above constitute the person's self-fashioning as ordinary, peaceful, civil, and authentic—we picked up the trash and did not break or steal anything, so ostensibly we are unlike BLM protesters. Such rhetoric forms part of a set of social practices and rituals whose goal is to contrast a normative social order against an alien reality. For example, the ritual identification with police rests on the fact that policing is seen as a form of governance that defends the normative social order inhabited by ordinary and authentic folks. That such defense costs municipalities heavily or depends on unconstitutional practices (e.g., suspicionless and discriminatory surveillance, stop and frisk) and on everyday police violence is the fact that must be kept at bay.[10] The rhetorical ecosystem in which participants in the Capitol riot function works to keep them innocent of these facts. If such violence and economic costs form part of "our" shared reality in the US, it is this reality that must be denied on a continuous basis by the politics that work to excuse or dismiss the riot. Ordinariness and authenticity form a moat around these fabricated identities, safeguarding them against the encroachment

10 Municipalities across the country spend close to 50 percent of their budgets on policing. Furthermore, it is estimated that between 2015 and 2019, the twenty largest police departments have cost cities more than $2 billion in civilian compensation for police misconduct (Ray 2021). Plus, one study points out that cities have increasingly resorted to issuing "police brutality bonds" to cover the cost of civilian payouts. The study found that between 2010 and 2017, the city of Chicago issued bonds totaling $709.3 million with an additional $860 million paid as interest to investors who purchased the bonds, costing taxpayers a total of $1.57 billion. Across five cities and counties, police brutality bonds cost taxpayers $1.73 billion (see Goodwin, Shepard, and Sloan 2020). Unconstitutional practices such as search and seizures are often "invisible to the courts" because they do not result in arrest, charge, or citation (Harcourt 2004, 363). Following lawsuits challenging the mass surveillance of Muslims by the New York Police Department, such surveillance was found to be discriminatory; the lawsuits were settled on the basis that the NYPD would reform a variety of investigative practices such as the use of undercover and confidential informants (ACLU 2017).

of "public secrets" about policing and democracy at large (Taussig 2006, 166; see also Goldberg 2012).

Alienated from the actual world, one can take refuge in this alienation by styling oneself as someone who resists assaults on what one knows and feels to be normative. As many January 6 participants showed, they desired to be seen as ordinary folks who do not possess an agenda or an ideology (unlike the enemies on the left) and who simply want things to be the way they ought to be. Trump's slogan "Make America Great Again" simply tapped into an existing desire for an ordinary life in a just and fair social order. Nevertheless, this desire could only be fashioned because politics and policy conjured justice and fairness for the ordinary citizen out of social exclusion and an economy of violence toward those marked as unbelonging and undeserving. The MAGA slogan was never simply about nostalgic desires for the restoration of a golden age. Rather, it opened a political space for people to create and participate in a movement that asserts the existence of a normative social order that respects ordinary folks (and that does not label them as deplorables or racists). It opened a field of practices—and participation in politics—between the fiction of a normative social order that is just and the facticity of the actual world. Right-wing political identities gain practical expression in the gap between this phantom world where one is innocent and an ordinary person, and the actual world of social struggles and democratic ruptures.

When a common reality is denied, the very rhetorical practices that constitute democracy become destructive. Agonistic practices, such as deliberation and persuasion, through which the demos constitutes itself, devolve into rhetorical fallacies and opinionated shouting matches for the purpose of "owning" and "destroying" the enemy. These prefabricated opinions are deployed to protect one's identity and preferred social order against the encroaching alien reality. Public space, which is constituted to *publicize* and thus contest that which is considered normative, becomes a place where normativity is celebrated. Thus, public space is made hostile to the condition of possibility of democracy, namely heterogeneity. When the arrestees claim a right to self-defense against an amorphous and impersonal Antifa or BLM, or more recently against "groomers," it is not a stretch of the imagination to argue that behind this claim lies a desire to rid public space of its capacity to publicize and politicize democratic claims for justice and equality. Researchers have documented how the Proud Boys normalized violence as an ordinary social practice by making self-defense their strategic claim (Campbell 2022). By understanding such practices as part of the development of dynamic antidemocratic cultures, we have sought to highlight the very ordinariness of January 6 to riot participants as the most normal thing that could happen despite its place as an extraordinary and shocking event in our imagination.

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ARTICLE

Stuart Hall's Relational Political Sociology

A Heuristic for Right-Wing Studies

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Abstract: *Since 2016, there has been a flood of research on the US right spanning disciplines and methodologies. This article theorizes a conceptual heuristic drawn from the writing of Stuart Hall to integrate this scholarship. To make the case for what I term Hall's political sociology, I stage a dialogue with Arlie Hochschild, whose 2016 ethnography* Strangers in Their Own Land *has become a classic in the literature. While both Hall and Hochschild stress the importance of documenting the affective nature of political subjectivities, Hochschild's investment in a politics of reconciliation prevents her from scaling analysis up to political elites, a move that would enable her to better contextualize her findings. Hall offers a model for such an approach, as he connects* political subjectivities *to acts of* articulation*; these acts to* hegemonic projects*; and the impact of such projects to the* conjuncture. *I stylize Hall's four-step conceptual frame as a relational cycle because it reconnects the historicizing work of conjunctural analysis to the felt experience of individual subjectivities. Beyond outlining Hall's political sociology, I illustrate how its use as a heuristic can integrate recent research on the US right. This scheme corrects for an analytic shortcoming driven by Hochschild's politics of reconciliation, namely a view that political progress will emerge from small-scale, cross-partisan dialogue. Though Hall offers no easy answers to the political questions of our time, his relational political sociology provides a tool for interlacing the research we have, thus rendering the massive challenges of the moment visible in all their detail.*

Keywords: Stuart Hall, Arlie Hochschild, right-wing studies, articulation, hegemonic project, conjuncture, political subjectivity

Upon its September 2016 publication, Arlie Hochschild's *Strangers in Their Own Land* was often compared with J. D. Vance's memoir *Hillbilly Elegy* (2016) by the popular press. The two were positioned as windows onto a neglected social world having its "moment," as a journalist in the *Washington Post* put it (Lozada 2016). Moments, of course, are not meant to last—but the election of Donald Trump that November transformed the significance of Hochschild's ethnographic account of white Tea Party supporters living in Louisiana. Instead of merely serving as an empathetic tour of right-

wing curiosities, its analysis was treated as a map for unsettled times. The importance imparted to *Strangers* by the 2016 election lives on, driven in no small part by the zeal of politicians who amplify and elaborate the tendencies Hochschild studied—a cast that now includes Vance, a Republican US senator elected in 2022.

For a work of sociology, *Strangers* had an immense popular impact—it was shortlisted for a National Book Award and quickly reissued in paperback—but it was also highly influential within the academy. Not to take anything away from its insights, but the academic standing of *Strangers* benefited from the state of US sociological research in 2016, which was weighted heavily toward studies of the left, important exceptions aside (notably work by Kathleen Blee, Amy Binder, Theda Skocpol, and Vanessa Williamson). Since Trump's election, research on the US right has taken off, both in sociology and beyond. A major component of this agenda is the study of public opinion to probe the motivations behind right-wing voters (Bonikowski, Feinstein, and Bock 2021). A more qualitative and theory-minded thread—and one where sociology is less crowded by other disciplines—has studied the right's uses of populism (Tuğal 2021), while a historical perspective has undercut any naive sense that the politics of the moment are unprecedented (Hemmer 2022). Because of these efforts, we can see through and beyond the spectacular brutality of an event like the insurrection of January 6, 2021. Research on support for political violence (Kalmoe and Mason 2022) and the impassioned fusion of Christianity, nationalism, and racism (Gorski and Perry 2022) renders the fatal energy of that day sociologically comprehensible.

For good reason, Hochschild's account is a classic in this growing literature—her analysis of the "deep story" motivating Louisiana Tea Party supporters provides an accessible and concise portrait of the political subjectivity of right-wing Americans. The Southerners populating *Strangers* imagine themselves playing by the rules and working hard as they patiently wait for the reward of a good life, a dream constantly deferred as "line cutters" cheat their way ahead. These line cutters are enabled by the state, engendering a resentment that draws her subjects toward the party that maligns the government as ineffective, or worse, the enemy. As in her magnificently influential earlier work (Hochschild 1983), *Strangers* highlights the emotional foundation of wider social currents, an insight supported by mountains of studies into status threat and resentment within the GOP's white base (e.g., Mutz 2018). By narrating this deep story, *Strangers* aims to foster mutual understanding across the partisan "empathy wall" dividing the US—in this way, the politics of the book is a politics of reconciliation. But this approach is undercut by an analytic shortcoming, namely a failure to explore whether the deep story has an author among political elites uninterested in reconciliation. Such a question necessitates a broader political sociology than what Hochschild offers, one that theorizes up from political subjectivities to the political projects that shape subjectivities, projects that operate under historical constraints and in competition.

In this article, I propose such a theoretical approach, one that carries Hochschild's sensitive insights into a wider frame. To do so, I draw from Stuart Hall's analyses of Thatcherism and from his jointly authored book, *Policing the Crisis* (1978). Crafting a

political sociology from Hall's writing generates a conceptual tool kit that builds on the strengths of *Strangers* and addresses its shortcomings. By calling this Hall's *political* sociology, I mean to emphasize that I am interested in what we can learn from Hall to understand struggles over democratic processes. By calling it a political *sociology*, I stress how Hall's approach "expands the field of view" past "formal institutions and acts of governing" (Clemens 2016, 1). That being the case, as a heuristic it aims to integrate research cloistered within a range of established disciplines, not just sociology. This feature helps distinguish my contribution from Hall's massive influence, under the banner of cultural studies, on political analysis in the UK. Though Gilbert (2019, 6) characterizes cultural studies as "a species of political sociology," he qualifies that it is one marked by "an analytical emphasis on the study of semiotic practices and a heavy bias towards qualitative modes of analysis." In contrast, the political sociology I construct from Hall's work is methodologically capacious—a necessity for organizing and uniting the diversity of social scientific research on the US right into a field of right-wing studies.[1]

The right has grabbed scholarly attention well beyond the US, but because Hall's thought is generally neglected by American social scientists, my narrow focus is an opportunity to shed new light on this national case. Hall's work also has the advantage of resonating with Hochschild. On the surface, the two may seem like an unlikely pair. They are separated by national context, and while Hochschild is as good a candidate as any for living legend status in US sociology, the late Hall has not yet received the field's "disciplinary sainthood" (Hunter 2018, 30). Beneath these surface differences, their intellectual affinities run deep—both sought to highlight the social role of emotions, with Hall, especially later in life, emphasizing a psychoanalytic perspective. In their different ways, both extended Marxism—Hall (2021) detailed the importance and autonomy of the superstructure, while Hochschild (2012) specified the emotional impacts of labor processes and industries that arose in the late twentieth century.

In *Strangers*, this interest appears in the form of industrial polluters who mar the land and waterways of "Cancer Alley"—the commodification of nature run amok. Her story is not one of willful ignorance: her subjects mourn the destruction and carcinomas pollution has wrought, but they refuse to consider the state as an avenue that could remedy their situation. This is the paradox Hochschild addresses, what she calls her "keyhole issue" (11). The brilliance of her analysis is its use of an emotional logic—as opposed to a *logical* logic—to explain her subjects' acquiescence to environmental ruin. As she notes, Thomas Frank's (2004) *What's the Matter with Kansas?* inspired her project, but instead of emphasizing Frank's bait-and-switch—the GOP lacing cultural red meat with free-market policies—Hochschild identifies the real emotional rewards

1 This is not to suggest the concepts I am outlining could only be applied to the US right. They could be applied to other contexts and political movements, but my aim here is to demonstrate how they are well suited to integrating the emerging field of US right-wing studies.

such cultural politics deliver. Hers is an account of affective displacement, with the scars of pollution soothed by the balm of self-righteousness.

Hall, too, embraced the importance of political subjectivities, but in *Policing the Crisis*, he and his coauthors show how subjectivities are organized by political actors—what he terms *articulation*, as in the speaking-into-being of a worldview through the linking of interests and identities. The concept of articulation begins the upward elaboration missing in Hochschild. In polemical essays, Hall would go on to describe the strategic content of Tory articulation in the 1980s as "authoritarian populism" ([1980] 2021, 150), a term that characterized the *hegemonic project* of Thatcherism. Building on the work of Gramsci, Hall argued such a project aimed to inflect common sense to serve Thatcherism's political aims. But Hall did not view politicians as omnipotent puppet masters injecting ideology into the heads of unwitting Britons; instead, their hegemonic projects were limited by the broader *conjuncture*—Hall's adopted term for the messy and cross-cutting dynamics of the cultural, political, and economic. When a hegemonic project was successful, as neoliberalism eventually became, it could influence the conjuncture by rerouting the political. Hall's insistence on the periodizing work of conjunctural analysis was an effort to bend the stick against teleological Marxism, wherein the march to capitalism and its demise was a straight line driven by the economic. But keeping with Marxism, Hall's interest in the intersection of the cultural, political, and economic was focused on crises and instability, namely places where the logic of one plane got caught in the gears of another—for example, the ideological celebration of freedom *culturally* propels neoliberalism, but freedom is incompatible with the *material* precarity that neoliberalism as an economic formation entails. Such contradictions generate anxiety felt on the ground, a feeling that can be organized and articulated into a subjectivity that serves a hegemonic project.

In this way, Hall's political sociology can be *schematized as a relational cycle* where political subjectivities are shaped by articulation; articulation can scale up into larger hegemonic projects; such projects, over time, can shape the conjuncture; and the conjuncture enflames (or soothes) the subjectivities of individuals, making them ripe for acts of articulation. Hall did not characterize his political sociology as such; instead, my theory building here draws on a range of his polemical and theoretical writing and is informed by critical evaluations of his work. What Hall once wrote about ideology could also be said of theory: "Much murky water has flowed under the bridge provided by this concept" ([1981] 2021, 100). My aim is not to author a "singular logically integrated causal explanation" (Calhoun 1995, 5) but instead a "[web] of concepts that aim at representing their subject area" (Fuhse 2022, 100). In this vein, my ordering of the concepts is not meant to imply a causal chain but rather a heuristic for integrating research at one stage of the cycle with research at other stages. Clearly, the elegance and intimacy of Hochschild's approach is muddied by Hall—where Hochschild's analysis points to empathy as the solution to partisan animosity, Hall emphasizes the complexity of the world. But at the cost of elegance, we gain a frame for unifying the diverse field of right-wing studies, which is presently divided by the familiar insularities of disciplines

and methods. As a result, while Hall insists on complexity, his four concepts provide a means to tame that complexity.

To begin, I explain how *Strangers* portrays its subjects' political subjectivities through the deep story, a heuristic that clarifies the affective investments that propel individuals toward politics. Hochschild's account of the right's deep story is well known, but she also describes a left deep story, a move that underscores her commitment to a politics of reconciliation. However, while Hochschild stresses the value of cross-partisan dialogue, *Strangers* implicitly suggests that a compromise between the right and left would be problematic. Further, I argue Hochschild's analysis of the left deep story does not capture the fractured nature of the Democratic bloc. Understanding why the right is more unified than the left requires periodizing deep stories, a move that entails studying how political elites articulate subjectivities into political subjectivities. At this point, I transition to explicating Hall's political sociology. To stress the relational nature of his concepts, I present four sections focused on the movement between concepts: political subjectivity / articulation, articulation / hegemonic project, hegemonic project / conjuncture, and conjuncture / political subjectivity. In each, I discuss how the concepts are deployed by Hall while also showing their capacity for capturing, integrating, and elaborating on recent US contributions. Given my criticism of Hochschild's politics of reconciliation, I end by characterizing Hall's approach as implying a hegemonic politics. Though this is a much taller task than Hochschild's call for dialogue, it embraces the world with as rich an understanding as social science can produce.

Strangers and Its Politics of Reconciliation

In the preface to *Strangers*, Hochschild roots her "big departure" (xi) to political sociology in previous work on questions of family and labor, research that led her "to believe strongly in paid parental leave for working parents" (x). Such a policy is common across the industrialized world but not, she stresses, in the US. In her view, this policy failure stems from a political failure, as the worldview of those on the right is fervently antigovernment and thus hostile to paid leave. To understand this hostility in general, Hochschild strategically shifts her focus from paid leave to the environment. In Louisiana, where sinkholes swallow homes and cancer rates are sky high, the case for government intervention is irresistible. So why does the state, year after year, vote red?

During her time in the south, Hochschild meets white Republicans like Mike Schaff, who had to evacuate his home after Texas Brine collapsed a cavern in an underground salt reserve used to store chemicals like ethylene dichloride. As Hochschild learns, Mike's politics are not anchored by the trauma of his experience as an industrial refugee but in resentment at government redistribution he feels is unjust. The same goes for the Republican diehard Janice Areno, whose sister was debilitated by exposure to phosgene while working for Olin Chemical. Though Democrats push for greater industrial oversight, Janice has three shelves stuffed with decorative elephants—"You can tell I'm a Republican," she tells Hochschild as they inspect the partisan herd (153).

Hochschild's analysis wrangles five years of this ethnographic research into a portrait of her subjects' shared political subjectivity, what she terms their deep story—"a story that *feels as if* it were true" (16, original emphasis). In an oft-cited passage (130), she narrates this deep story as the experience of waiting in line. Her subjects are patient and follow the rules—working hard and living a life within their means. But as they endure the wait, her subjects notice something in the distance, people cutting in:

> As they cut in, it feels like you are being moved back. How can they just do that? Who are they? Some are black. Through affirmative action plans, pushed by the federal government, they are being given preference for places in colleges and universities, apprenticeships, jobs, welfare payments, and free lunches, and they hold a certain secret place in people's minds, as we see below. Women, immigrants, refugees, public sector workers—where will it end?

In a prescient later chapter, Hochschild documents the compatibility of this deep story with the political style of then-candidate Trump. Recounting an ecstatic campaign rally staged in an airport hangar, Hochschild argues that Trump's appeal is that his bigotry fingers the line cutters for what her subjects feel them to be, while his business success symbolizes the wealth and success they aspire to. Their deep story values the end of the line—the American dream, something Trump loudly claims he has—leaving scorn for those who get in the way.

The deep story is the most important contribution of *Strangers*—a heuristic for understanding political subjectivities that escapes the temptation to explain political mobilization as purely rational or ideological. By shifting to an emotional logic, Hochschild reveals the lived experience of politics. Unfortunately, the richness of *Strangers* is often missed when it is cited to help answer the most prominent question the election of Trump prompted—did class or culture motivate people to vote for such an atypical candidate? This question not only captivated the academy but also animated popular discourse following the election. For example, an article (Porter 2016) in the *New York Times*—which takes a swipe at Frank's (2004) culture-over-class argument—is entitled "Where Were Trump's Votes? Where the Jobs Weren't." In contrast, most scholars have argued class is less important than culture, a category often operationalized as racism (Jardina 2019) and shown to include a thick social identification with parties (Mason 2018), though there are debates within the culture camp over the importance of, for example, nationalism (Bonikowski, Feinstein, and Bock 2021). *Strangers* is often read as evidence for both culture over economics *and* economics over culture. For example, a recent article in the *Annual Review of Political Science* (Berman 2021) places

Strangers in the culture camp; but a piece in the *Annual Review of Economics* (Rodrik 2021) cites the book as giving primacy to economics.[2]

The problem with this "either/or" framing, as McQuarrie (2017, S121) argues, is that it "treats the voting public as an agglomeration of disembedded individuals that are primarily knowable in terms of their demographic attributes, which in turn are more or less directly determinative of political attitudes." By narrating the subjective fusion of cultural identity and class experience, Hochschild's deep story evades this reductionist tendency. If pressed, Hochschild is more at home in the culture-over-class camp, given her grounding in affect. But the richness of *Strangers* is its subtlety—her subjects *feel* a class experience, one that occludes the advantages granted by their whiteness.

While the line cutters of the right's deep story are the enduring takeaway from *Strangers*, a less frequently cited passage depicts what Hochschild calls alternatively the liberal or progressive deep story. In this feels-as-if-true account, the polity is standing around a public square rich in museums, libraries, and schools. As the onlookers make room for anyone and everyone, "marauders" dash through to "steal away bricks and concrete chunks from the public buildings" (235). The loot is destined for the private sector, where it enriches individuals at the expense of the public. The inclusion of a left deep story is vital to *Stranger*s, as Hochschild's intent is to conjure cross-partisan empathy by facilitating mutual understanding. In this way, Hochschild offers a solution to the bitter polarization dividing the US, one that works by putting individuals on the right and left in dialogue—this is her politics of reconciliation. In talks and interviews since the publication of *Strangers*, Hochschild has repeatedly emphasized this point, citing living room conversations with Republicans and Democrats as a method to move the nation forward through compromise (Hochschild 2017, 2018b).

Hochschild's politics of reconciliation lives on in a particularly well-funded corner of the literature, namely depolarization. Often employing experiments, this research evaluates methods for cooling partisan animosity. In Hochschild's conceptual array, depolarization is an effort to poke holes in the empathy wall. Such work has quickly become institutionalized at, for example, Duke's Polarization Lab and Stanford's Polarization and Social Change Lab. The latter recently produced an immensely impressive "megastudy" of twenty-five interventions to reduce partisan animosity (Voelkel et al., 2022). Just as Hochschild focuses on the healing work of living room conversations, this study investigates how individuals can be induced to warm to the other side through such microinterventions as "portraying positive outparty exemplars" and "arguing that depolarization has positive consequences" (7).

2 More problematically, *Strangers* is often misread as being about the views of the (objectively located) white working class, when in fact the right's deep story narrates the experience of the white middle class looking down the class ladder (see p. 144).

Healing divisions through dialogue has an intrinsic appeal, but the politics of reconciliation is undercut by a close reading of *Strangers*.[3] Hochschild identifies the height of the empathy wall as her villain, but the clean environment she seeks would implicitly bring the liberal deep story to life. As Ray (2017, 130) notes, "Hochschild's analysis is ultimately one that assumes that [her subjects] have false consciousness (indeed the appendix of the book corrects their mistaken assumptions about welfare, race and state regulation)." Hochschild avoids reference to the term false consciousness, and she attempts to dismiss a related charge by insisting that, "as an explanation for why any of us believe what we do, duping—and the presumption of gullibility—is too simple an idea" (14).[4] Her analysis is deeply humanizing, but listening to the voices in *Strangers* does not lead one to view a compromise between the left and the right as a good solution, but rather a less bad one. As her appendix B notes, "the higher the exposure to environmental pollution, the less worried the individual was about it—and the more likely that person was to define him- or herself as a 'strong Republican'" (253). I am not suggesting that dialogue across the empathy wall is useless, only that, per Hochschild's account, "practical cooperation" (233) between partisans would not lead to a clean environment. Scaling the empathy wall could be the first step in a transformative politics, but reading Hochschild against Hochschild, it would need to be a scouting mission. Instead of enabling compromise, dialogue should inform efforts to advance the left's deep story though interest alignment and movement building.

Even if Hochschild were to say the solution is to convert her subjects to the left's deep story, her characterization of this good government–based political subjectivity

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3 There is also an external issue, namely that Hochschild's politics of reconciliation reproduces what Mitchell (1991) calls the state effect. This is the impression of the state as something distinct from the market—a misrecognition that generates an ideology conducive to capitalism. *Strangers* exudes optimism that the economy could be more just if only the state had better leadership, a view that misses the interdependence of the state and market. Hochschild (2016, 232) does make the vital observation that the relative cleanliness of California compared with Louisiana depends on a relationship—California uses and relies upon the chemicals Louisiana produces. But she does not follow this analysis to the conclusion that the Democratic Party, not just the Republican Party, is also complicit in the creation of Cancer Alley. This shortcoming further pries open the divergence between Hochschild and Hall. Hall's recognition that the state and market are interconnected led him to reflect on the tradeoffs involved in the left's embrace of the state ([1984b] 2017).

4 In a much earlier essay, Hochschild wrote of the US, "Here among the dispossessed the emotional aspect of 'false-consciousness'—*feeling* content with an unjustly dealt fate—is more the rule than the exception" ([1975] 2003, 85). Containing a seed of the argument she would make four decades later, the essay discusses the tendency to identify up and direct "disdain" down the social hierarchy. In a speech hosted by the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation's Marx 200 celebration, Hochschild (2018a) directly addressed the question of her *Strangers* subjects' false consciousness. In that speech, she concedes there is an aspect of false consciousness at work, but she characterizes it as a "mixed story." On one hand, the belief that their misfortune is caused by women and Blacks receiving an unfair advantage points to false consciousness; but on the other, she notes her subjects rightly resent the global elites running large corporations. As an alternative term, she suggests "circumstantial consciousness."

is unconvincing. Research on political mobilization finds that Democrats have a more diverse range of factors pushing and pulling them to the polls than Republicans (Grossmann and Hopkins 2016), suggesting that, for example, the "liberal" and "progressive" deep story may in fact be two distinct stories. Why is this so? On one hand, based on commonsense notions of identity like race, ethnicity, and religion, the Democratic coalition is more diverse than the Republican coalition, which makes the construction of an inclusive deep story tricky. On the other, the Democratic Party has done a less effective job at *creating a shared identity*. As Tuğal (2017, 140, original emphasis) argues in a reflection on *Strangers*, "The Left is so expert- and professional-dominated that it is trying to do its best to render *its* metanarrative as *fact*- and *judgement*-based as possible." Such an approach drains the left deep story of feeling and power, an argument that, as we will see, mirrors Hall's analysis of the Labour Party's failure to engage in hegemonic politics.

Pressing on the validity of a singular left deep story begins to open up the divergence between Hochschild and Hall, as it reveals the importance of understanding the connection between ground-level political subjectivities and efforts by elites to create and coax such subjectivities—what Hall calls articulation. This is not to say Hochschild treats the deep story as lacking a genealogy—in fact, just as Hall links the conjuncture to political subjectivities, Hochschild sources the emotional depth of the deep story to historical developments that are both material and symbolic. In *Strangers*, the material experience, what she calls the structural squeeze, is the evisceration of decent jobs by a corporate sector that "had gone global, automated, moved plants to cheaper workers or moved cheaper workers in" (215). This economic precarity sent people looking for a cause of their suffering, and as Hochschild narrates, a shift on the cultural plane offered up the line cutters. Hochschild argues the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s fell into the "emotional grooves" (207) cut by the 1860s, when the Civil War and Reconstruction stripped poor whites of their standing (given how swiftly Jim Crow reinstated what W. E. B. Du Bois [1935] called their psychological wage, it is important to stress that deep stories are not histories). As the conflict of the more recent '60s became elaborated into feminism, gay rights, and other identity movements, Hochschild's white subjects found themselves caught in an honor squeeze tightened not only by civil rights legislation but a culture that appeared to direct "the finger of blame at the entitled white male" (212). In a provocative turn of phrase, she calls this situation an "undeclared class war" (151) because material suffering was resisted on the right through the deep story's resentment of the honor squeeze instead of a reckoning with the structural squeeze (figure 1).

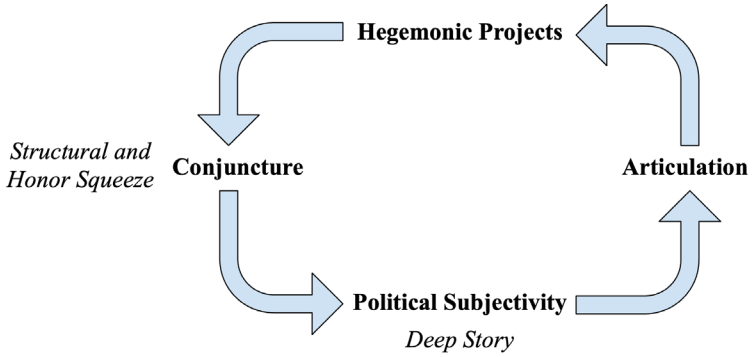

Figure 1. Arlie Hochschild read via Stuart Hall. Source: author's construction.

This conjunctural analysis is a moment where Hochschild and Hall converge—both are sensitive to the ability of long-term changes to cause psychic pain, what Hall and his coauthors call social anxiety in *Policing the Crisis*. But Hall's political sociology would insist that such social anxiety could provide affective fuel for any number of political commitments, a point driven home by the fact that there are white Democrats caught in both the structural and honor squeeze. To understand why Republicans channel their pain into the particular deep story Hochschild outlines, Hall would link political subjectivities to articulation and hegemonic projects, concepts that operate at a smaller timescale than the century and half-century conjunctural moves Hochschild makes. In short, the more recent history behind the deep story is occluded by Hochschild, a history well documented in work on, for example, the "long" Southern strategy (Maxwell and Shields 2019), Newt Gingrich's transformation of political norms (Hemmer 2022), and elite coordination with the Tea Party (Skocpol and Williamson 2012). Conjunctural dynamics motivate affective investment in the deep story, but as this research demonstrates, the plot of the story has authors occupied with on-going revisions.

Hall's Relational Political Sociology

What I call Hall's relational political sociology is built around four concepts. As illustrated by Hochschild, political subjectivity refers to the way affective energies are organized toward political ends. Articulation is the term for techniques that achieve this organization—it is not only the speaking-into-being (articulation) of a group, but the linking (articulation) of previously diverse identities and interests. A hegemonic project is the accumulation of articulating efforts to the point that they shift common sense toward a political end. When successful, a hegemonic project can impact the conjuncture, Hall's term for the interconnection of the political, economic, and cultural. A conjuncture is defined not just by the arrangement of these three planes but the contradictions they generate. These contradictions have consequences for individuals caught between their logics, which is where conjunctural analysis returns to political

subjectivity. By outlining these concepts as a relational cycle, I am illustrating how analysis can move up and down in scale, a heuristic intended to facilitate the integration of diverse research (figure 2). The cyclical arrangement is not strictly causal, meaning I am not insisting that one should avoid combining hegemonic projects with political subjectivities, or articulation with conjunctural thinking—any combination could be fruitful.

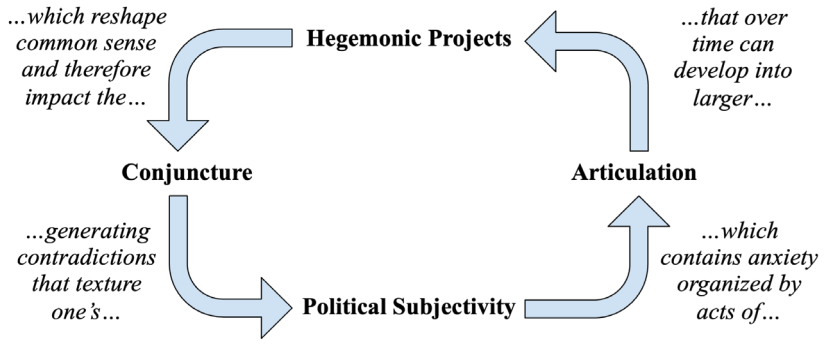

Figure 2. Stuart Hall's analytic heuristic. Source: author's construction.

There are several currents working against my efforts at outlining Hall's political sociology. For one, Hall never authored a programmatic statement delineating his conceptual tools. Beside *Policing*, much of his political writing was published outside the traditional channels of academia, such as in *Marxism Today*, where the focus was squarely on contemporary developments. Hall ([1980] 2021,153) admits his use of concepts was "rough and ready," designed to confront politics as they were happening. Further, what I call Hall's political sociology is deeply syncretic, drawing terms and insights from Louis Althusser, Nicos Poulantzas, Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe, Karl Marx, and, most importantly, Antonio Gramsci. Some of these thinkers attach distinct meanings to the terms I am employing—addressing those differences is outside the scope of this article, but it has been explored elsewhere, including by Hall himself (see Hall 2021).

These difficulties aside, Hall's political sociology has the advantage of honoring the richness of political subjectivities while also connecting their content with the efforts of elites and the tectonic shifts of conjunctures. By placing subjectivities in context, Hall's analytic perspective casts doubt on Hochschild's politics of reconciliation for asking nothing of elites. In Hall's view, living room dialogue is wholly inadequate to move politics. This is not because individuals are powerless but because individuals are more powerful when operating together on a massive scale, a perspective that emphasizes the importance of hegemonic politics.

A second advantage of Hall's political sociology is that by moving between four distinct levels of analysis, its relational nature offers openings for different disciplines and methodologies to contribute to a collective understanding of the present. As

Strangers is a demonstration of the usefulness of ethnographic methods for studying political subjectivities, so media studies is at home on the level of articulation. Likewise, public opinion is a useful lens for characterizing a hegemonic project, and historical analysis is the natural approach to conjunctural study. Integrating these perspectives into a whole is the trick Hall's perspective pulls off.

To outline Hall's political sociology, I discuss each stage of the relational cycle below, focusing on the movement from one concept to the next. Throughout, I demonstrate how the concepts appeared in Hall's own writing, while also comparing his approach with *Strangers*. To demonstrate the capaciousness of Hall's framework, I apply it to recent research on the US right. My aim is not to offer a complete analysis of the US right but rather to clarify Hall's political sociology and make its integrative abilities clear.

Political Subjectivity / Articulation

Hochschild's account of the deep story is an illustration of a political subjectivity, but where did the story come from? In her take, the deep story precedes politics—she writes, "When we listen to a political leader, we don't simply hear words; we listen *predisposed* to want to feel certain things" (15, emphasis added). Hall would agree that individuals receive politics through an emotional groove, and that to be successful, politicians should walk within the groove. But where Hochschild and Hall differ is that Hall insists these grooves can also be stomped into shape to serve a defined political end. There are limits, but a heavy boot can do a lot of work.

The familiarity of the deep story enables Hochschild to evade this concern. The idea of an American dream arrived at through hard work is well documented—Hochschild owes us no explanation for that motif. But where the plot gets lost, and where Hall comes in, is the scripting of line cutters—"Blacks, women, immigrants, refugees, brown pelicans" (Hochschild 2016, 139). Some of these characters have had a centuries-long role in the national drama (Blacks, women, immigrants) while others are more recent (refugees) and regional (brown pelicans). But what is key to the deep story is not only who they are but what they are doing, namely benefitting from the state at the expense of everyone else. The felt veracity of this plot point has a history, and articulation is the concept Hall employs to study how the affective grooves of individuals are shifted by the maneuvering of political elites.

The concept of articulation has recently reentered political sociology, though scholars have emphasized Gramsci and not his elaboration by Hall. In the introduction to an edited volume built around the concept, de Leon, Desai, and Tuğal (2015, 2) define "political articulation as the process by which parties 'suture' together coherent blocs and cleavages from a disparate set of constituencies and individuals, who, even by virtue of sharing circumstances, may not necessarily share the same political identity." While Hall often dissected the articulating power of discursive claims-making, recent work has emphasized nondiscursive articulation, such as policies that fund industries and, in

the process, cement the bond between a governing party and beneficiary groups (Eidlin 2016).[5]

This focus on nondiscursive articulation crucially centers parties and the state, but it also reflects sociology's disciplinary biases—namely an emphasis on formal politics over the media (Pooley and Katz 2008). Bringing Hall into conversation with the recent articulation scholarship demonstrates how the efforts of parties and the state are refracted through the professional culture of journalism—this is true even of ostensibly nondiscursive articulation, assuming the effort attracts media attention. In *Policing the Crisis*, Hall and his coauthors stress that the articulating effects of political actions are structured by professional reporting norms. In their view, understanding articulation requires specifying how news values and genre practices privilege elites and thus shape which acts of articulation reach the masses (and which acts are habitually excluded from publication). As a result, the study of articulation implies the study of the means of communication.

As in sociology broadly, Hochschild downplays the role of the media. Fox News is often on in the background of *Strangers*, referenced as an amplifier of political anxiety but not something deeply considered. And in the spirit of the politics of reconciliation, it is equated to MSNBC (7, 12). In one short section (126–8), Hochschild emphasizes the omnipresence of Fox in the lives of her subjects and notes the extreme language it used to vilify Obama's administration. However, citing some of the Manichean language she heard on the station, she writes, "Yet the words *tyranny*, *apparat*, *terrorist*, and *strangler* did not come up in my talks with Tea Party embracers in Louisiana." As further reassurance, she adds, "We all intuitively filter the news ourselves" (128). While it is no doubt true that Fox, like any media source, fails to exercise complete control over its audience—this is the point of Hall's well-known "encoding/decoding" ([1973] 2019) essay—there is a literature on the power of Fox News to meaningfully shift the political behavior of its audience (DellaVigna and Kaplan 2007).

Given the documented power of Fox—and elite influence more generally (Lenz 2012)—it is vital to closely consider how the media shapes political subjectivities. One example of such work is Peck's (2019) study of Fox, which analyzes how the channel articulates a bloc that aligns its audience with big business through the performance of "entrepreneurial producerism" (158). This mode of articulation works by portraying the business class as job creators whose efforts are hampered by the state—thus positioning big business among the "us" in a populist us-versus-them frame. In an interesting moment that underscores the power of elites, Peck (19) notes the articulation of Thatcherism

5 Bob Jessop and others critiqued Hall for overplaying the ideological effect of discursive articulation; they argue this shortcoming led Hall to overstate the hegemonic accomplishments of Thatcherism (for a review of this debate, see Gallas 2015). Despite springing from Hall's writing, the heuristic I am outlining is inclusive of both discursive and nondiscursive articulation. The heart of the articulation concept is the uniting of individuals into a cause, but this can be accomplished by a variety of means—speeches, census categories, tax brackets, and far more.

studied by Hall in the 1980s was carried out by, among others, British tabloids owned by Rupert Murdoch, who controlled Fox News at the time of Hochschild's research.

By exploring the professional values and routines of journalism, Hall's approach is deeply sociological in mode if not topic. But moving away from sociology, Hall also pays attention to the polysemous nature of symbolic communication, which is where he draws nearest to the post-Marxism of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985).[6] Central to his thinking is the insistence that rhetorical styles and motifs do not contain an inherent class or political meaning, so that, for example, the idea of the American dream can justify free enterprise *and* redistribution, Hochschild's right deep story *and* her left deep story. Though the creativity of articulation is dependent upon polysemy, it is not a free-for-all. Instead, articulation is most powerful when connected to a preexisting groove in one's subjectivity. The conjunctural-level contradictions of any moment are felt, such as Hochschild's honor and structural squeezes. This subjective experience engenders a discomfort that begs for a solution, creating an opportunity for acts of articulation to fashion a prism through which discomfort can be explained. When this is done for political purposes, a subjectivity is articulated into a political subjectivity.

The importance of this connection between articulation and the subjective experience on the ground is another point where Hall is instructive for recent revivals of articulation. In their contribution, de Leon, Desai, and Tuğal (2015) are interested in pushing against reflection theories of politics, wherein politicians adjust their actions to match the demands of constituents. Hall is no advocate of reflection theory, but he is deeply attuned to the need for acts of articulation to respond to the already existing subjectivities alive in the world, a move that places a limit from below on the actions of political elites above. What is more, acts of articulation are not just limited by subjectively felt discomfort but also the inheritance of common sense from eras past. This is why, in Hochschild's account, the familiar metaphor of waiting in line for the American dream is so central—the idea that there is an American dream, and that hard work can grant one access to that dream, is part of the national common sense.

This is surely complex terrain. To turn a subjectivity into a political subjectivity, articulation must respond to the affective grooves of individual psyches and the existing commonsense interpretation of the world, the latter of which is sure to already have political implications. Muddying the waters further, polysemy ensures that the intended effect of a political statement may miss the mark. How are scholars to follow this lesson? While it lacks any individual portraits as intimate as those offered by *Strangers*, *Policing the Crisis* offers a model. The book argues that in the 1960s and 1970s the decline of industry, labor unrest, and the rise of youth subcultures unmoored the lifeworld of the UK's working class and petty bourgeoisie. This process engendered a sense of "social anxiety" (162) that was ripe for excitement aroused through media coverage of street

6 For a discussion of their underappreciated differences, see Colpani (2022).

crime. The key moment is the articulation (as in joining) of preexisting anxiety over social change and economic decline with fear of Black street crime organized under the novel term "mugging." Discursive acts carried through the media—whose norms guaranteed publicity for political and state elites—effected this articulation of generalized unease with Black crime, setting in motion a law-and-order politics that divided the working class by race and underpinned what was soon to be known as Thatcherism.

In an essay published around the same time as *Policing*, Hall ([1978] 2017, 150) writes, "Race is the prism through which the British people are called upon to live through, then to understand, and then to deal with, the growing crisis." The point is not that racist imaginaries "unravel the complex tissue of political and economic forces which have created and sustained the poverty of inner-urban working-class districts" (156), but rather that *they create the impression* of doing so. Articulation "solves" the experienced crisis through a sleight of hand, in this case displacing a structural crisis by rerouting anxiety into blame hung on an out-group. In line with Hochschild, a key point is that there is a subjective basis for the act of articulation to build on; but, contra Hochschild, articulation can steer that basis toward a defined political end.

Articulation / Hegemonic Project

In the case of Margaret Thatcher, the political end was "authoritarian populism"—one of Hall's ([1980] 2021) most widely known concepts. The term is still in use today and has been retrieved within the post-2016 study of the right. For example, Trumpism has been described as a form of authoritarian populism by scholars (e.g., Norris and Inglehart 2019) and by think tanks ranging from the Center for American Progress (2018) to the Cato Institute (Palmer 2019). Authoritarian populism is Hall's characterization of Thatcherism's *hegemonic project*, namely the strategic effort to redefine common sense—Gramsci's war of position—toward some larger aim. This is the conceptual level at which individual acts of articulation can pile up into a larger ideological project that, in turn, operates through politics on culture and the economy.

What the deep story offers is an analysis of the mobilizing effects of such a project. The emotional experience of waiting in a line bedeviled by cheats is shared across Hochschild's subjects precisely because it has ascended to the level of common sense. The advantage of complementing this perspective with a consideration of hegemonic projects as a mass political strategy is that it pushes analysts to historicize politics. While noting that the Tea Party was not the first antigovernment movement in the US, Hochschild writes, "[N]one before the Tea Party have so forcefully taken up the twin causes of reversing progressive reform and dismantling the federal government—a movement in response to the deep story" (2016, 207). Leaving aside the undoing of Reconstruction, this would seem to miss the antistate accomplishments of the 1980s and 1990s—from the Reagan Revolution to Bill Clinton's cutting of welfare—which Hall often referenced as he tracked the maturation of Thatcherism into British neoliberalism.

In both the UK and US, the hegemonic accomplishment of conservative politics was the centering of the market as the organizing principal of social life. But to achieve this, Thatcher and Ronald Reagan did not simply promote the virtue of the market. Instead, these figures directed the experience of economic decline toward a view of the welfare state as intrusive, irresponsible, and naive to the manipulations of immigrants, people of color, and others, thus turning the state into an antagonist. Accomplished through individual acts of articulation, such a project seeded a common sense that Hochschild encountered in appended form as the deep story. In *Policing the Crisis*, well before Thatcher was on the scene, we see the early moves of this articulation via figures like Enoch Powell. But over the next decade and more, writing in outlets like *Marxism Today*, Hall used the benefit of historical distance to theorize these efforts as hegemonic due to their rewiring of common sense. At a greater level of specificity, he characterized the content of this shift in common sense as authoritarian populism because popular will was piqued toward raising the repressive hand of the state against the social democratic hand.

The usefulness of the term authoritarian populism for analysis of the US right is clear. To take just one example, consider GOP efforts to stir mass support for restrictions on the teaching of racial history in public schools. Nonetheless, the more general term, hegemonic project, needs to be centered in Hall's political sociology. Authoritarian populism is an analysis of the rhetorical content of articulation (populism) and its policy effects (authoritarian). But this strategy was powerful because of its hegemonic aspirations—it strove to rewrite common sense and sway the population toward a new vision of life. In a dialogue with critics of the term authoritarian populism, Hall ([1980] 2021,150) insisted that "it would be ludicrous to assume [Thatcherism] could be 'explained' along one dimension of analysis only." Such is the nature of hegemonic projects—they operate at a depth that exceeds the purchase of any one pithy concept. It follows that he coined additional terms to describe Thatcherism, such as "regressive modernization" ([1987] 2021, 164). Whereas authoritarian populism highlighted the irony of generating mass support for a repressive state, with this second term, Hall underscored how the radicalism (modernization) of Thatcherism's market views were advanced through appeals to traditional (regressive) values.

It is clear Hall intended authoritarian populism as a particular characterization among many, but there are further analytical reasons to stress the more general concept of hegemonic project. From Hall's perspective, the hegemonic character of the right is what distinguished it from the left—the term hegemonic necessitates such a comparison since, for a project to achieve hegemony, any opposition project must be routed. In the 1980s and 1990s, Hall critiqued Labour for failing to scale up its efforts at articulation into a counter-hegemonic project. Left parties can be hegemonic—as we know from Laclau and Mouffe (1985)—but from Hall's perspective, Labour never was during his adult life. In an important essay entitled "The Crisis of Labourism" ([1984a] 2017, 219), Hall laments that Labour "shows less and less capacity to connect with popular feelings and sentiments, let alone transform them or articulate them to

the left." The problem was that while the Tories spoke of Englishness and God, the evil in the streets and virtues at home, Labour campaigned within "a formal definition of the 'political'" (219) that stressed policies and assumed interests. This is precisely the point Tuğal (2017) makes in his criticism of Hochschild's left deep story—namely that the Democratic Party is too rhetorically technical to author a hegemonic appeal. In Hall's lifetime, instead of articulating interests into a counter-hegemonic bloc, Labour slid into what Gramsci called transformism (Hall [2003] 2017) by adopting neoliberal logic veiled beneath leftist talking points. This was embodied in the UK by Tony Blair and New Labour, whereas in the US, Clinton's "third way" orations limned the market in an aspirational light. As should be clear, Hall's political sociology is not only suited for the right. More importantly—and perhaps in tension with the project of "right-wing studies"—employing the concept of hegemonic project *requires* chalking off the competitive arena of politics, so that at some point, any study of the right will entail notice of the left.

Another advantage of emphasizing the more general term hegemonic project over authoritarian populism is that it discourages the academic tendency of trying to pin down the essence of mass politics in a single concept, what Hall derisively called "conceptual gunfire" ([1980] 2021, 159). Much of the post-2016 research attempts to identify and measure the *most important* ideological ingredient of Trumpism—is it sexism, racism, or economics (Schaffner, MacWilliams, and Nteta 2018)? Or anti-immigrant attitudes (Reny, Collingwood, and Valenzuela 2019)? A hegemonic project requires a range of themes to be linked together, and no mass political movement is likely to operate through one vector alone. Understanding the ideological makeup of political movements is vital, but precisely weighing each component in search of *the* component risks missing the forest for the trees. Even more, acts of articulation can shift the salience of themes and introduce new ingredients. For example, the phrase "critical race theory" was virtually unknown among GOP voters in 2016, but the immense attention it presently commands does not imply a fundamental break.

While far from discarding an interest in the ideological content of politics, Hall's political sociology refocuses attention on the mechanisms and strategies bundling individual acts of articulation into a hegemonic project. It matters whether the critical race theory moral panic influenced GOP voters, but given how much we already know about their racial attitudes, Hall would prioritize asking *how* the panic was ignited. A rich area in the post-2016 literature compatible with Hall's sociology is the study of mis- and disinformation, especially works that stress emergent digital strategies. On the Internet, wildly unusual conspiracy theories sprout up—like Pizzagate and QAnon—but their novelty does not fracture the GOP bloc. Rather, they are articulated into the hegemonic project of the right. How does this happen?

An example implicitly in line with Hall's approach is Tripodi's (2022) ethnographic study of right-wing activists in Virginia. To understand how the right maintains control over the circulation of information, Tripodi documents how elites inculcate activists with an "ideological dialect" (17) that shapes the search terms they use to "do their own

research." The activists are under the illusion of trawling the whole Internet for answers, when instead the terms they have learned to use—for example, "alien" instead of "undocumented"—keep them within the circuit of Trumpist sites like the Daily Caller and PragerU. Another example of this literature, and one written to invite a popular audience, is *Meme Wars* (Donovan, Dreyfuss, and Friedberg 2022), which describes how digital propaganda works to radicalize audiences. Though the pop culture imagery of memes may suggest humor or frivolity, the book documents how such tools can sharpen extreme political commitments, including those that led individuals to storm the Capitol on January 6.

Hegemonic Project / Conjuncture

When a hegemonic project is successful at shifting common sense, it is capable of influencing the conjuncture, Hall's borrowed term for the interconnected arrangement of the economic, political, and cultural.[7] The term prompts analysts to broadly historicize their work *and* consider the relationship between these three planes, which are so often kept separate at the cost of seeing the social formation as a totality. A specific conjuncture is characterized by a set of contradictions that arise from the arrangement of these planes—the two signal conjunctures in Hall's thought are the post–World War II conjuncture of social democracy and the subsequent neoliberal conjuncture embodied by Thatcher in the UK and Reagan in the US. In their British form, the two conjunctures are separated by the instability of the 1960s and 1970s, when an economic crisis (stagflation and industrial decline) converged with a political crisis (the retreat of the social democratic state) and cultural crises (youth movements on the left and reactionary backlash on the right).[8] Hall is clear that the shift to neoliberalism was too deep and organic a process to be attributed to authoritarian populism alone, but he also argues the hegemonic ambitions of Thatcherism accelerated and secured the transition.

The massive scale of conjunctural thinking requires analytic humility, but such a gambit is what enables Hall's fine-grained approach to the articulating work of

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7 In addition to its use within the Marxist tradition, the term was employed in a similar vein by the *Annales* school.

8 This transition is documented in *Policing the Crisis* (1978), what Gilbert calls the "definitive example of a 'conjunctural analysis'" (2019, 9). *Policing* displays a characteristic typical of cultural studies, namely an analytic movement from a cultural form to its conjunctural conditions of possibility. In this case, the movement is from a mugging panic up to the crisis of the state. The breadth of *Policing*'s analysis is instructive—the text moves from press coverage of street crime to the organization of the judiciary, policing techniques, political discourse, strike activity, Mick Jagger, the shifting membership of political blocs, and the class function of the education system, among other themes. As a how-to guide, the breadth of *Policing* can be intimidating, but it is also an invitation to recognize how many ingredients can contribute to conjunctural analysis. That being the case, the focus on a conjuncture's contradictions is key as they generate the social anxiety that political elites articulate in the service of a hegemonic project.

hegemonic strategies to stand within a historical frame. Without the periodizing overlay of the conjuncture, it would be tempting to cast the political as truly autonomous. Instead, for Hall, the contradictions of a conjuncture are felt as social anxiety—an echo of Gramsci's (1971, 328) kernel of "good sense"—and it is this subjective experience that is articulated by hegemonic projects. The contradictions of neoliberalism are numerous, but much commentary has focused on those driven by its economic logic, especially how speculative financial techniques are self-defeating economically and, increasingly, ecologically. To take an example from Hochschild, the contemporary scale of petrochemical production necessitates industrial byproducts incompatible with human flourishing—we see this in the sinkholes and cancer diagnoses that haunt the subjects of *Strangers*. The social anxiety this generates motivates the fervency of the deep story following, per Hall, the intermediary work of articulation. The line cutters are not the cause of environmental ruin—in fact, they are among its victims—but because the deep story so convincingly casts government redistribution as a villain, the social anxiety generated by neoliberalism is absorbed by resentment against the state.

Though this take is focused on the economic, contradictions cut across the social formation and the social anxiety they generate should not be seen as exclusively emerging from the economic base. For example, neoliberalism's cultural prizing of individual freedom and autonomy both justifies marketization and clashes with the colossal wealth disparities created by the market—a conjunctural dynamic that feeds the deep story centered on a never-ending wait in line. Such analysis can lead away from studies that take right-wing politics as their object, but Hall insists this historicization is vital for understanding affective investments in politics.

In his time, Hall traced the emergence of neoliberalism—his essays from the 1980s analyze how Thatcherism secured the new conjuncture by suturing together disparate constituencies into a bloc. In contrast, scholars today debate whether neoliberalism still defines the present conjuncture. This debate turns on a range of questions, including whether the contemporary right-wing project is hegemonic in scope. Another key concern is discerning whether the project's means and ends swim with or against neoliberal logic. Hochschild engages in conjunctural analysis through her invocation of the structural (economic) and honor (cultural) squeezes, but she never names the conjuncture as such—in fact, the term neoliberal never appears in *Strangers*.[9] If the transition from social democracy to neoliberalism was marked by a series of crises, recent history offers no shortage of crises that could signal another fundamental break. Hall lived to see one such candidate, namely the recession of 2008. According to Hall, conjunctures break apart when there is a synchronicity of crises so that "the social formation can no longer be reproduced on the basis of the pre-existing system of

9 Hochschild uses the term elsewhere (e.g., 2018a). In *The Outsourced Self* (2012), her analysis of commercial language seeping into everyday life suggests a characterization of neoliberalism as a hegemonic project.

social relations" (Hall and Schwarz [1985] 2021, 96).[10] Writing as the Great Recession turned into economic recovery, Hall ([2011] 2017, 335) noted that "new and old contradictions still haunt the edifice," but neoliberalism nonetheless continued on. Writing in agreement, his collaborator Massey (2017, 88, original emphasis) specified that, by 2011, "it was evident that though there had been a massive economic crisis, there had been *no* serious unsettling of political and ideological hegemony."

Since Hall's death in 2014, there has been further debate about whether neoliberalism holds, much of it driven by perceived challenges to neoliberal logic by right-wing politics in the US and UK. While Hall stressed the continuity of neoliberalism from the 1980s into the twenty-first century (Gilbert 2019), Fraser (2017) argues that neoliberalism mutated into "progressive neoliberalism" by the 1990s, a formation that combined free-market distribution with an inclusive and meritocratic system of recognition. Trump's economic posturing in the 2016 campaign appeared to signal a shift toward populist distribution and, consequently, a possible challenge to neoliberalism. Instead, according to Fraser, his four years in office cemented the winner-takes-all distributive logic that marks the neoliberal conjuncture. Trump did, however, inaugurate a "hyper-reactionary politics of recognition" (Fraser 2017), a challenge to the hegemony of progressive neoliberalism but too unstable a project to constitute a true counter-hegemonic effort. Writing on Britain—where conjunctural analysis is a thriving tradition—Gilbert (2019, 16) cites "the very strong evidence for the breakdown of neoliberal hegemony," a dissolution marked by youth commitments tending left, an emboldened English nationalism housed within the Conservative Party, and neoliberal elites who combine a beguiling mix of staying power and impotence. The task here is not to agree with Fraser and Gilbert over Hall, or vice versa, but rather to outline the stakes and scale of the questions raised by the concepts of hegemonic project and conjuncture.

Hall's political sociology invites grand introspection, but this is not to suggest political analysis needs to be weighed down by such considerations. Given the scale of conjunctural analysis, it is not likely we will be able to analyze whether a conjuncture has ended until after the dust has settled. The important lesson for right-wing studies is that analysis of politics should be grounded in long-term cultural, political, and economic dynamics as far as we know them. In the US, that means recognizing the role of the racial order in politics, as Hochschild's honor squeeze demonstrates. And as with her structural squeeze, it also means recognizing the economic condition of twinned mass precarity and corporate wealth. It matters whether we call this neoliberalism, late neoliberalism, or something else, but it is not central to every question worth asking.

The structural squeeze and the honor squeeze have been part of the present conjuncture since its inception. They are also deeply connected—the GOP "nationalized southern white identity" (Maxwell and Shields 2019, 336) at the same time as it embraced free-

10 This text is a concise demonstration of Hall's approach to conjunctural analysis. For an influential conjunctural analysis of the US, see Grossberg (2015)

market policies during the 1960s and 1970s. However, a third interrelated trend is reaching a state of longevity that warrants inclusion in conjunctural analysis—political polarization. According to political scientists Sides, Tausanovitch, and Vavreck (2022), polarization has matured into what they term the calcification of politics. In the US, polarization denotes a state where the two parties are clearly differentiated *and* internally united. But in calcification, among partisans, there is "less willingness to defect from their party" (6), so that even dramatic events like the COVID-19 pandemic are unable to shuffle sides. The emergence of calcification has coincided with strategic parity, so that national elections are decided by narrower margins than in years past, when a route like Reagan's 1984 victory over Walter Mondale was possible.

Polarization must be central to any contemporary use of Hall's political sociology because its effects reach beyond the ballot box to culture—where partisan identity correlates with a slew of ostensibly nonpolitical preferences—and to the economy—where partisan gamesmanship may lead the US over a fiscal cliff. Beyond its conjunctural impacts, however, polarization generates productive tension with the concept of hegemonic project. There are two tempting and competing perspectives. First, because polarization is arranged around a racial cleavage, one could argue such conflict cements neoliberalism by diverting political conflict away from economic distribution and toward social recognition, a view compatible with Fraser's take above. Second, and in contrast, one could argue the calcification of difference between two increasingly cohesive parties speaks to an abandonment of hegemonic projects.[11] Instead of seeking to rewrite common sense writ large, the parties are focused on the construction of distinct political hegemonies limited to their partisan camps.[12] In this view, the threat to political stability is so great that economic stability is threatened—and thus the conjuncture, too. Sides, Tausanovitch, and Vavreck highlight a related dynamic, namely that the parity of calcification leads parties to seek victory not through persuasion—an aspect of hegemonic politics—but by altering election rules. For the GOP, this has entailed passing restrictive voting laws and inserting partisan actors into electoral bureaucracies. The term hegemonic carries a negative valence, but framed as a foil to the politics of our times, Hall's political sociology illustrates how hegemonic projects are also an effort at unity. Sussing out what polarization means at the conceptual level where hegemonic politics meet the conjuncture is a vital task for right-wing studies.

11 De Leon, Desai, and Tuğal (2015) raise a similar distinction through the concepts of integral and traditional parties, with the former referring to parties that aspire to transform society.

12 As scholars have argued (e.g., Hunter 1991), the right's hegemonic camp is motivated by "culture war" fears that the left is about to achieve, or has achieved, hegemony.

Conjuncture / Political Subjectivity

What makes Hall's political sociology a relational cycle is that he insists on connecting the tectonic movements of conjunctures with subjective experiences on the ground. This movement from history to individuals returns us to the terrain of *Strangers*, where the two squeezes produce experientially what Hall ([1984a] 2017, 212) calls "the contradictory raw materials" on which efforts at political articulation work. Hochschild takes us into this dynamic by documenting the economic and cultural experiences of her subjects and connecting them to historical currents reaching back to the 1960s and 1860s. As *Strangers* demonstrates, ethnographic analysis is a powerful lens for the study of the connections between conjunctural contradictions and political subjectivities.[13] Since 2016, there has been a slew of outstanding studies that attempt to trace conjunctural-level developments down into the workings of particular worldviews, including Silva's (2019) ethnographic study of a struggling coal town, which focuses on the structural and honor squeezes; and Elcioglu's (2020) work on political activism along the US southern border, which spotlights polarization.

Did Hochschild offer us a definitive take on the emotional grooves of the present, or are there others to consider, especially given the rise of polarization as a conjunctural force? Public opinion scholars have begun to investigate a rising dynamic, one less amenable to ethnographic observation and Hochschild's politics of reconciliation—radicalism and political violence. In the study of domestic mass politics, violence is a topic political science has long ignored (Kalmoe and Mason 2022, 3), instead emphasizing the relatively tame theme of affective polarization. Such a construct is typically measured through feeling thermometers, which quiz respondents on how cold or warm they feel about partisan others (Iyengar et al. 2019).

As the political scientists Kalmoe and Mason argue, such questions fail to capture the depth of political radicalism. The pair began fielding surveys in 2017 that focused on two features of radical partisanship—moral disengagement and violence. Moral disengagement is the vilification or othering of partisan adversaries, a mental move that "rationalize[s] harming opponents" (2022, 42). Measures for this include questions concerning whether a partisan other is "evil" or "fully human." To measure violence, the scholars asked if, in support of one's politics, a respondent approves of threatening messages, harassment, or the use of violence.

Moral disengagement was widespread across their study. In November 2017, around 40 percent of Republicans agreed that Democrats are "evil," a number that increased to just under 70 percent by early 2021, a peak reached after Trump lost the White House. A similar trend is visible in their survey data on beliefs that Democrats are not "fully human," which climbed from 20 to just over 40 percent. Characterizing violence as "justified" was more muted but still meaningful, rising from a bit under 10 percent to

13 Such a move is consistent with sociology's extended case method tradition (Burawoy 1998).

20 percent. A more specific question, fielded only in early 2021, asked, "How much do you feel it is justified for [Republicans] to kill opposing political leaders to advance their political goals these days?" Twelve percent of Republicans called such assassinations "at least 'a little bit' justified." As the authors emphasize, generalizing out suggests millions "endorse assassinating US leaders" (Kalmoe and Mason 2022, 69).

Theorizing these findings within Hall's political sociology requires reckoning with his entire relational cycle. Because these feelings are targeted at partisan others, Kalmoe and Mason are measuring a facet of political subjectivity that has already been articulated. Though not explicitly using the language of Hall, they note the role of elites in this process, writing that as moral disengagement climbed through the Trump years, "[the president] and Republican media outlet Fox News publicly rationalized right-wing violence—including murders—encouraging their Republican followers to see the violence as not just excusable, but necessary" (62). They also stress the longer-running hegemonic project of the GOP, which they argue began forging a bloc of white Christians after the Civil Rights Movement splintered Democrats.[14] The mass effects of this project are, in part, polarization arranged around racial identity and views on racial others, a conjunctural-level development generating radical partisanship. And while the study was of opinions and not actions, in a threat assessment, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS 2020) wrote that from 2018 through 2019 half of the sixteen deadly domestic terror attacks and thirty-nine of forty-eight resultant deaths were attributed to white supremacists.

Despite right-wing violence far exceeding left-wing violence, Kalmoe and Mason emphasize that until Trump's election loss, measures for moral disengagement and violence were quite similar across the two parties. This may suggest parallel deep stories—perhaps plotted around opposing trenches rather than a wait in line—but they emphasize that the causes of radical partisanship are opposed. Both parties may vilify their opponents via moral disengagement, but "white Republicans are doing so largely in defense of a racist system that they refuse to acknowledge, while white Democrats vilify more when they recognize racism's role in holding Black Americans back" (81).[15]

After cycling through articulation, hegemonic projects, the conjuncture, and back down to political subjectivities stamped by radicalism, it is clear Hochschild's empathy wall may be too tall to climb. A politics of reconciliation is strategically ill suited for political subjectivities articulated into radical subjectivities that deny the humanity

14 This racial cleavage has even deeper roots in the history of US settler colonialism and slavery, a point Kalmoe and Mason make by reviewing the centrality of racism to national political conflict beginning in 1607. Their historical analysis underscores how domestic political questions are never insulated from global histories. Hall's analysis of British politics stressed the importance of the nation's imperial projects, especially how the colonial other shaped ideas of Englishness (e.g., Hall et al. 1978, 147).

15 For Republicans, Kalmoe and Mason also found that sexism was associated with greater moral disengagement.

of political opponents. Despite the gloom of their findings, Kalmoe and Mason offer an optimistic observation pertaining to Democrats: "At no other time in American history has there been a major political party recognizing that racism, religious bigotry, *and* sexism are systemic problems requiring government intervention to ensure equal protection" (167, original emphasis). Blocking this emancipatory political project, of course, is the right. Even if Hochschild's politics of reconciliation could temper mutual dehumanization, what would cooperation between antiracism and racism achieve?

Conclusion

In this article, I outlined a vision of Hall's political sociology and applied its relational scheme to the study of the US right. To show off the strengths of Hall's approach, I contrasted it with Hochschild's *Strangers*, an early classic in the field. While *Strangers* eloquently portrays the political subjectivities of Southern Tea Party supporters, it fails to reckon with how these views are articulated by political elites, a key concern for Hall. This interest in moving from the ground up in Hall's political sociology continues toward consideration of hegemonic projects, namely long-running efforts at articulation that shift common sense toward a political end. But far from granting political actors absolute power, Hall's approach also recognizes that hegemonic efforts must wrestle with the conjuncture, namely the interlocking dynamics of the political, economic, and cultural. Here, Hall's political sociology crashes back to the ground, as the tectonic movements of conjunctures are defined by contradictions experienced by individuals, stamping their subjectivities with affective grooves that bound the efficacy of articulation.

Through her detailed parsing of political subjectivities, Hochschild succeeds at revealing how policy preferences and identities are felt as much as they are thought. However, this analytic focus on affect also leads her toward a politics of reconciliation, where the antidote to our acrimonious—and violent—political present is conversation-enabled compromise. Such an approach has taken hold in an unusually well-funded corner of sociology, but it fails to reckon with the scale and radical content of hegemonic projects driven by political elites.

Does Hall have a solution of his own, or is he simply a critic content to poke holes in the ideas of others? Though hardly comforting, the analytic spirit of Hall's sociology is to embrace complexity. For this reason, while he would agree with Kalmoe and Mason that the Democratic Party's drift to antiracism is a good thing, he would not see a politics of progressive recognition as sufficient. So long as neoliberal distribution holds at the conjunctural level, there will be pain on the ground that is ripe for articulation. It may not be inevitable that this social anxiety is funneled into racism, but history tells us it has happened countless times before. Hall's embrace of complexity offers no easy answers for what to do, but his relational sociology does provide a heuristic for linking insights from ethnography, institutional analysis, public opinion, history, and more.

What does this say about Hall's politics? If Hochschild stresses reconciliation and compromise, Hall seeks conversion. The only thing that can overcome the maelstrom of our political present is a hegemonic effort that is antiracist by virtue of being broadly anti-neoliberal. Racism fuels radicalism, but opposing neoliberalism is a means to calm the social anxiety rooted in precarity that right-wing politicians articulate with racism. Such a solution is monstrously more difficult than hosting a living room conversation, but it is a conclusion born of the full weight of the insights gleaned by right-wing studies. It is also more easily theorized than done—but there are promising visions. The late Erik Olin Wright (2019) proposed anchoring such a politics in values. The US right is sutured together by an ascriptive racial identity; while this closes off membership, values leave the door open at the same time as they create a focal point for unifying the diverse coalition comprising the US left. Hall's political sociology is attuned to the risks—how an act of articulation can slip into unintended meanings, perhaps tilting a value into service of the right—but it also underlines the cost of inaction.

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ESSAY

Black Feminist Strategies for Right-Wing Studies

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When researchers wade into work on the far right, they inevitably emerge transformed in some way. Despite the fact that fields like sociology (my own home ground) persistently cling to ideas of objectivity, the conversations I have with other researchers often involve the emotional and mental damage we feel after engaging in our research. Surely not all researchers feel the same way, particularly those whose political and social position are in alignment with their object of study. This essay is not for them. As a Black trans feminist who studies gay men's participation in right-wing (and often far-right) social movements, I find that my research takes a heavy toll. Days, months, and years immersed in texts warning of the dangers of "mulatto glitter fairies" and calling for the extermination of people who look, act, and sound like me cannot be approached from a place of objectivity. Yet, despite this I remain committed to the work I do. It feels increasingly important as the systems Dylan Rodriguez terms "multicultural white supremacy" become pervasive and ubiquitous.[1]

Here, I aim to deepen the conversations scholars of right-wing studies are engaged in by framing our work with the tools and skills developed by Black feminists. First, I explore how Black feminism responds to what we popularly term "burnout" and how scholars of far-right movements can engage in these practices to promote healing. After laying this groundwork, I turn to challenging us all to think about the purpose of our work. These two points are aspects of the same analysis, an analysis that centers dignity and care as essential to resisting disposability and to orienting our scholarly work. Finally, I end with a call to action, building on the work of right-wing studies scholar and Black feminist activist Ida B. Wells-Barnett.

Black Feminism

Before diving into how this framework is helpful for scholars of right-wing studies, I want to establish the commitments and orientation of Black feminism. Patricia Hill Collins argues that a core component of Black feminist thought is the recognition

1 Dylan Rodríguez, *White Reconstruction: Domestic Warfare and the Logics of Genocide* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2020), 17.

that Black women, as an oppressed and subjugated group, have a particular critical social theory and praxis for understanding and resisting the interpersonal and systemic violence they encounter. Even more than this, Hill Collins positions Black feminism as a process of rearticulation—connecting the already developed consciousness of Black women to a vehicle for expressing this consciousness to the public.[2] Like Hill Collins, Barbara Smith identifies how this kind of theorizing centers autonomy while recognizing that the skills, theorizing, and organizing insights of Black feminism have implications for social change among other oppressed peoples.[3] These insights are what I hope to draw out for both Black right-wing studies scholars and those who might not be exposed to Black feminist thinking in their daily lives.

Black feminist scholarship is not a stranger to right-wing studies. Although the field of right-wing studies is still coalescing within the academic arena, it has long been a part of Black feminist practice to accurately describe, understand, and combat right-wing social and political movements. Such knowledge has been essential to the survival of marginalized people, particularly Black women, and this is reflected in Black feminist scholarship. Within the lineage of Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Black feminists have studied right-wing politics from lynching, to incarceration, to imperial war. Part of survival amid these systems is developing a painful intimacy with how harm is justified, normalized, and reproduced; it involves knowing how your pain and labor are the necessary ingredients to the society that others are fighting to keep in place.

For some, this intimacy can be internalized as necessary, for others it reveals that another world is possible. Black feminism takes this intimacy as a starting place to challenge our internalized commitment to domination. Patricia Hill Collins explores this commitment through the framework of the matrix of domination and the internalization of dominant narratives by Black women.[4] From political figures like Candace Owens and Condoleezza Rice, to business and entertainment figures like Oprah and Beyoncé, there are examples of how Black women can be coopted into projects of Black capitalism, grind/hustle culture, and American imperialism. Their success rests on the continuing dispossession and exploitation of others, and so while each of these women is an example of "success," their success rests on the control and coercion of others. Lifted up by various systems of exploitation, they demonstrate the pleasures of domination—that part of "making it" rests on your ability to step on others to affirm your importance and worth within society.

The Combahee River Collective also calls out this recurring need for domination in their critique of both feminist and Black liberation movements, arguing that feminist

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2 Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

3 Hill Collins; Barbara Smith, introduction to *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, ed. Barbara Smith (New York: Kitchen Table Press, 1983), xix–lvi.

4 Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*.

movements maintained systems of racial domination and Black liberation movements maintained systems of gender and sexual domination.[5] Put a different way by someone outside the Black feminist tradition, we all need to confront and kill the fascist within.[6] Effectively utilizing the strategies and tools offered by Black feminism requires us to engage in this critical work—not only to see the meaning-making and violence of the far right somewhere outside ourselves but within our own world-building and practices. Identifying this desire for domination can be difficult, and here Corey Robin's definition of conservatism may be helpful:

> Conservatism is the theoretical voice of this animus against the agency of the subordinate classes. It provides the most consistent and profound argument as to why the lower orders should not be allowed to exercise their independent will, why they should not be allowed to govern themselves or the polity. Submission is their first duty, and agency the prerogative of the elite.[7]

This animus is concentrated and distilled in far-right studies, where scholars are often immersed in texts calling for the subjugation or elimination of vulnerable groups. Such animus may not only be resisted by researchers but may also resonate—in perhaps lesser, more invisible ways—with our own internalized commitments to domination. Confronting and navigating this tension itself can be labor for the researcher, and another source of exhaustion. It can be hard to realize we see ourselves in those we study, especially when they may represent groups who harm us and our communities.

The work we do then can constitute a form of moral injury to ourselves on multiple levels. A moral injury is "the strong cognitive and emotional response that can occur following events that violate a person's moral or ethical code."[8] As such, it more closely resembles Mariame Kaba and Kelly Hayes's definition: "a profound exhaustion paired with an injury to our dignity or sense of belonging or a violation of our boundaries."[9] This spirit of domination directly relates to burnout as Kaba and Hayes define it; we as

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5 Combahee River Collective, "The Combahee River Collective Statement," *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* 1 (1983): 264–74.

6 Michel Foucault, introduction to *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (New York: Penguin Press, 2009), xl–xlv.

7 Corey Robin, *The Reactionary Mind: Conservatism from Edmund Burke to Sarah Palin* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 7–8.

8 Brett T. Litz, Nathan Stein, Eileen Delaney, Leslie Lebowitz, William P. Nash, Caroline Silva, and Shira Maguen, "Moral Injury and Moral Repair in War Veterans: A Preliminary Model and Intervention Strategy," *Clinical Psychology Review* 29, no. 8 (2009): 695–706.

9 Kelly Hayes and Mariame Kaba, *Let This Radicalize You: Organizing and the Revolution of Reciprocal Care* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2023), 199. See especially chap. 10 on "Avoiding Burnout and Going the Distance."

researchers regularly find ourselves exhausted, not just by the material we encounter and its consistent crossing of some of our most closely held boundaries—that we, and our communities, are worthy of dignity and autonomy—but by the fact that we are forced to look into the parts of ourselves that find pleasure in domination.

Care Work

Responding to this kind of chronic injury requires healing. One source of Black feminist healing in the face of recurring violence is the practice of care work. This can look like practices of pleasure, of finding joy and connection with others through forms of what adrienne maree brown terms "pleasure activism."[10] Other forms of care work involve the mundane, and sometimes onerous, tasks of making sure our own needs are met. While some traditions within feminism have, rightly, called into question care work as a site of feminine labor exploitation, such labor is simultaneously necessary for practicing social relationships and building institutions that reaffirm both group and individual dignity. As Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, a disabled Brown disability organizer, shares, the key to reconciling these simultaneous truths is to recognize that care work is labor—rather than a peripheral aspect of organizing, it is central to the entire project of crafting a world contrary to hyperexploitation, ableism, racism, and misogyny.[11]

Because care work is unevenly distributed, with normative gender structures placing cis men as recipients of care work but rarely its laborers, it is important to think about your own particular social location. Cis men engaged in this work should be particularly attuned to sharing the labor of care work and to how this can ground them in a broader network of support. For others, how can you request support from a broad network of others in your community? And no matter what your social location, how can you support your own boundaries and those around you? Developing a praxis that frequently checks in about these questions takes work, but it is necessary work to develop a resilient network of care.

So let us be frank: right-wing studies can be debilitating. If we take seriously the ways doing this work can be damaging, what are some of the practices we can engage in to keep ourselves and our communities from burning out? These are intertwined questions because Black feminism challenges the binary distinctions we make between the mind and body, and between ourselves and others. Sami Schalk specifically uses the term "bodymind" in her work to underscore this connection. A term coined by Margaret Price, the bodymind, Schalk argues, "insists on the inextricability of mind and body and highlights how processes within our being impact one another in such a way that the notion of a physical versus mental process is difficult if not impossible to clearly

10 adrienne maree brown, *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good* (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2019).

11 Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice* (Vancouver, BC: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2018).

discern in most cases."[12] If the dangers we navigate are both intellectual and embodied, solutions to burnout also have to include intellectual, emotional, and physical healing and grounding practices.

Some of the practices I offer up here emerged from a scholarly panel titled "Mental and Emotional Tolls in Research on Extremism and Supremacism."[13] A few of these are relatively straightforward. For example, one suggestion offered by Dr. Elizabeth Pearson was to regularly engage with therapy to provide an important outlet for processing research-related harm. For me, this has been sound advice. Being in therapy long term has helped me to work through the hard-to-hold feelings that come with being exposed to my archive, interviews, and cases. Therapy can be an important way to avoid displacing harm onto our loved ones, or overactivating our community network with the daily experiences we have as right-wing scholars. There are some limits to this technique: not all scholars have the resources for or access to therapy; therapy can be a site of violence; and when you are doing this work the therapy process is not working toward some final goal. Even for someone positioned relatively well within academia, getting access to consistent therapy has been hard. Going from grad school to an academic job, moving around the United States, and having intermittent insurance make it hard to find the right therapist; plus, inconsistent resources and access make it especially difficult to find a therapist that understands both why I continue to do this work and the unique needs I have as a patient. No matter what, it is important to develop other, less institutionalized, relationships of care alongside developing a strong therapy regime.

Bodies matter to this healing care work as well. Particularly as a researcher I often find myself ruminating on my work and failing to attend to my body's needs; disrupted sleeping, missed meals, forgotten medications, high caffeine intake, and long periods without moving around are all common occurrences as I navigate far-right archives. The institutionalized ableism of the academy helps to instill practices like these as a necessary part of doing "rigorous" scholarship.[14] Even more than a necessity, engaging in these practices is glorified as part of the acculturation to academia—as a sign that you are worthy of being included within the academic ranks. This contributes to burnout, as our minds and bodies are inextricably co-constituted. When I was burned out following the completion of my dissertation, it was both my mind and body that were injured. It looked like drawing into myself, spiraling anxiety, and a fixation on my work, which

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12 Sami Schalk, *Bodyminds Reimagined: (Dis)ability, Race, and Gender in Black Women's Speculative Fiction* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 5; Margaret Price, "The Bodymind Problem and the Possibilities of Pain," *Hypatia* 30, no. 1 (2015): 268–84.

13 Alexandria Onuoha, Elizabeth Pearson, and Blu Buchanan, "Mental and Emotional Health Tolls in Research on Supremacism and Extremism," virtual presentation, Conference on Supremacism and Authoritarianism, Institute for Research on Male Supremacism, December 1, 2022.

14 Jay T. Dolmage, *Academic Ableism: Disability and Higher Education* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017).

produced only exhaustion and mental and physical self-harm. I stopped treating myself like I matter. I did this because I was trained to believe this kind of mental, emotional, and physical space is what produces scholarship. But effective scholarship, especially when faced with violent material, cannot be done without taking care of your body and your mind.

Both parts of the self in this case require rest. Here again we can take a page from Black feminism. Black feminists today are immersed in a world where Black death is a button click away—dehumanizing content is the digital water in which we swim.[15] Stepping away from social media alone does not protect us from the embodied and material experiences of misogynoir—alone it does not offer rest. Just as our research into the far right may expose us to death, torture, and other forms of moral injury, so too does the daily experience of Black women. So, what can we learn from Black feminist praxis around rest? As Tricia Hersey discusses, rest requires intentional practice. What, if any, are your practices of rest? Do you feel bad about resting? Her work around The Nap Ministry argues these intentional practices of rest are a form of resistance against white supremacy and capitalism—it is a way to ground yourself in your own dignity and worth.[16]

Just as we are not discretely parsed into mental and physical components, researchers are not islands unto themselves. Part of the healing involved with care work is about putting ourselves in connection and community with others. Engaging in mundane community-related activities, ranging from mutual aid to other forms of care work, is equally important, as they build not only personal resiliency in the face of harm but a stronger network to navigate the impacts of dehumanization.[17] For example, amid recent Israeli genocidal violence[18]—in seeing via social media the maiming, crushing, and explosive harm being done against men, women, and children—the only way to hold and process that grieving has been to act together in community. On campus, I worked with faculty, staff, and students to organize against our institutional complicity.

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15 Alexandria C. Onuoha, Miriam R. Arbeit, and Seanna Leath, "Far-Right Misogynoir: A Critical Thematic Analysis of Black College Women's Experiences with White Male Supremacist Influences," *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 47, no. 2 (2023): 180–96; N. N. Shahid, T. Nelson, and E. V. Cardemil, "Lift Every Voice: Exploring the Stressors and Coping Mechanisms of Black College Women Attending Predominantly White Institutions," *Journal of Black Psychology* 44, no. 1 (2018): 3–24, https://doi.org/10.1177/0095798417732415.

16 Tricia Hersey, *Rest Is Resistance: A Manifesto* (New York: Little, Brown Spark, 2022).

17 Dean Spade, *Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity during This Crisis (and the Next)* (New York: Verso, 2020); The Care Collective, *The Care Manifesto: The Politics of Interdependence* (New York: Verso, 2017).

18 For more on why what is happening is understood as genocide, see "Application of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide in the Gaza Strip (South Africa v. Israel)," International Court of Justice, United Nations, accessed June 17, 2024, https://www.icj-cij.org/case/192; and Francesca Albanese, "Anatomy of a Genocide: Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in the Palestinian Territories Occupied since 1967" (advance unedited version), United Nations Human Rights Council, March 25, 2024, https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/sessions-regular/session55/advance-versions/a-hrc-55-73-auv.pdf.

This included holding a memorial event that let people grieve together in public while connecting the issues of state violence in the United States to those killed in Gaza. Off campus, I connected with local organizers who were protesting Raytheon's production plant here in Asheville, with Palestinian community members, and with community safety teams who were coordinating their efforts to make our local community safer. Perhaps most importantly, I worked to connect campus and off-campus networks to increase our overall capacity to hold our local institutions accountable. Seeing the United States support this violence has shown me acutely, as a Black trans person, exactly the price tag to human life. Against this, I have only the common Black abolitionist phrase "We keep each other safe." But to keep each other safe we must know one another in order to practice the kind of world we want. We need to know that others have our backs, and that we can rely on one another in the face of increasing state and vigilante violence. If part of the harm we experience as researchers is immersion in a world where our communities are robbed of their dignity, practices of community care demonstrate another moral framework that can help heal these moral injuries.

Balancing these connections, with others and with our work, is also important. Part of the harm involved in our work is the dissolution of our own boundaries. Activities that reaffirm those boundaries can be helpful to reasserting our own sense of dignity. This balance can be a hard one to strike. On the one hand our work is bound up with our ability to meet our basic needs: things like putting shelter over our heads and food on our table. On the other hand, our communities are often in a state of crisis, immediately engaged in some struggle that feels urgent and has immediate consequences for those at risk. Here Audre Lorde gives us a guide when she writes, "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation and that is an act of political warfare."[19] Although this quote, like self-care in general, has lost much of its contextual potency through commercialization and co-optation, its original meaning still resonates as a key part of Black feminist praxis. Taking care of yourself, establishing boundaries around your energy and capacity, is important to the continued work required in both contexts.

At the same time, self-care can become a mantra for disengagement or political apathy. Countering this requires pairing self-care practices with practices of accountability. An informal but important source of regulation can be found in a practice called pod mapping. This exercise, developed by the Bay Area Transformative Justice Coalition (BATJC), is focused on mapping out your relationships of accountability. The "pod" in this case "is made up of the people that you would call on if violence, harm or abuse happened to you; or the people that you would call on if you wanted support taking accountability for violence, harm or abuse that you've done; or if you witnessed violence or if someone you care about was being violent or abused."[20] Mapping out

19 Audre Lorde, *A Burst of Light and Other Essays* (Mineola, NY: Ixia Press, 2017), 130.

20 Mia Mingus, "Pods and Pod Mapping Worksheet," Bay Area Transformative Justice Collective, June 2016, https://batjc.wordpress.com/resources/pods-and-pod-mapping-worksheet/.

these connections can help to ground right-wing studies scholars within a broader moral context, as well as create a supportive environment for handling their chronic exposure to violence.

A network of scholars is also a necessary component of doing right-wing studies. Black feminist scholarship stresses the importance of dialogue and conversation.[21] Again, this intervention often butts heads with conventional academic wisdom, which encourages us to internalize the image of the singular scholar working alone tirelessly in the archive or field. This image has detrimental effects for scholarship in general but is particularly harmful for those of us who regularly engage with the logics of genocide, oppression, and normalized violence.

Avoiding burnout also means leveraging whatever resources are available at the institutional level. While this can be a fraught process, as academic institutions are themselves rooted in right-wing logics, it is important to use whatever resources we can garner to transform and support the conditions under which we labor.[22] Is your institution actively committed to professionally protecting you from right-wing attacks? Do they have a strong commitment to academic freedom? On a smaller scale, do you know your department administrator and have you talked with them about contingency plans to ensure the privacy of your information? Do you have a safety plan that does not rely on policing as the catch-all answer for right-wing threats? For example, I have gotten hate mail sent to my department mailbox, and I have talked with my administrator about strategies to record, monitor, and prevent such hate mail in the future. While most institutions lack specific and recognizable resources for right-wing studies scholars, building relationships and strong communication within your institution can help to offset potential violence before it happens.

Last, but certainly not least, is practical application. As hooks argues, the development of theory or the observation of phenomena should never be understood outside their effects on our everyday lives and practices.[23] hooks shares how one reason for the gap between theory and organizing is that theory is seen as an impractical, navel-gazing exercise. Connecting the theoretical or empirical results of your work to active personal and communal action helps to make the work transformational rather than observational.

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21 bell hooks, "Theory as Liberatory Practice," *Yale Journal of Law & Feminism* 4, no. 1 (Fall 1991): 1–12.

22 The field of critical university studies deals directly with the connection between the academy and naturalized systems of domination like racism, ableism, and classism. See, for example, Craig Steven Wilder, *Ebony and Ivy: Race, Slavery and the Troubled History of America's Universities* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013); Jay Dolmage, *Academic Ableism: Disability in Higher Education* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017); and William Watkins, *The White Architects of Black Education: Ideology and Power in America, 1865–1954* (New York: Teacher's College Press, 2001).

23 hooks, "Theory."

Example

One question I have seen circulating in my research spaces is about personal and community safety. Because universities, and often our own departments, are structured around the assumption that research safety is unidirectional, the protocols for research safety and ethics focus primarily on human subjects training and on ensuring the safety of our study participants. An enormous gap lies at the heart of this institutional ethics process: what happens when your study participants would like nothing better than if you dropped dead? As Elizabeth Pearson and her colleagues found by surveying right-wing studies scholars, there is often a feeling of isolation in which scholars are expected to keep the violence they study far from their friends and loved ones.[24]

This isolation extends beyond our conversations; in the face of potential vigilante violence by far-right groups, we can also feel isolated from our communities at large. During a conversation on the emotional and mental health tolls of research in extremism and supremacism, one issue led to division among presenters: the reliance of researchers on police to protect them from far-right extremists.[25] One practical intervention given by a presenter was to contact university and local police to let them know about the potential threat of right-wing violence. This suggestion, while practical, was not endorsed by the other panelists. At the heart of this division were competing visions of world-making, with one presenter believing that police would protect her from extremist violence and the other two seeing the police as part and parcel of that extremist violence.[26]

Rather than delve deeper into which of these worldviews is correct, I would like to suggest that the fundamental desire for safety is something shared by all right-wing studies scholars. One limitation we face is that we often have to develop safety practices on our own, and in a world in which police are a hegemonic institution associated with safety, it can be hard to think of other alternatives. Black feminism offers a number of alternatives, focused primarily on mutual aid and care work. I, for instance, contacted all of my neighbors to let them know there could be a risk of far-right violence because of my work. By providing them with my contact information, an opportunity to talk about risks and strategies, and why I was undertaking this work, I not only got a chance to build community but shifted the responsibility for safety away from historically violent, right-wing institutions like the police to a network of individuals who shared an interest

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24 Elizabeth Pearson, Joe Whittaker, Till Baaken, Sara Zeiger, Farangiz Atamuradova, and Maura Conway, *Online Extremism and Terrorism Researchers' Security, Safety, and Resilience: Findings from the Field* (Vox Pol, 2023), https://voxpol.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Online-Extremism-and-Terrorism-Researchers-Security-Safety-Resilience.pdf.

25 Onuoha, Pearson, and Buchanan, "Mental and Emotional."

26 Onuoha, Pearson, and Buchanan.

in protecting their community. It also began important conversations about what safety looks like, and why far-right violence could happen to us. This safety practice inverts the isolation so often experienced by right-wing studies scholars; it reconnects individuals with their community and helps others in the community to make informed decisions about how to care for one another.

This inversion practice comes from a number of feminist sources, from disability and racial justice movements in particular. It shifts the weight of our work from the individual to the community, while reaffirming our place within a collective world-building project. It is not foolproof. As scholars of right-wing studies, and as community members, safety is always relative. The key to avoiding burnout is not to completely avoid risk but to enter situations in a way that maximizes our agency and consent to undertake the risks involved. As the example provided earlier highlights, this agency and risk assessment is never made alone but always in connection to others.

World-Making

To assess risk thoughtfully requires thinking about what kind of world you want to emerge from your work. While a call to actively engage in articulating this world-building may be unusual, the university as a social project is deeply invested in world-building projects (albeit a world often at odds with Black feminist values). Practicing care work as part of right-wing studies is less a departure from the world-building of the university than an intentional divergence from these projects to forge a practice of care and dignity. Here is where avoiding burnout requires developing a keen and deep understanding of our own commitments and desires. What kind of world are we hoping to ground ourselves in? Within what kind of world are we renewing our emotional, intellectual, and physical selves?

The work of early sociologist and Black feminist scholar Ida B. Wells-Barnett provides a good example of how world-building can inform right-wing studies. Her work on the structures and causes of lynching in the United States rested on the practical desire to see a world in which such events were relegated to the past. Driven to talk about lynching following the murder in Memphis of a Black grocery store owner and his two employees, Wells-Barnett connected her personal experience of trauma with the need to address this rampant form of social violence.[27] Before Wells-Barnett's work, mainstream white media thought of lynching as a spontaneous and uncontrollable social phenomenon.[28] Her empirical research established deep connections between the use of lynching and the maintenance of social, political, and economic stratification.

27 Ida B. Wells-Barnett, *Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells*, ed. Alfreda M. Duster, 2nd ed. (1970; repr., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020), 42–43.

28 Ida B. Wells-Barnett, *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases* (New York: The New York Age Print, 1892).

This meant lynching could be eliminated because it was the product of a set of human decisions and institutions.

Black feminism makes this kind of world-building central to replenishing and healing ourselves in the face of violence; and using the tools of this theoretical and methodological tradition demands that researchers ask themselves what the purpose is behind their engagement in this work. Within conventional scholarly conversations about research, the stress tends to fall on whether our questions are "interesting," and for those of us in social sciences, on whether there is a way to gather empirical data. But this leads to a fundamental contradiction with the foundations of Black feminism. Approaching right-wing studies as a set of intellectual puzzles will stymie the use of Black feminist strategies because such an approach ignores the material and social consequences of our work. To utilize the tools Black feminism offers requires engaging in a serious reflection on the kind of world we are working for as scholars of right-wing studies. Engaging in this work as an intellectual puzzle limits researchers' abilities to see and recognize the harm caused by these ways of thinking and acting, both to themselves and to the wider world.

This kind of world-building also allows us to connect our individual purposes for doing this work with the collective purposes of our various communities. It asks why our research matters, not just as an intellectual exercise but to the people on the receiving end of right-wing violence. As such it asks us to be accountable to the people whose harming creates the data we sift through and work with every day. The work of Wells-Barnett articulated not only her own understanding of right-wing social movements but also put forth a community demand to end lynching as a form of white terrorism. While scholars who study oppressed people often discuss amplifying the needs of their research subjects, scholars of right-wing studies should still maintain an ethical relationship to end the violence and stratification they study.

Ida B. Wells-Barnett's work again gives us a template for how Black feminist strategies are informed by world-building. Her exploration of lynching challenged the common ideas of the day—especially among whites—that this kind of violence was natural and normal. Her work was relentlessly public in nature, aiming to transform the common consciousness through rigorous engagement with the structures of white supremacist and far-right thinking. Rather than an intellectual puzzle to be solved, her work was constantly grounded in the material, embodied realities faced by Black people under this regime of terror. As Shaonta' Allen lays out for us, Ida B. Wells-Barnett is a template for how Black feminism lies at the root of scholar activism (in sociology and beyond).[29]

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29 Shaonta' E. Allen, "The Black Feminist Roots of Scholar-Activism: Lessons from Ida B. Wells-Barnett," in *Black Feminist Sociology: Perspectives and Praxis*, ed. Zakiya Luna and Whitney N. Laster Pirtle (New York: Routledge, 2022), 32–44.

This commitment to world-building, to living otherwise, informs the way scholars can engage their work in right-wing studies. If care work creates the conditions under which we can continue to do our work, it also creates the conditions for our self and community transformation. Without such transformation not only will scholars suffer burnout, but we will be engaged in reinforcing the very violence we are immersed in.

Conclusion

Detaching from my work after coding a hundred documents containing swastikas takes more than looking away from the screen. Studying the far right is more than an observational exercise but rather involves immersing oneself in the logics, symbols, and affect of violent stratification. Combating the emotional, mental, and physical toll this takes requires drawing deeply on the practices and strategies developed to create sustained resistance to these systems of domination. It means rooting ourselves deeply in our relationality, with other people and with the world at large.

While this research can be incredibly isolating, we are situated within a long tradition of scholars who have tried to understand far-right movements. Just like these other scholars, our work is the product not only of our own intellectual labor but also the networks of care within which are situated. Scholar-activists like Ida B. Wells-Barnett have been lifted up as figures radically applying their knowledge to a transformation of the world, but they are the tip of the historical iceberg—their work was only possible because of the people who sheltered them, cooked them meals, and eased their heartache in the face of myriad attacks by right-wing organizers.

This essay is by no means a comprehensive guide to avoiding burnout. Here, I have opened the door to the conversations I have had with other researchers, loved ones, and community members. In many ways it has instead offered a set of guiding questions and tentative practices for researchers as they engage in right-wing studies. It asks why you have decided to take up this research in the first place. Above all, it asks where your research fits in the world you are working to create.

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From the Margins to the Mainstream

A Personal Reflection on Three Decades of Studying and Teaching Far-Right Politics

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I started working on what were then commonly called "extreme right" parties in the early 1990s, doing a comparative study of the ideologies of three small "national democratic" parties in Western Europe for my MA thesis (Mudde 1995). I mostly read German-language works in the contemporary history (*Zeitgeschichte*) tradition, as English-language (political science) literature was still very rare at that stage. In fact, to find political science literature on the topic, I had to reach out to foreign scholars, as there was only one other scholar of the far right in the Netherlands, an anthropologist who mainly published in Dutch.

It was an odd time to study the far right academically. While the far right was completely marginal in the country, and in most of the world, public interest was very high in the Netherlands. At the same time, within academia in general, and political science in particular, the study of the far right was seen as secondary at best. Fast forward four decades and the far right is among the most vibrant political forces across the globe and the study of the far right has exploded across academic disciplines (often, however, under different labels, most notably "populism"). Hundreds of PhD students and thousands of MA and undergraduate students are working on the topic and there are even some, admittedly few, academic jobs that specifically look for expertise on the far right. In other words, much has changed, both in terms of the relevance of the far right and its study.

In this essay, I want to reflect on this transformation with a particular focus on some of the questions that inform this special issue. Most of the essay is a personal reflection on the study of the far right, from someone who has contributed to both the literature and the infrastructure—notably the European Consortium of Political Research (ECPR) Standing Group on Extremism and Democracy and the related Routledge Studies in Extremism and Democracy. My main aim is to provide new(er) scholars in the field with a (personal) historical account of the study and teaching of the far right,

predominantly in the Global North. I also hope to help colleagues navigate some of the issues that confront students of the far right—from presentism to social pressure—without pretending to provide solutions: First of all, because I have been, and probably still am, part of some of these problems (notably Eurocentrism). Second, because I have many more privileges than the vast majority of my colleagues—from sociodemographic ones (white, straight, male) to professional ones (tenured, international reputation, close to retirement). And third, because most of these issues are contextual and therefore defy universal solutions. Still, hopefully at least some readers will find solace in knowing that they are not the only ones struggling with what can only be described as a taxing field of study.

This essay is divided into four sections. In the first two sections, I will reflect on my personal experience of studying and teaching the far right. In the third section, I address the issue of Eurocentrism in the study of the far right—a problem to which I have contributed myself (see, for instance, Mudde 2017). In the final section, I tackle the issue of presentism and relate it to the transformation of the far right in the twenty-first century. Finally, I conclude this essay with some suggestions.

Studying the Far Right

In his famous 1988 article, the late Klaus von Beyme identified three "waves" of "right-wing extremism" in postwar Western Europe. As I have argued before (Mudde 2016), the development of the postwar far right coincided with changes in its academic study. In the first wave, roughly from 1945 to 1955, the far right was primarily a remnant of the past, commonly referred to as "neofascism." The limited scholarship was dominated by historians, who mainly looked for ideological and personal connections between historical fascism and neofascism. The second wave, roughly from 1955 to 1980, saw the influx of mainstream social science concepts and theories (particularly from US scholars), focusing predominantly on the support base of the "radical right." In the third wave, from 1980 to 2000, English-language political science became increasingly dominant, as did a focus on electoral and party politics in Western Europe. Although the fourth wave of the far right—defined mainly by mainstreaming and normalization—started at the turn of the century (Mudde 2019), scholarship has so far been relatively slow to catch up with its developments.

In the last twenty-five years, in terms of scholarship on the far right, we have gone from scarcity to abundance. In the early 1990s, much political science research was qualitative by necessity—there were few electorally successful or politically relevant far-right parties and most national surveys had too few far-right supporters for (cross-national) quantitative studies. These practical problems were often "solved" by either artificially increasing the pool of far-right parties (by conceptual stretching) or the pool of their supporters (by combining cross-national or cross-temporal datasets). There is no need for such suboptimal solutions today. As the far right has increased and mainstreamed its support across the globe, there are plenty of parties and supporters

to study. Moreover, with the ascendence of social media, quantitative scholars have a treasure trove of new data to analyze. And the mainstreaming of the far right has also mainstreamed the study of the far right, which has grown exponentially since, most notably, the victories of Brexit and Donald Trump in 2016.

But the mainstreaming of the far right has caused a power shift too, which has inevitably affected its study. In the 1990s, I was rarely criticized for my scholarship. In fact, if I was, it was mainly by people on the radical left, who rejected my self-proclaimed "neutral" position—a critique I have become much more receptive to over the years. Although I was already a relatively prominent voice in the media, and outspoken in my opposition to the far right, this did not really affect my access to far-right parties and politicians (positively or negatively).[1] I believe this was in part because I was, and remain, a fervent supporter of free speech and was, at that time, one of the few people to explicitly defend the right to free speech for the far right in the media.

Today, as the far right is much more mainstreamed, and has a growing number of "neutral" or even supportive scholars to work with, my access to far-right actors has diminished significantly. And this is an important reminder for junior (and senior) scholars whose research depends on fieldwork: an outspoken and prominent public profile can restrict access to the very sources that your research depends on. To be clear, this is a trade-off that scholars must make for themselves. But it is important to be aware of the academic risks of moving beyond the "neutral" position that many in academia, media, and politics *demand* of academics.

In the 1990s, right-wing parties and politicians were classified as "extreme right" and even "fascist" without much more evidence than a critical position on immigration or one cherry-picked (or misinterpreted) statement. This would lead to little opposition from within academia or society, which was, in general, not very interested in conceptual and definitional issues. There were some important exceptions, however. Most notably, in 1999, the Austrian far-right leader Jörg Haider took the prominent local political scientist Anton Pelinka to court, accusing him of "defamation" in an interview Pelinka gave on Italian TV. Although Pelinka's initial conviction was overturned on appeal, the case had a chilling effect on scholars in Austria and beyond (Dedaic and Nelson 2001; Noll 2001). Legal action against scholars by far-right actors has increased in recent years, although actual court cases remain rare and (final) convictions even rarer. That said, each case sends a warning to other scholars, and it would be naive to assume that this has not led to caution at best and self-censorship at worst.

The situation is particularly challenging in far right–governed countries and states. In Poland, for example, the far-right government dominated by Law and Justice (PiS) has passed legislation that effectively mandates how the Holocaust can be studied. This has already led to local courts ordering historians to apologize for statements in

1 This is in contrast to the fact that, at that time, my brother was still a prominent far-right activist in the Netherlands, which closed at least as many doors as it opened within the broader movement.

books on the Holocaust, although some convictions were overturned on appeal (Wójcik 2021). The situation is even more dire in India, where the Modi government has been involved in a concerted effort to "Saffronize" the country, that is, to make official history more in line with its far-right Hindutva ideology, which includes the close monitoring of research and teaching (see Jaffrelot 2021, 400–404).

Nonlegal threats have increased and changed as well. When writing op-eds in grad school, I would occasionally get a handwritten letter at my university address, almost always written by an old man who would, in a more or less disparaging tone, tell me that I was wrong, ignorant, stupid, and/or a communist. With the ascendence of the Internet, and in particular social media, these "letters to the editor" have multiplied, becoming more often anonymous, and more threatening. Although I have received my fair share of (anonymous) threats, my privileges and physical distance—living in the US but mainly speaking and writing about Europe—have largely protected me from the worst. Sadly, in today's world, researching the far right, let alone speaking openly about it in the media or on social media, opens one up to a world of abuse, particularly if you are a (younger) woman or a person of color. And this intimidation can literally hit very close to home—for instance, several female scholars in the Netherlands were harassed and intimidated at home.

But the biggest change has taken place within academia. While there have always been scholars with open sympathy for the far right, nativism and particularly Islamophobia have become more prominent within academia in the wake of the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and the mainstreaming of far-right ideas and parties (Mondon and Winter 2020). Today, some key far-right beliefs are openly propagated by established academics, including some within the broader field of right-wing studies—probably the most notable examples are white identity politics in the book *Whiteshift* by Eric Kaufmann (2018) and populism in *Values, Voice and Virtue* by Matthew Goodwin (2023). Even worse, some scholars (like Pierre-André Taguieff in France and Kaufmann in the UK) play an active role in the push for (state) repression of the scholarship of the far right, and other fields and topics, under the vague guise of opposing "gender ideology," "Islamo-gauchisme," or "wokeness" (Louati 2021; Zia-Ebrahimi 2023)—all terms with a strong far-right connection. It has created a schizophrenic world in which we mostly still write from an (implicit) assumption of a liberal democratic consensus while describing in detail how this consensus is actually disappearing in the real world (if it ever truly existed).

Teaching the Far Right

The first time I taught a course on the far right was as a graduate student at Leiden University in, if memory serves me correctly, 1996. Since then, I have been teaching a course on "Far-Right Politics in Western Democracies" almost annually at universities across the globe, including in Belgium, Hungary, Japan, and the US. The far right has always been a popular topic among graduate and undergraduate students. As with the

broader public, it is mainly a normative issue for my students, who often have a hard time seeing it also as an academic topic to be studied more impartially.

Originally, my course was almost exclusively focused on far-right parties in (Western) Europe—a consequence of my training as a scholar of Western European political parties. After several years, I moved away from a country- and party-centric structure and moved to a more comparative and theoretical approach that also included nonparty aspects, such as social movements, music, and violence. In part this reflected a broader, albeit slow, movement within the field (see Castelli Gattinara 2020). Upon moving to the US, in 2008, I slowly expanded the coverage of the US far right, which now encompasses roughly one-third of my course and is constantly updated. I also increasingly refer to the situation in other regions in class—notably Brazil, India, and Israel—although the course remains too Eurocentric (see below).

I have always taught my course against the legal and normative context of liberal democracy, which the far right threatens ideologically and politically. Within Europe, with few exceptions, students were aware of and concerned about the far-right threat, often exaggerating it, but in the US they initially had no conception of either the movement or its (potential) threat to US democracy. I used to talk my European students off the ledge by explaining that, while the far right constituted a threat in some countries, the "political mainstream" was still solidly constituted by (self-proclaimed) liberal democrats. This strategy completely backfired in the US, where the first time I taught the course most students ended with the idea that the far right was an irrelevant political phenomenon of the past.

The most significant change in my teaching has come from the political environment. Although I had occasionally encountered a student who was not concerned about the far right, or even expressed support for some of its core ideas, my teaching assumed that all students shared a preference for liberal democracy and considered the far right at least a potential problem or threat. Interestingly, most of my students shared this assumption too and usually spoke from this perspective in class discussions. Moreover, I was used to teaching in a political environment, including the university administration, that shared this normative framework.

This was challenged for the first time when I moved, in 2002, to Antwerp, a city where at that time roughly one in three people voted for the far-right Flemish Bloc, later rebranded as Flemish Interest (Vlaams Belang, VB). Unsurprisingly, I had several VB supporters in my class, including some active in its student and youth organizations. Although supporting the biggest party in the city, they never identified as VB supporters in class or defended the far right or VB in class discussions. Several admitted their sympathy or activism to me in private and some even wrote MA theses with me. Although the knowledge of having VB supporters in my class made me more aware of some of the unsubstantiated "received wisdoms" that the field held—for instance, it was common in the literature to describe parties as antisemitic or racist without providing clear or convincing examples—I never felt uncomfortable in class. Actually, I believe that their presence made my teaching, and scholarship, better by making

sure I had academic evidence for my qualifications and statements and that I was not, unconsciously, relying on received wisdom.

This has changed in recent years. I currently teach at a public university in a GOP-controlled US state, where many of my students come from relatively conservative families, including supporters of Trump.[2] Consequently, several students come into the course supporting the GOP and Trump or, at least, seeing them as mainstream conservatives. The difference from teaching far-right students in Antwerp, however, is that the political and university context in Georgia is fundamentally different. The local Republican Party, which is in full control of Georgia politics, is staunchly pro-Trump and many prominent members are among the most outspoken Trump supporters (e.g., US House of Representatives members Marjorie Tayler Greene and Andrew Clyde, both incidentally graduates of my university). It is in this hostile context that I sometimes teach students who are active in far-right organizations like Turning Point USA, infamous for its Professor Watchlist project that targets progressive faculty at US universities (disproportionately minorities and women).

Has this changed the way that I teach my course? I would like to say no, but I doubt that is entirely true. At the very least, I am much more cautious about the political bias of the nonacademic sources I use in my course, particularly media sources. And although I have not fundamentally changed the content of the course, I do feel that I am more accommodating to far-right students than I used to be (and sometimes than I would like to be)—then again, so are most of my students, who rarely challenge each other in the classroom. To be clear, I have never been explicitly censured or reported for my teaching, by either students or administrators, but I have felt less comfortable and supported at my university in recent years. Although this has not fundamentally changed my views on liberal democracy and the far right, or made me less open about them to my students, it has made me less eager to teach the course and, at times, more concerned about negative consequences.

Eurocentrism

There is no doubt that the study of the far right is very Eurocentric (Castelli Gattinara 2020; Leidig 2020), meaning not only that European scholars and scholarship on Europe are central to the field, but also that their experiences and perspectives dominate scholarship, even by non-European scholars and in studies of the non-European far right. Much of this has to do with broader Eurocentrism in academia in general and the social sciences in particular (Alvares 2011; Joseph, Reddy, and Searle-Chatterjee 1990). But there is clearly more, as the study of populism, for example, is less Eurocentric

2 In fact, in recent years my course has become a sort of "self-help" course for some students, who hope to understand why their parent or parents have fallen into the QAnon rabbit hole.

than that of the far right—which is not to say that it is not Eurocentric at all (see Finchelstein 2019).

I think there are at least two explanations for the specific Eurocentrism of far-right studies (Mudde 2016). First, the field emerged largely out of the study of (historical) fascism. Second, at least in the third wave, it was heavily dominated by political science, which focuses disproportionately on electoral and party politics. Because of these two interrelated explanations, much of the foundations of the field come from the study of far-right parties in Western Europe—which was itself heavily influenced by earlier (behavioralist) scholarship in North America. Although the study of far-right politics has since moved well beyond the geographical constraints of Western Europe, the field remains "firmly Euro-American in character" (Alvares 2011, 73), as much of this new research has uncritically adopted the assumptions and methodologies of Euro-American scholarship.[3]

Even as the study of the far right has become less party-centric, focusing increasingly on political violence and social media, Eurocentrism remains present. Still, slowly but steadily, there is a push to break out of it, as can be seen from initiatives like the Manchester University Press Global Studies of the Far Right book series (edited by Eviane Leidig, William Allchorn, and Ariel Alejandro Goldstein) and the related Center for Research on Extremism Global Perspectives on the Far Right webinar series (organized by Eviane Leidig), as well as a growing number of critical publications (Castelli Gattinara 2020; Pinheiro-Machado and Vargas-Maia 2023a, 2023b). This revision is not only important for more accurately analyzing new waves of far-right politics outside of Europe but also for better understanding the far right in Europe itself.

As is often the case with critiques of hegemonic positions, such critiques of far-right studies are presented as more original and radical than they truly are. For instance, although the five "singularities of the Global South" mentioned by Rosana Pinheiro-Machado and Tatiana Vargas-Maia (2023a) might be more pronounced in that region than in the Global North, none is truly "singular" to that region. Theoretically, neither economic anxiety nor nativism is restricted to "white men" and each can be, and has been, applied to nonwhite countries and groups (on India, for instance, see Jaffrelot 2021). Similarly, the legacy of dictatorships and strongmen has been explicitly addressed in works on Eastern and Southern Europe (Art 2006; Kitschelt and McGann 1995), while religion has always been central to studies of the Eastern European and US far right (Barkun 1994; Kaplan 1997; Minkenberg 2018; Ramet 1996). And, finally, feminist social movements have also been identified by scholars as important sources of resistance to far-right actors and policies (Petö and Grzebalska 2018). In fact, at a metatheoretical level, one could argue that Eastern Europe, and even Southern Europe,

3 This observation refers exclusively to the (limited) English-language literature I am familiar with. The situation might be different for research published in Portuguese and Spanish.

are more part of the colonized periphery of the "Global South" than they are of the colonizing center of the "Global North."

All of this is neither to deny or minimize Eurocentrism within the field nor to discourage initiatives to make the field truly global in terms of not just geographical scope of study but also theoretical framework. This is even more important with the recent shift in far-right propaganda and targeting, from ethnic others to ideological others—that is, from Islam to "woke" and from "immigration" to "gender ideology." Recent work on the (far-) right's fight against "gender ideology" in Latin America (Moraes Teixeira and Bulgarelli 2023; Payne, Zulver, and Escoffier 2023) can only strengthen the important ongoing scholarship on the topic in Europe (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017; Kováts 2017; Petö and Grzebalska 2018). It can also, perhaps, move scholarship on the far right beyond its central focus on nativism (something, again, which is very much part of my own work).

Presentism

Since the election of Donald Trump in 2016, the field has seen an influx of hundreds of new scholars, from graduate students to established full professors. This has made presentism—the myopic focus on current ideas, attitudes, and experiences—a major risk, leading to ahistorical analyses and reinventing of the wheel over and over again. Presentism has a lot of different causes but is mostly a consequence of unawareness rather than malice, and of the pressure to oversell the originality of one's work to get it published. Scholars either think the present is so different from the past that we can learn little from history or they are simply unaware of the older literature. This is perhaps most striking in some of the contemporary work under the (unqualified) heading of "populism"—it does not just ignore a long tradition of populism research from the twentieth century but also the bulk of scholarship on the third wave of the far right, which did not yet use the term populism.

And yet, most pre-2016 studies on the "radical right" or "right-wing extremism" are probably more relevant to research on contemporary populism than is most general work on populism. For instance, many of the contemporary academic and public debates in the wake of Brexit and Trump, such as support versus protest, or economic anxiety versus cultural backlash (see Mudde 2019), have been fought and studied in Western Europe since the 1990s. In fact, one of the most convincing explanations of support for far-right attitudes and politicians today, so-called social status anxiety, was already introduced in the study of the "radical right" in the US by Seymour Martin Lipset (1955) seventy years ago—a fact that, sadly, some recent studies fail to acknowledge.

At the same time, too much of the academic and public debate is too rigidly steeped in the literature of the third wave. Simply stated, it still considers the far right as political outsiders, who only recently achieved electoral success and political relevance, primarily based on protest voting. But the essence of the fourth wave of the far right is the mainstreaming and normalization—in terms of actors, ideas, and issues—of at least

the *radical* right, meaning that part of the right that is formally democratic but rejects some key liberal protections like minority rights or separation of powers (Mudde 2019). In other words, the relationship between the "political mainstream" and the far right in general, and the radical right in particular, has changed fundamentally, which has crucial conceptual, empirical, and theoretical consequences.

First and foremost, leaving aside the theoretical and normative problems with the concept of "mainstream" (Moffitt 2022; Mondon and Winter 2020), empirically the "political mainstream" is no longer exclusively liberal democratic in many countries. In fact, in a growing number of countries, it is either partly (e.g., in Brazil and the US) or predominantly (e.g., in Hungary, India, and Italy) far right. Consequently, the traditional "challenger paradigm" of the third wave, in which the "far right" challenges the "political mainstream," now makes little sense in these countries—or, at the very least, it requires a fundamental revision. Similarly, the dominant "economic anxiety versus cultural backlash" debate misses a crucial alternative explanation dominant in many electoral studies of "mainstream" parties: "pocketbook voting" (Lewis-Beck 1985). With far-right parties in government specifically targeting subsets of the electorate with state subsidies, at least part of their support is likely because of specific policies rather than ideology or protest (Orenstein and Bugarič 2022).

Second, the mainstreaming of populist radical right actors and ideas has opened up space for *extreme* right actors and ideas—meaning those that are not just antiliberal but antidemocratic too (Mudde 2019). In both Hungary and Poland, the radical right "mainstream" party has faced a (partly) extreme right challenger, at least for some time—Jobbik (before its moderation) and Confederation, respectively. Moreover, populist radical right parties have grown more extreme in terms of actions and ideas. In Hungary, the governing Fidesz has not just destroyed liberal democracy but democracy as such. In Brazil and the US, large parts of the "right-wing" camp reject the results of the last presidential election and openly support a failed coup attempt. I would argue that this is a logical consequence of the mainstreaming of radical right actors and ideas, which has shifted the boundary of acceptability so much to the far right that openly antisemitic, antidemocratic, and racist ideas no longer seem (and no longer are) disconnected from the political "mainstream."

Conclusion

Though obvious to many, it is important to state explicitly that the success of the far right did not start with Trump or with social media. At least since the 1990s, populist radical right parties have been gaining electoral successes and their ideas have slowly but steadily influenced other parties and society as a whole (Mudde 2007). At the same time, the far right today is not the far right of my youth (let alone of the youth of my parents). Not only is it much more successful overall, electorally and politically, it has become relevant in more countries and regions, has partly created new enemies (e.g., Islam and "gender ideology"), and has found new ways to mobilize supporters

and propagate ideas (e.g., social media). Most importantly, it operates in a much more sympathetic cultural and political environment, with enablers and supporters in the elites of all key sectors, from academia to the media and from economics to politics (Bale and Rovira Kaltwasser 2021; Mondon and Winter 2020). Although the study of the far right is one of the most vibrant fields of academia today, it struggles to keep up with these developments.

When I started studying the far right, three decades ago, I had little choice but to read "mainstream" political science literature, as there was not yet enough academic literature on far-right politics available (not even in languages other than English). Today, scholars are no longer able to keep up with everything written on far-right politics because of its sheer, and rapidly expanding, volume, particularly if closely related literatures on topics like "populism" are included. And because of the ever-growing academic infrastructure of the subfield—there are more and more academic journals and book series that cater exclusively or mainly to far-right studies—scholars can have a successful academic career while reading and publishing mainly, if not exclusively, within the field of far-right studies.

To be clear, there is important intellectual value in creating an academic infrastructure for the study of "the far right." Like most important political phenomena, far-right politics is complex in its causes, consequences, and forms. To understand the phenomenon in all its complexity, an inter- or multidisciplinary approach is needed, which is facilitated by initiatives like the UC Berkeley Center for Right-Wing Studies (CRWS), the Center for Research on Extremism (C-REX) at the University of Oslo, the Polarization and Extremism Research and Innovation Lab (PERIL) at American University, and the summer schools organized by the ECPR Standing Group on Extremism and Democracy.[4] At the same time, from an academic career perspective, multidisciplinary initiatives always run the risk of being undervalued by the traditional disciplines, which still dominate the structure of most universities, including hiring decisions.

Yet, as far-right actors and ideas have become mainstreamed in many countries, across several continents, the need to integrate the study of the far right into the "mainstream" study of politics (or social media and social movements) has become even more obvious and urgent (see also Castelli Gattinara 2020). Of course, scholars should be aware and critical of the numerous biases of "mainstream" academia, including Eurocentrism and presentism, which were discussed in this essay. Moreover, "mainstream" academia prioritizes and rewards just a narrow range of research topics and methods, while the study of far-right politics is in dire need of a broader rather than a narrower research focus and methodology. As Pietro Castelli Gattinara (2020, 326) has powerfully argued, "It is only by infusing the field with insights from broader social and political science

4 I want to thank Pietro Castelli Gattinara for reminding me of this important aspect. For full disclosure, I must also acknowledge that I have been involved, in some (minor) capacity, in all four initiatives.

paradigms, by adding knowledge from other contexts beyond Europe, and by exploring new methods and data, that we can acknowledge and theorize ongoing developments within this specific breed of politics."

But as scholars challenge and build upon the work of previous generations, they should not forget to reflect, more explicitly and collectively, on the consequences, for the field in general and their personal situation in particular, of the mainstreaming of far-right actors and ideas. Compared to thirty years ago, the stakes of the study of far-right politics are much higher, both for democracy and for scholars. And although I do not envy the new generation of young scholars, who work in an academic and political world that is, in many (but not all!) ways, less accommodating and supportive than the one I made most of my career in, I do feel encouraged, empowered, and inspired by their conviction and zeal.

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ESSAY

Burn after Reading

Research-Related Trauma, Burnout, and Resilience in Right-Wing Studies

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Last year, in preparation for my academic discipline's biggest international conference, the International Communication Association (ICA), I purchased a T-shirt from the ICA web store with the words "FCUK INDIVIDUAL RESILIENCE" emblazoned across the front alongside a newly redesigned association logo. The shirt was inspired by the 2021 article "Academic Caregivers on Organizational and Community Resilience in Academia (Fuck Individual Resilience)," by Sun Joo (Grace) Ahn, Emily T. Cripe, Brooke Foucault Welles, Shannon C. McGregor, Katy E. Pearce, Nikki Usher, and Jessica Vitak. The article draws on Patrice M. Buzzanell's resilience scholarship to make a series of recommendations for moving away from individualized approaches and toward "organizational and community resilience" (Ahn et al. 2021, 301). While the article focuses on a lack of institutional support for academics with additional caregiving responsibilities (e.g., parents who care for children or those who care for aging parents), the authors also recognize that the recommendations they make will ultimately "help *everyone* in academia" (301, original emphasis). In an era when ever more disciplines and subjects are politicized and, following from that, ever more university students, staff, faculty members, and administrators find themselves in the proverbial hot seat for the content of their scholarship, it is clear *everyone* needs the help that community and organizational approaches to resilience could provide. Perhaps nowhere is this truer than in right-wing, extremism, or far-right studies and adjacent disciplines.[1] But a recent investigation of Canadian universities found that only one of the responding media relations offices had any resources available for the increasing risk of harassment related to public-facing scholarship (Ketchum 2020). It is not unreasonable to assume this is similarly the case elsewhere.

1 While an imperfect term, "far right" is used as an umbrella term encompassing the illiberal, extremist, and antidemocratic right for the remainder of this essay.

The T-shirt is also a fundraiser with proceeds earmarked to provide free childcare for student ICA attendees with kids—certainly, a cause well worth the $25 price tag and an excellent example of community resilience. But, more than that, the message—of both the article and the T-shirt—deeply resonated with me. I wore the shirt proudly on the first day of the conference with jeans, a blazer, my N95 mask, and sensible flats for trekking all over the expansive Parisian conference center, and it proved a reliable and often compelling conversation starter. After reading the article, wearing the T-shirt, and having conversations about the shirt with colleagues and friends conducting research on the right wing and far right, I began to make connections between this community resilience experience and another topic I have been tinkering with for the better part of the past two years—research-related trauma (RRT), that is, trauma related to studying harmful content. Since that time, my perspective on RRT has more fully developed. This essay is an early attempt to flesh out my thinking on organizational and community resilience and how scholars of the far right and beyond might begin to tackle the mental, emotional, and physical risks of conducting research on harmful content and groups as well as such associated manifestations of RRT as burnout.

Research-related trauma has been conceptualized by political scientists Cyanne E. Loyle and Alicia Simoni (2017, 141) as "the psychological harm that emerges from exposure to death or violence while engaging in research." While this body of scholarship is still in its relative infancy by academic standards, it first emerged as a response to concerns around the trauma caused by conducting fieldwork in conflict zones or working with people who have experienced pervasive death and violence. Because this research area has historically been geared toward these populations, as well as survivors of sexual violence, many of the recommendations to improve conditions for those experiencing RRT have tended to echo the highly individualized personal care strategies Ahn et al. implicitly rail against (e.g., therapy, peer support, exercise, ample sleep, practicing mindfulness, taking breaks, maintaining meaningful connections, etc.).[2]

Early work in this vein has also tended to overlook other forms of RRT—namely, harassment-related research trauma (HRRT) and symbolic research-related trauma (SRRT). Along with scholars studying newly politicized topics, researchers of the far right are likely to experience organized harassment campaigns and spend long hours analyzing potentially traumatic content. Kathleen Blee (2007, 121) has written of HRRT that "it is not uncommon for extreme rightest groups to actively intimidate potential researchers with explicit or implicit threats of violence." I have personal and professional relationships with (mostly female and LGBTQ) scholars of the far right

2 To be clear, there is nothing inherently wrong with these practices. I have practiced all of them at one time or another in the course of my research on supremacism, violent extremist communication, far-right media and politics, mis- and disinformation, and conspiracism; however, they all put the burden of detraumatization on the person who has been traumatized in the first place. In other words, they are individual band-aids on a gaping structural wound.

who have been threatened with lawsuits for public scholarship, received rape and death threats, been doxxed, and more. You probably do too, and you should find some wood to knock on if you do not. Repeated, long-term exposure to symbolic forms of violence (e.g., racist, sexist, or anti-LGBTQ media narratives and online discourses) while conducting research can also lead to another kind of trauma—SRRT. I can personally attest, for example, that immersing yourself in harmful content can leave you feeling irritable and exhausted on even the best days. (I once had to take a week "off" after reading and analyzing thousands of pages of white supremacist content.) Thomas Colley and Martin Moore (2022) have highlighted mental health concerns related to sustained researcher exposure to harmful content. Similarly, in recent interviews for a forthcoming study of early career researchers and harmful online content, my coauthors and I found that most of our participants had experienced some form of RRT and its mental or physical manifestations. Importantly, the risk of RRT for researchers of the far right—whether it stems from fieldwork, harassment, or repeated exposure to symbolic violence—is more pronounced for graduate students, precariously employed staff, and scholars researching harmful groups and content when they are related to those scholars' intersectional identity (e.g., a trans woman studying anti-trans hate groups or a Black woman studying white nationalism).

Of course, we scholars who conduct research on the far right, disinformation, hate speech, conspiracism, supremacism, extremism, radicalization, and other similar topics (as well as the ever-increasing list of "newly" politicized topics like vaccination) did in many cases choose to build our research agendas around these subjects. I, for example, transitioned from a specific focus on male supremacism to the far right more broadly due to personal and professional concerns about a lack of intersectional scholarship in the discipline. Some readers may be thinking that we have no one to blame but ourselves if we experience RRT while exploring, analyzing, or critiquing our chosen research area, so why bother building, rethinking, or restructuring organizational and community resilience. But such thinking downplays very real internal academic imperatives and external political landscapes that shape how we carry out our work.

Internally, there are several cross-cutting factors that can contribute to difficulties with changing one's research agenda. First, graduate students regularly conduct research on behalf of their advisors rather than choose a specific research area for themselves.[3] In these cases, students will most likely graduate with a body of work that best positions them for academic or alternative-academic (alt-ac) jobs that require maintaining this research agenda. In the case of far-right studies, this may mean alt-ac jobs in areas such as deradicalization or countering violent extremism (CVE) since academic roles with a far-right emphasis are somewhat limited outside of a few dedicated centers—increasingly

3 These students likely selected their graduate programs and advisors because they were interested in similar topics, but this is not always the case. At many institutions, advisor-advisee matches are simply made by the administration.

so in the current political climate. This is a detriment for knowledge production in our field. Second, the academic job market tends to reward applicants from "prestige" programs who have high numbers of publications or funded grants around a clear and cohesive research agenda. For critical scholars of the far right who are uninterested in taking money from government agencies—like Department of Justice funding for CVE—this also limits academic opportunities, particularly in less precarious positions such as tenure-track jobs. Third, the informal mandates to "publish or perish" and build a public profile often mean researchers have spent years focusing on one highly specialized research area that may have a few related branches.[4] I, for example, focus on supremacism, harmful online content, far-right media and politics, and associated disinformation and conspiracism, all from an intersectional feminist perspective rooted in political communication. To change that now, after seven years, would be akin to a full-scale reset of my academic career. Finally, many scholars studying the far right conduct their research because they hope to help fix the problem. They may be well aware of the inherent risks associated with this work, but in hoping to make the world a better, safer place, they actively work at not allowing these dangers to scare them away from their mission, including when support is required to reduce these harms.[5]

Even if from an internal perspective it were easy or desirable to change one's research area away from far-right studies, the external political landscape has changed drastically in recent years. There are many tenured faculty who have been studying these topics for decades and are now potentially blindsided when they experience HRRT at the hands of students, colleagues, administrators, "grassroots activists," and even government officials and online trolls.[6] Student evaluations of instructors can reflect racial and gender biases.[7] Friends and colleagues have noted student evaluations that now "armchair quarterback" their areas of research expertise and/or accuse them of ideological favoritism. I personally get at least one evaluation almost every semester that describes my visual communication class (a critical field often deployed in far-right studies to interrogate memes, symbols, etc.) as "too liberal" because the textbook unpacks the asymmetrical power dynamics of visuality and the persuasive capacity of looking, which these students seem to perceive as progressive "wokeism."

But it is not just students who have begun targeting those who research harmful content. Some colleagues and administrators, too, voice concerns about these lines

4 Importantly, building a public profile (increasingly prized by academic institutions) also increases the likelihood of HRRT.

5 See, for instance, works on the importance of public scholarship around social injustice (Billard 2019) and communication studies broadly (Billard and Waisbord 2024).

6 I do not mean to imply that RRT—in all its variations—is a new phenomenon. However, the uptick in right-wing and far-right media outlets, as well as the speed with which related rhetoric and harassment can circulate online, has exacerbated the issue.

7 On bias in student evaluations, see note 14.

of scholarship because right-wing grievances about left-wing indoctrination do not magically disappear when you step across the campus border. Prior to joining my current institution, while still on the job market, I received some anecdotal remarks about my research agenda being too contentious in the current political climate. While this can be a hurdle most anywhere, it is more likely to be considered an issue in locations, such as the US South, where attacks on higher education have become par for the political course. Additionally, the appeal of neo-reactionary philosophy—traditionalist, antimodernist, "postliberal"—while fringe, is growing in academic spaces, as is founding right-wing centers and installing right-wing leadership at colleges and universities.[8] Conservative activist organizations, like the Leadership Institute, have been pushing academia as a leftist "evil empire" for decades, while organizations like Turning Point USA (TPUSA) curate its Professor Watchlist and help students file lawsuits against colleges and universities.[9] Even at the highest echelons of power, the "liberal elite" narrative in academia is present—former US education secretary Betsy DeVos infamously and erroneously bemoaned leftist indoctrination of students on college campuses at the 2017 Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC).[10] These trends parallel growing attacks on trans rights and women's reproductive health, and associated political violence, beyond academia. The rhetoric is not only factually inaccurate but also inflames online trolls (who regularly respond by targeting and harassing journalists, activists, and researchers) and fuels conservative politicians' efforts to quell academic freedom and whitewash course content.[11]

University of Tennessee professor Robert L. Williams wrote almost twenty years ago that "a conservative sociopolitical culture poses [a threat] to academic freedom in state colleges and universities" (2006, 5). More recently, the *American Conservative* cheered the "end of academic 'freedom'" as a "conservative achievement," suggesting

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8 An example of the allure of antimodernist postliberalism is Deneen (2018). The North Carolina Board of Trustees, early in 2023, passed a resolution (bypassing shared governance in these matters) to launch a School of Civic Life and Leadership at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill designed as "an effort to remedy" a lack of "right-of-center views," as described by the board chairman on *Fox and Friends* (Quinn 2023). Also, Florida's governor, Ron DeSantis, waged a hostile takeover at New College of Florida and an all-out assault on liberal arts education in the state, vowing to transform the college into a "bastion of conservatism" (Mazzei 2023).

9 Early results from my own research on TPUSA's Professor Watchlist indicate BIPOC and non-gender-conforming scholars conducting research on social justice issues are overrepresented relative to their presence in the academy.

10 This came as little surprise considering DeVos is likely connected (financially and personally) with the conservative website The College Fix. For her ties to The College Fix, see Fain and Seltzer (2017). For an overview of DeVos's CPAC speech, see Jaschik (2017). On lawsuits by TPUSA, see Boothe (2017).

11 "Grassroots activists" are also trying to effect change in these areas at the K–12 level, turning up at school board meetings to discuss curriculum and harassing library workers over attempted book bans largely related to so-called culture war topics.

"tenure is on life support, and so are academic freedom of speech and inquiry as we have known them since at least the mid-twentieth century" (Ahmari 2023). These threats to academic freedom disproportionately impact scholars researching the far right and related social justice topics. Republican US congressperson Jim Jordan of Ohio, for example, recently weaponized Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests to harass researchers studying politicized topics such as disinformation (Bernstein 2023). Florida, Georgia, and Texas, among other states, have either banned or are investigating the funding of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives.[12] Arkansas senator Tom Cotton introduced in 2021 the Stop CRT Act to federally defund institutions teaching critical race theory (CRT). Since then almost every state has seen efforts to ban the teaching of CRT or "divisive concepts." Following the ban of gender studies programs in Hungary in 2018 (Kent and Tapfumaneyi 2018), some US states have also attempted to follow suit, despite reports that interest in the discipline is increasing.[13] Already in these places, faculty are left with unpleasant decisions to make—change their research agenda (as we have already established, not an easy task), seek employment elsewhere in a saturated and competitive job market, quit or retire, or stay to fight. We might also characterize these assaults on academic freedom as sources of RRT.

At the end of the day, whether you are an overworked academic caregiver (such as those on which Ahn et al. focus), conduct research on the far right in a state where your work is under attack, have been targeted for FOIA requests by the likes of Jim Jordan, or spend your days conducting far-right research that may lead to RRT, the symptoms of trauma are overwhelmingly similar. Colley and Moore (2020, 22) describe feelings of "despondency, numbness, intimidation, and isolation." Loyle and Simoni (2017, 142) list many "intense or unpredictable feelings," "changes to thoughts or behavior patterns," "strained personal relationships," and "stress-related physical symptoms," including anxiety, nervousness, impatience, feeling overwhelmed, trouble eating and sleeping, difficulty concentrating, feelings of isolation, increased levels of conflict, withdrawal, headaches, nausea, and ultimately, burnout.

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12 A recent report reviewed "the apparent pattern of politically, racially, and ideologically motivated attacks on public higher education in Florida" and found that the "hostile takeover" of the New College of Florida is viewed as a "test case." Administrators are either acquiescing to the attacks or are complicit in them; the bills passed in Florida represent "a systematic effort to dictate and enforce conformity with a narrow and reactionary political and ideological agenda"; and self-censorship and fear are running rampant in this context. See AAUP (2023).

13 In the United States, states, including Florida and Wyoming, have attempted (in some cases successfully) to defund gender studies programs despite a 2023 report called "Protecting Our Futures: Challenges and Strategies for Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies," which pointed to increasing student interest (Alonso 2024). This may be linked to broader efforts to defund these programs by groups such as the conservative National Association of Scholars, which manages the website www.mindingthecampus.org.

The Mayo Clinic (2023) describes work-related burnout or "job burnout" as "a special type of work-related stress—a state of physical or emotional exhaustion that also involves a sense of reduced accomplishment and loss of personal identity." The organization also describes causes, risk factors, and symptoms of job burnout. Among the common causes of job burnout are a "lack of control," "unclear job expectations," "dysfunctional workplace dynamics," "extremes of activity," "lack of social support," and "work-life imbalance." In the academy, we experience all of these to varying degrees.

For scholars of the far right specifically, these demoralizing features of our higher education system butt up against pressures related to our research, and create compounding stressors that can hasten burnout from RRT, HRRT and SRRT. External actors such as local and federal politicians increasingly wield disproportionate pressure that threatens academic freedom and limits perceived control over our day-to-day professional lives. We may, for example, be implicitly or explicitly encouraged to avoid certain topics deemed not "germane" to our teaching. We may worry about our ability to publicize research about the far right without becoming targets of organized harassment campaigns or weaponized FOIA requests. We may experience a lingering sense of uncertainty or dread that politically inspired budget cuts will see our faculty lines disappear, or suffer anxiety around whether our research agendas will be deemed "tenure worthy" beyond our department. We may even have trouble publishing our research in journals beyond "niche" area studies either because that work displays normative commitments rooted in our desire to make the world better and safer or, alternatively, because it fails to align with more general disciplinary norms.

A perceived lack of control also can arise from unclear top-down mandates pertaining to job expectations. Undertaking leadership work at academia-adjacent organizations like the Global Network on Extremism and Technology (GNET), the Global Internet Forum to Counter Extremism (GIFCT), the Institute for Research on Male Supremacism (IRMS), and other similar nonprofits or think tanks may be highly relevant to our research agendas but frowned upon in lieu of department, college, institutional, or more general disciplinary service. Ratings of teaching excellence can be marred by evaluations from students who base their opinions on our gender or race, or on preconceived notions of our political leanings based on our research agendas, which are easily found online. This is further heightened for BIPOC, non-gender-conforming, and women scholars who already tend to receive comparatively worse—and identity-based—evaluations.[14] Also, publishing outside of academic journals (e.g.,

14 Studies on gender bias in teaching evaluations have been conducted for years with mixed results. However, several recent qualitative studies find support for bias related to a failure to "do gender" correctly (Adams et al. 2021; Gelber et al. 2022). See also Colleen (2022). Similarly, scholars have noted not only that women tend to experience bias in student evaluations but also that people of color do (Chávez and Mitchell 2020). While there is comparatively less research on how political views may impact student evaluations, at least one study indicates that students' perceptions of an instructor's politics may impact their evaluation (Kelly-Woessner and Woessner 2006). Additional research is needed related to politics and student evaluations in the contemporary climate.

op-eds, whitepapers, reports, etc.) or producing "creative" content (e.g., podcasts and documentaries) about our areas of focus may not count toward tenure and promotion.

Unfortunately, a lack of control and unclear job expectations—especially when combined with high-stakes research areas like far-right studies—can also quickly lead to dysfunctional work environments. While this dysfunction may or may not be discernible in our home departments or institutions, the interdisciplinary nature of our field can lead to gatekeeping and infighting, some of which has resulted in high-profile, and very public, arguments or meltdowns. Similarly, the academy's baked-in extremes of activity and work-life imbalance are intensified in the case of far-right studies due to a lack of the formalized social support necessary to (at least partially) ameliorate RRT, HRRT, SRRT, and burnout. If there are no secure institutional mechanisms for support, how do we communicate with one another? Where do we fit this communication into our already jam-packed schedules? In the end, many far-right scholars may be left to suffer alone and in silence. My first experience with sustained harassment, for example, was interpersonal. A former colleague from my magazine days took issue with my research agenda, which he found online, and spent months creating new and ever more explicit fake email addresses to spam me with hate mail. Because this occurred during my first year on the tenure track, I felt I had precious little time to seek support about the situation from my peers despite having built an informal support network since graduate school. In the end, tears were cried, curses were shouted into the ether, and the HRRT I experienced was left unresolved and festering.

Unsurprisingly, the Mayo Clinic's (2023) recommendations to address job burnout echo the forms of individual resilience previously described. Experiencing extreme stress? Do some yoga and *relax*. Feeling irritable? Get some *exercise* to improve your mood. Having trouble sleeping? Well, just get more *sleep*. Concentration on the fritz? Practice *mindfulness*. Feeling sad or disillusioned? Why not try seeking *social support* from friends, family, and colleagues. But, as Ahn et al. (2021, 303) note, "Structural change is critical to remove structural barriers." Whether we are talking about caregiving during a crisis, RRT, or job burnout, we must rethink how we combat ongoing attacks on academic freedom and human rights, as well as how we can reprioritize efforts away from individualized recommendations and toward structural solutions and change using organizational and community resilience. At last year's ICA conference in May 2023, my collaborators (including Drs. T. J. Billard, Rae Jereza, Ayse Lokmanoglu, and Nanditha Narayanamoorthy) and I convened a Blue Sky workshop on RRT aiming toward "the defanging of higher ed."[15] The group identified four main areas for institutional and community support and resilience. While these suggestions would benefit everyone working in higher education, they hold particular promise for those

15 Other groups have also discussed these matters, including a recently formed working group on risky research organized by Alice Marwick, who has also conducted related research, at the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) and elsewhere.

conducting research related to the far right who are at higher risk of legal, physical, and mental health ramifications related to their work and are subject to additional monetary costs around personal safety and security.[16]

1. **Legal.** Colleges and universities can offer legal aid to employees who are being threatened with lawsuits stemming from public scholarship about their research areas, as well as representation when those threats turn into legal action. They can also provide training and welcome transparent and collaborative conversations with faculty about FOIA requests, including how they handle research in progress and redacting personal information. Legal counsel can take the time to learn more about faculty research agendas, particularly those who work in politicized areas like the far right and are more likely to be targeted for harassment. Finally, larger associations affiliated with higher education (e.g., the American Association of University Professors) can work together to establish or expand pro bono legal assistance for researchers facing harassment, FOIA weaponization, and lawsuits.
2. **Financial.** Shoring up or maintaining personal security costs money that many students, early career scholars, and precariously employed faculty simply do not have. The cost of purchasing services (like DeleteMe and Privacy Pro) and technology (like VPNs), among other things, adds up. Colleges and universities could launch small grants for researchers studying harmful and politicized topics to purchase the things they most need to keep them as safe as possible in the course of their work. Similarly, academic associations, publishers, and other similar organizations that rely on academic labor for their success can establish similar funds and target them toward those most in need of financial aid. From a community perspective, the "FCUK INDIVIDUAL RESLIENCE" T-shirt fundraiser provides an excellent example of how association divisions with many members doing difficult research can think creatively about resilience.
3. **Mental Health.** Colleges and universities can employ mental health professionals with expertise in RRT and make those services available free of charge to employees and students who may experience RRT in the course of their work. Alternatively, they could provide health insurance for employees and students with specific provisions for this type of mental health support. They could also establish peer support networks through campus centers for excellence in teaching and learning and/or mental health offices for researchers working on harmful or politicized subjects. One participant at our Blue Sky session also suggested exploring ways for researcher safety, including mental

16 I do not mean to imply, in the following list, that none of these suggestions are currently in practice at institutions of higher education and/or related organizations. However, if and where they are, they remain outliers in the broader academic ecosystem when they could be models for improvement.

health, to be tied to funding mechanisms (e.g., through federal grant makers like the National Science Foundation or the National Institutes of Health in the United States). Another recommended trying to expand the phrase "in the field" to include online research for health insurance coverage purposes.

4. **Awareness.** In order to convince our institutions that legal, financial, and mental health resources are necessary for the proper functioning of our professional roles, we must first raise awareness of the problems. We will not, for example, garner support for pseudonymous publishing practices or for the removal of classroom and office locations or phone numbers and emails from public-facing websites without an awareness that researchers of the far right are at risk of harassment and physical violence. RRT is still an understudied subject area, harassment of researchers is still largely swept under the rug, and the few recommendations and resources that do exist are still largely individualized. It takes a village, as they say, to do this work and community building is the foundation. Locking arms to advocate for these support structures is not too much to ask of our colleges and universities since engaging with our chosen research areas and interlocutors is a function of our employment. But to do so, we will need to begin by raising awareness of the problem and building community resilience.

Until such time as we have a fully fleshed-out organizational resilience infrastructure at our institutions and in academia-adjacent spaces, I invite anyone interested in connecting with me and my ICA Blue Sky collaborators to reach out and get plugged into the repository that emerged from the session. There is always power in numbers.

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ESSAY

Irrationality and Pathology

How Public Health Can Help to Make Sense in Right-Wing Studies

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At the Sid Goldstein Freedom Park in Westminster, California, a small-statured Vietnamese soldier has been standing next to a tall white American soldier for twenty years, all four bronze feet welded to the same black marble base. That the "eternal flame" monument in front of them never goes out signals that here, in Orange County, South Vietnam lives on. The former nation's flag, yellow with three red stripes, flies at every corner, and every spring the park hoists dozens more at its annual Black April event commemorating the 1975 Fall of Saigon. This, the community organizer explains to me, is how the Vietnamese diasporic community has dealt with the staggering loss of their people and their home country—mourning, remembering, and memorializing.[1] What ties it all together, she says, is a deep-rooted and unmoving sense that the cause of this catastrophic loss is communism. When I ask about the MAGA flags that flutter in droves alongside the South Vietnam ones, she says that too is the product of anticommunism. Her explanations dovetail with those of scholars on this topic, who argue that Vietnamese Americans in Southern California are oriented toward the political right due to shared anxiety about communism.[2]

While "red-baiting" has historically referred to the systematic defamation of people via false accusations of communist or socialist involvement, many Vietnamese American community members in Southern California use the term with a slightly different meaning. Here, red-baiting describes how members of the community are lured away from certain politicians or policies by (often false or distorted) accusations that those people or policies are in some way communist. People may also be red-baited *toward* policies or politicians that specifically denounce communism. In an article published in

1 Thu-Huong Nguyên-Vo, "Forking Paths: How Shall We Mourn the Dead?," *Amerasia Journal* 31, no. 2 (2005): 157–75, https://doi.org/10.17953/amer.31.2.g232251372h12k78.

2 Thuy Vo Dang, "The Cultural Work of Anticommunism in the San Diego Vietnamese American Community," *Amerasia Journal* 31, no. 2 (2005): 64–86, doi:10.17953/amer.31.2.t80283284556j378.

the *Los Angeles Times* in 2022, a member of the Vietnamese American community was quoted stating that politicians have long been "exploiting fears within the immigrant community for political gain."[3] In another example, a press statement published by a local organizing group called VietRISE denounced "red-baiting tactics" by politicians who stoke fear of communism for constituent approval.[4] It is in this sense that Vietnamese Americans here describe themselves as being "red-baited" by right-wing figures such as Donald Trump, finding solidarity with his vilification of supposedly communist and socialist people and agendas. They also echo right-wing talking points about bootstrap meritocracy, American nationalism and exceptionalism, and the right to call the United States home.

Watching the scene, my heart skips a beat. For the better part of the last decade, I have agonized over the difficult question of accountability in the production and performance of right-wing ideology. Who is responsible for building friendly, dialogic bridges with conservatives so we can work toward a free future, rather than reproduce one shackled by oppression and inequality? Though I am not from Little Saigon, I, like many residents there, descend from Vietnamese refugees who suffered unspeakable, nearly fatal hardships. Though I know nobody in the crowd, I feel that if anyone in my family had spent any time here, they very well *could be* in attendance. This fact troubles me because, if political divides make us unable to appeal to our own friends and family members, how can we expect change at larger scales? I sought answers in my disciplinary field, public health, where scholars have argued for structural and institutional change, claiming that redistributive policies, such as (and especially) universal healthcare, can singlehandedly equalize everyone's chances at living healthy lives. Perhaps there was a way I could argue that the conservative politics of Little Saigon degrade public health and suggest interventions to restore faith in public goods. But with what I had been vehemently told is the unique unchangeable political story of Little Saigon—that its residents now and forever would reject collectivism by way of their anticommunism—I was stumped by what felt like "race traitorship."[5] To me, this seemed like people of color willingly submitting not only themselves to poorer health, but their neighbors, other racialized people, too.

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3 Seema Mehta and Anh Do, "In Tight California House Race, 'Red-Baiting' Mailers Accuse Candidate of Communist Ties," *Los Angeles Times*, September 30, 2022, https://www.latimes.com/politics/story/2022-09-30/jay-chen-michelle-steel-china-communism-vietnamese-voters.

4 "VietRISE Condemns the Usage of Red-Baiting Tactics by Santa Ana Councilmember Phil Baccera," VietRISE press statement, April 17, 2023, https://vietrise.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/38/2023/04/VietRISE-Letter-to-Santa-Ana-City-Council-re-Redbaiting.pdf (accessed June 3, 2024).

5 See Shayla Colon, "'I've Been Called a Race Traitor': CT Latino College Student Criticized for Voting Trump," *Connecticut Post*, November 6, 2020, https://www.ctpost.com/elections/article/I-ve-been-called-a-race-traitor-CT-15706472.php.

Do not be fooled, the organizer cautions me. Just because many of the constituents of Little Saigon, spanning the cities of Westminster, Fountain Valley, Santa Ana, and Garden Grove, vote Republican *does not mean that they support conservative policies*, she explains. They vote Republican merely because they are red-baited by opportunistic politicians who have long wielded fear about socialism for political gain, not because they actually endorse antistatism or reject redistributive politics. In fact, she contends, Vietnamese voters here are more likely than other Asian American voters to support universal healthcare and a basic income. What I heard the organizer telling me was that, for this community, support for public health was divorced from anticommunism. Views on policies for public goods were separate from other views on government reach; affiliation with the right wing did not necessarily bring with it antiwelfare views. Over my first few months in Little Saigon, I heard this analysis frequently from organizers and from teachers, students, and elders. The more it became a chorus, the more perplexed I felt. Why were so many of Little Saigon's elected officials Republicans, from city council members to congresspeople and mayors? Why on earth would people who experienced shattering trauma and displacement so vociferously ignore the US's direct role in that loss, pointedly cheering on the US, Trump, and sometimes even Confederate flags? If people were eager to support redistributive politics, like universal healthcare, public health's flagship objective, why would they vote *against* those interests? Regardless of where individuals fell on the spectrum of right-wing politics, this seemed like a paradox. I kept concluding that this place was simply riddled with contradictions, and I continued to feel hopeless in the face of the conviction that nothing could be done to untie anticommunism from conservative politics.

Hoping for a vivid conversation about these issues, I turned to the academic intersection of health studies and right-wing studies, but I was disappointed in what I found, or rather, did not find. At their intersection, what is being contended is at once contradictory and circular: right-wing politics produces poor health, and poor health predisposes people toward right-wing politics. The two essentially point fingers at each other as root causes of injustice. Taking a step back, though, I realized that the two arguments were talking past each other. I was relying on a limited and reductive definition of what public health is (and could be).

You see, as a student of the field for the last ten years, I have been taught that public health is "the science of protecting and improving the health of people and their communities . . . achieved by promoting healthy lifestyles, researching disease and injury prevention, and detecting, preventing, and responding to infectious diseases." The foundational principle of public health as "concerned with protecting the health of entire populations" suggests that the field envisions itself as an invisible hand that attempts to both sweep away and guard against conditions that can make people unwell.[6] This epistemic stance relies on a few key problematic assumptions. The first is

6 "What Is Public Health?," CDC Foundation, accessed May 9, 2024, https://www.cdcfoundation.org/what-public-health.

that there is one universal aim of public health, regardless of time, place, or person—namely, to make as many people as possible free of disease. This assumption is deeply flawed. Critical scholars know that well-being and the steps we take toward it stretch beyond rigid conceptions of disease and health. Influential writing from Black and Indigenous feminist scholars often frames public health not merely as a landscape of discrete outcomes (the way public health scholars typically do), but also as a *way that people envision liberation*.[7] The health of a population reflects the quality of relationships that people have to each other, to the Earth, and to the past, present, and future more than it reflects individual-level health behaviors.[8] And what can be more influential in a person's politics than these relationships?

Secondly, public health assumes that all conditions adversely affecting health are like pathogens, compelling our intervention. This assumption has led us down dark paths in our own history as a field. By decontextualizing these conditions, we have dehumanized people. Take, for instance, laws and policies that codify racist segregation in living arrangements, such as redlining. This mid-twentieth-century practice of excluding Black and Brown families from accessing mortgage lending was justified in part using public health logic that white residents would be safer and healthier if they did not have to live among people of color, who ostensibly brought with them pollution, poor sanitation, crime, and infectious disease.[9]

Redlining exemplifies a eugenic logic that misses where poor health actually comes from, conflating the pathogen with the person, linking disease with racialized bodies. This assumption raises another important issue in the field—that "public" and "health" are seldom, if ever, debated. Insofar as "public" can represent infinitely different categorizations of people, we rarely specify which public we are investigating. "Public" is also an inherently relational category in that it reflects the way we see ourselves in relationship with others and with the natural world, which means it is dynamic and constituted in context.[10] In turn, we run into the problem of the first assumption: since health is forged in context, without defining who we mean by "public," we can claim little about their health. In the example of redlining, the "public" refers to white

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7 Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, eds., *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2015); Laura Harjo, *Spiral to the Stars: Mvskoke Tools of Futurity* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2019).

8 See Edward W. Soja, *Seeking Spatial Justice* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010); and Gerald Vizenor, *Survivance: Narratives of Native Presence* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008).

9 Carolyn B. Swope, Diana Hernández, and Lara J. Cushing, "The Relationship of Historical Redlining with Present-Day Neighborhood Environmental and Health Outcomes: A Scoping Review and Conceptual Model," *Journal of Urban Health* 99, no. 6 (December 2022): 959–83, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11524-022-00665-z.

10 Natalia Molina, Daniel HoSang, and Ramon Gutierrez, *Relational Formations of Race: Theory, Method, and Practice* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2019).

residents, and for many, their "health" depended on segregation. These assumptions have certainly appeared where public health scholars have been interested in politics; thus far, research has shown that right-wing politics can make us sick, and that we need to intervene so communities do not continue to endorse right-wing politics, lest they become sicker and sicker.[11] In essence, according to this literature, right-wing politics is the disease to be cured.

I sense a similar terrain of struggle in the academic study of the right. Its scholars wrestle with problems in research and in policy, debating the legal and constitutional environments through which right-wing movements emerge, the histories of such movements, the appropriate affect with which to approach questions and methods, the curse of their relevance. Though I join a chorus of scholars who hope in right-wing studies to advance a collective agenda, others are not so sure if scholars are united by a coherent disciplinary goal. Therefore, parallel to public health, researchers of the political right grapple with *what* turns *whom* against the idea of public goods and democratic rule. This is where public health can play a part—to try to make sense of how people come to their politics. Influential writing has identified those on the right as mentally unwell, uneducated, conceited, and irrational. Even in the recently published roundtable in the *Journal of Right-Wing Studies*, Roger Griffin suggests that right-wing studies must better understand, among other factors, the role of "group and individual psychosis, megalomania and extreme narcissism, [and] palingenetic longings" as "drivers of the illiberal right."[12]

Hallmark questions of public health and right-wing studies—"why do some people engage in unhealthy behaviors?" and "why do some people vote against their own interests?"—might actually be cut from the same cloth. Both rely logically on what Lisa McGirr has called an "excessively psychological interpretation" of the right.[13] Both view their subjects as irrational, uninformed, poorly educated, and/or destructive. But by employing this stance, we have done a terrible job at understanding how public health is actually conceived, contested, and managed differently *all the time*, especially in communities that have been historically aggrieved.

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11 Javier M. Rodriguez, "Health Disparities, Politics, and the Maintenance of the Status Quo: A New Theory of Inequality," *Social Science & Medicine* 200 (2018): 36–43, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2018.01.010; Javier Rodriguez, "The Politics Hypothesis and Racial Disparities in Infants' Health in the United States," *SSM—Population Health* 8 (2019): 100440, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssmph.2019.100440; see also Arlie Russell Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right* (New York: The New Press, 2016).

12 Roger Griffin, contribution to "Right-Wing Studies: A Roundtable on the State of the Field," *Journal of Right-Wing Studies* 1, no. 0 (2023): 34–36, at 35.

13 Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right*, updated ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).

The intervention I propose is one that reconceptualizes "public health" in order to reconceptualize the incentive for people to endorse the right wing. To study what people are hopeful for, who they imagine to be included in their community, how they imagine caring for and protecting their community, including the natural world—for me, *that* is public health. It is sensitive to the infinite contexts through which we understand a "public" and how "health" might appear for them. Public health can therefore help us generate a set of local questions to ask about the kind of choices people make in pursuit of that goal. And if that is public health, then understanding political behavior as a way to achieve those goals makes the question more legible, meaningful, and potentially useful to right-wing studies. It responds to a call from Daniel HoSang and Joseph Lowndes to disavow our tendency to "write [the right] off as a collection of racist and conspiratorial groups on the margins of society."[14] Hopefully, it also answers Terri Givens's appeal for "social scientists to let go of our assumptions and develop new models and tools to help us gain greater understanding of the societal shifts that are being impacted by and shaping party politics."[15] Perhaps by asking questions about right-wing politics through the lens of survival and wellbeing, we could interrupt the narrative that people who endorse the right are ill in some way. When it comes to the logic of pathology, we must remain especially vigilant to how we invoke this for racialized people. It may not be surprising, for example, that when Vietnamese refugees arrived in the US, officials attempted to avoid the Cuban "ghettoism" that concentrated conservative politics in one place by strategically scattering resettlements.[16] I imagine they made these decisions even knowing that dispersing a group of highly vulnerable people, as they entered an unfamiliar language and culture, could only detrimentally impact their social cohesion and health. Again, who is the public and what is health?

I reconceptualize public health as a set of politically motivated choices that people and their collectives make, within the local particularities of oppression, to protect their health and well-being. How can this framing help make sense of the vexing phenomenon, for example, in which people of color vote against their own interests? We can begin by considering that they are not acting against their own interests or behaving contradictorily or irrationally—that they *might very well be protecting* their interests. Here, Ruth Wilson Gilmore's definition of racism as "the state-sanctioned or extralegal production of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death" is tremendously helpful.[17] Racialized and immigrant communities understand that to give

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14 Daniel HoSang and Joseph Lowndes, contribution to "Right-Wing Studies: A Roundtable on the State of the Field," *Journal of Right-Wing Studies* 1, no. 0 (2023): 10–12, at 11.

15 Terri Givens, contribution to "Right-Wing Studies: A Roundtable on the State of the Field," *Journal of Right-Wing Studies* 1, no. 0 (2023): 15–16, at 16.

16 Scott Gold and Mai Tran, "Vietnam Refugees Finally Find Home," *Los Angeles Times*, April 24, 2000, https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2000-apr-24-mn-22846-story.html.

17 Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

themselves the best chances of surviving and thriving in the US, they must forestall these interlocking conditions that otherwise send them careening toward premature death. The stakes are so high for some of these communities, like the Vietnamese, that they take up a politics that seemingly contradicts their best interests but, in actuality, might give them the best odds to maintain a quality life. For Vietnamese in Orange County, what if right-wing politics *is* public health? In a place where anticommunism coexists with support for policies and practices that make social equality possible, there must be another story. In Little Saigon, where life and freedom feel especially precious, why are living on, memorializing, and remembering so important?[18]

Orange County is considered the "nucleus" of the modern US conservative movement that began in the 1960s, with a long history of pious affluence shaping the enduring social and economic landscape.[19] Its intolerance toward racial difference and hostility toward collectivism is embedded in its infrastructure and culture, appearing by way of sprawling suburbia and a keen sense of individualism and free-market radicalism. Sensing that socio-spatial environments and their histories had been an understudied dimension of assimilation, especially for Vietnamese Americans, Karin Aguilar-San Juan conducted a comparative study on Vietnamese place- and home-making between Orange County and Boston. Aguilar-San Juan found that Vietnamese refugees were required to quickly develop a sensitivity to Orange County's "extreme spatial and cultural logic," which long predated their arrival. According to Aguilar-San Juan, "staying Vietnamese is not an act of constancy but of purposeful, and ultimately strategic, shifting and changing in order to arrive at new ways of being Vietnamese in a US context," a process that continues until they reach an "equilibrium state."[20] Compared to Boston, which was already a racially diverse and contested place, lily-white Orange County required the Vietnamese to deploy different strategies of what we call "assimilation," "suburbanization," and "Americanization." Perhaps most accurately, these strategies amounted to a project of "deracination" marked by the color-evasive insistence that the United States is postracial, which masks the ways that anti-Blackness and white supremacy both endure. As Toni Morrison writes, surviving as an immigrant in the United States requires the

> enduring and efficient rite of passage into American culture: negative appraisals of the native-born black population. Only when the lesson of racial estrangement is learned is assimilation complete. Whatever the lived experience of immigrants with African Americans—

18 Nguyên-Vo, "Forking Paths."

19 McGirr, *Suburban Warriors*, 4.

20 Karin Aguilar-San Juan, *Little Saigons: Staying Vietnamese in America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), xiii, xxvii.

> pleasant, beneficial or bruising—the rhetorical experience renders blacks as noncitizens, already discredited outlaws. . . . In race talk the move into mainstream America always means buying into the notion of American blacks as the real aliens. Whatever the ethnicity or nationality of the immigrant, his nemesis is understood to be African American.[21]

It is conceivable that Vietnamese American community leaders took this lesson seriously, realizing that in order to survive as citizens, as fully human in the US, they needed to create and protect the boundaries of what eventually became Little Saigon by foregrounding what they found in common with white Americans—anticommunism. In her study of early twentieth-century anti-Black racial oppression and anticommunism, or the "Black Scare" and the "Red Scare," Charisse Burden-Stelly writes that anticommunism has long been wielded "through and with white supremacy to encourage cross-class collaboration that obfuscated economic exploitation and discouraged interracial class solidarity."[22] This race-evasive cultural camouflaging may have been the ultimate weapon against the aggressive whiteness of Orange County, such that today (though not without struggle), Vietnamese have been able to build an institutionally complete society, in which community members wholly supply their own economic, educational, health, religious, and other needs within the boundaries of their enclave. Indeed, Orange County's Little Saigon is considered the biggest Vietnamese community outside of Vietnam.[23] With whom do these communities see themselves linked in fate now?

What if instead of "deprived and captive" subjects whose gullibility and vulnerability made them eager to express gratitude to the US for its saviorism, the Vietnamese right-wing has emerged as itself an intentional strategy, sensitive to the histories of their new communities in the US and responsive to the politics of the moment, doing what they believe will offer the best chance to preserve their health and well-being?[24] After all,

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21 Toni Morrison, "On the Backs of Blacks," *Time*, December 2, 1993, https://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,979736,00.html.

22 Charisse Burden-Stelly, *Black Scare / Red Scare: Theorizing Capitalist Racism in the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2023), 139.

23 Thuy Vo Dang, Linda Trinh Vo, and Tram Le, *Vietnamese in Orange County* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2015); see also Raymond Breton, "Institutional Completeness of Ethnic Communities and the Personal Relations of Immigrants," *American Journal of Sociology* 70, no. 2 (1964): 193–205.

24 Elena S. H. Yu and William T. Liu, "Methodological Problems and Policy Implications in Vietnamese Refugee Research," *International Migration Review* 20, no. 2 (1986): 483–501, at 499, https://doi.org/10.1177/019791838602000218.

as Aguilar-San Juan contends, being "Vietnamese" is just as much a "social and spatial" question as it is a "personal and psychological one."[25]

Understanding politics through public health helped me resolve the "contradiction" between the way Vietnamese Americans vote and what the community organizer claimed is their true, internal, authentic politics. In the absence of public health, the interventions we imagine for the right might be maladaptive. For example, I had been told in the context of Little Saigon that there was nothing anyone could do about conservatism here, that people were simply going to continue to be duped and manipulated by right-wing politics, and that the best we could do would be to ignore or shame them. But by understanding that these political actions may have been chosen with reason and intention, we can come up with better solutions that take seriously what people are struggling through and how they gauge the health of their communities, and we can strategize together by rerouting that pain toward a solidary, collective fight. By seeing anticommunism and assimilation through the lens of public health, we can see that these politics may reflect the embodied costs of navigating whiteness.[26] Through flipping this narrative, we can achieve three things: 1) depathologize people of color, who might be seen as backward or regressive; 2) more clearly articulate how local formations of white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, and elite class rule nurture hostility toward statism; and 3) find opportunities to nurture among aggrieved, racialized communities what Du Bois calls "second sight" in the pursuit of multiracial solidarity.[27] For Du Bois, "second sight" is the sensation "of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others," a heightened awareness among Black Americans that they are intended only to see themselves through the contemptuous lens of the oppressor.[28] How can second sight among other racialized communities awaken them to their captivity? How do we nurture, instead of a possessive investment in whiteness, a sense of linked fate with other communities who have had everything taken away from them?[29]

By reframing a political question as a more expansive and relational concept of public health, we can craft more humanizing questions about how people make the

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25 Aguilar-San Juan, *Little Saigons*, xxvii.

26 Daniel HoSang and Joseph Lowndes, *Producers, Parasites, Patriots: Race and the New Right-Wing Politics of Precarity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019).

27 Laura Pulido, *Black, Brown, Yellow, and Left: Radical Activism in Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches* (Cambridge, MA: A. C. McClurg, 1909); Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002).

28 W. E. B. Du Bois, "Strivings of the Negro People," *Atlantic* 80 (August 1897), https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1897/08/strivings-of-the-negro-people/305446/.

29 George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics*, revised and expanded ed. (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2006).

ultimately political choices for the health and well-being of their communities. Public health could be the *medium* through which we understand political choices. What makes the study of these choices particularly illuminating is its ability to shed light on the local particularities of systems of oppression and ongoing colonialism. Moreover, though this idea of public health has been written about elsewhere, the field itself has not quite reached enough self-awareness to make way for these questions. What I propose is a new, multidimensional conception of public health that makes right-wing studies itself a study of what is "public" and what is "health" to a certain community in a time and a place. Only then can our fields begin to meaningfully converge.

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