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# When the Radical Becomes Ordinary

## *A State of the Field of the Far Right in US History*

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In the spring of 2017, the historian of conservatism Rick Perlstein published a remarkable essay in the *New York Times Magazine* explaining how he and his peers had failed to anticipate the election of Donald Trump to the presidency. Over the previous two decades, professional historians had crafted a narrative of the rise of the conservative movement that played down the role of its irrational, conspiratorial, and hate-filled elements, preferring instead to stress the significance of more respectable actors like the founder of the *National Review*, William F. Buckley Jr., or the middle-class housewives of southern California. In so doing, Perlstein found that the gatekeepers of America's past had proved "too credulous," failing to understand how the mainstream conservative movement could produce "a man like Trump," who defied so many of the expectations of polite society and yet still managed to enter the White House. For historians to better grasp the foundation of Trumpism, he concluded, "[t]hey'll need instead to study conservative history's political surrealists and intellectual embarrassments, its con artists and tribunes of white rage."[1]

Over eight years on, that advice has not gone unheeded. From our current vantage in 2025, it is clear that historians have worked to redress the blind spots Perlstein diagnosed, pulling the far right out of the shadows and placing it closer to the heart of the narrative of modern American life. Our special issue seeks to take stock of that shift: its insights, its limitations, and the terrain it has yet to cover. This introduction both surveys where the field stands and suggests where it could go next.

Many of the conceptual challenges we now face are far from novel. Much of today's scholarship and public debate around the far right echoes arguments that stretch back to the movement's earliest roots in American history. Scholars have long struggled to name the ideas, figures, and currents that stand beyond the boundaries of political convention. Are we dealing with "extremism," "radicalism," "populism," or even "fascism"? Can such

1 Rick Perlstein, "I Thought I Understood the American Right. Trump Proved Me Wrong," *New York Times Magazine*, April 11, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/11/magazine/i-thought-i-understood-the-american-right-trump-proved-me-wrong.html.

boundaries be clearly drawn at all, or are the far right and the political mainstream inextricably entwined? These are not sterile semantic quarrels, for the answers we give to these questions shape our view of this tradition's place in American life. Is the far right better understood as a pathology of the marginal, a last stand of those who cannot adapt to change? Or does it speak for the fears and ambitions of comfortable groups intent on defending a particular vision of order?

These questions have fueled an interdisciplinary debate that reaches back at least to the interwar years. The resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan and the emergence of various fascist groups stirred a wave of inquiry during this period, from both inside and outside of the ivory tower, into what was not yet called the far right but already had a deep influence on American politics. Much of this early work was soon eclipsed by a cohort of liberal intellectuals who, reacting to the Second Red Scare of the late 1940s and 1950s, cast far-right mobilizations as outbursts of psychological fragility, status anxiety, or irrational fear, crafting a framework that would long dominate public discourse even as it met with swift resistance in academic circles. As Perlstein observed in his essay, historians pushed back against this dismissive reading by emphasizing the far right's entanglement with larger currents of American political and cultural life. This revision was both timely and essential. Yet in their eagerness to highlight the movement's ordinariness, later accounts often swung too far in the opposite direction, downplaying the extent to which it sometimes embraced exclusionary and authoritarian ideologies, as if one could not be both mainstream and racist, respectable and extremist, ordinary and radical.

This reluctance to confront the normality of extremism reflects a deeper unease: the possibility that authoritarianism and violence may not represent a rupture from liberal democracy but rather an enduring feature of it—or at the very least, that these seemingly opposing forces have long coexisted more seamlessly than we are willing to admit. Recent scholarship in US history and political science underscores this point, yet the dilemma is hardly confined to America.[2] It lies at the heart of the broader field of right-wing studies, which continues to wrestle with the question of whether such movements should be seen as marginal disruptions in "otherwise stable, pluralistic, and egalitarian democratic societies," or as revealing "core contradictions and repressive tendencies" embedded within the liberal democratic order itself.[3] As political scientist Cas Mudde has argued, the very opposition between pathology and normalcy can be misleading. Rather than treating far-right movements as aberrant outliers that gain popularity only under crisis conditions, he proposed that they may be better understood as a radicalization of ideas and attitudes that

2 Steven Hahn, *Illiberal America: A History* (W. W. Norton, 2024); Jefferson Cowie, *Freedom's Dominion: A Saga of White Resistance to Federal Power* (Basic Books, 2022); Desmond King, "American Political Violence (The Government and Opposition / Leonard Schapiro Lecture 2023)," *Government and Opposition* 60, no. 2 (2025): 289–312.

3 A. J. Bauer, Isis Giraldo, and Clara Juarez Miro, "Introduction—The Curse of Relevance: Challenges Facing Right-Wing Studies," *Journal of Right-Wing Studies* 2, no. 1 (2024): 7–8.

are already widely shared within democratic societies. From this perspective, the far right does not stand apart from the mainstream but instead amplifies its latent contradictions.[4]

One final point before diving in: The purpose of this introduction is not to rehash the "fascism debate" that erupted after Trump's first presidential campaign and has since dominated much of the discourse about the far right, but rather to deflate that controversy by historicizing it and exposing its blind spots. To its credit, the debate rekindled interest in the subject and contributed to a growing recognition that the United States has not been immune to fascism; it erred, however, in its original premise that this was a tradition alien to American soil, one that had been scarcely studied and was largely irrelevant to US history. As we shall see, this view disregarded a substantial body of scholarship that has long traced the careers of American fascists and neofascists from the interwar period onward, while probing the unsettling parallels between fascist ideology and figures not typically labeled as such, such as Huey Long or the militia movements of the 1990s. It is true that much of this work had remained at the margins of the broader historiography, and that many (though not all) of these scholars ultimately declined to frame these movements fully within a fascist paradigm. Yet in hindsight, what is most striking is not the reluctance to apply the label outright but rather the recurring sense that it deserved serious discussion. More than a few scholars have shown that fascism was not a fleeting influence but a real, if only partial, presence in the broader fabric of the US far right. The United States was never immune to the ideological currents that swept the twentieth century, including its most radical.

To make sense of how historians have wrestled with these conceptual and political challenges, this essay first turns its attention to the historiography. By tracing how public and scholarly debates have unfolded since the interwar years, we can begin to see how historical interpretations have shifted alongside broader political transformations, with each generation redefining the terms of the discussion. The essay will then explore matters of definition before suggesting some fertile grounds for future inquiry.

## From the Margins to the Mainstream: A Century of Scholarship on the Far Right

Ours is hardly the first generation to discover the presence of the right in the United States. As Leo Ribuffo once wrote, "the study of Americans who were conservatives by some plausible set of criteria is as old if not older than the professional study of United States history."[5] In the first half of the twentieth century, elite conservative figures occupied a central place within the dominant interpretative framework of the progressive school,

4 Cas Mudde, "The Populist Radical Right: A Pathological Normalcy," *West European Politics* 33, no. 6 (2010): 1,167–86.

5 Leo P. Ribuffo, "The Discovery and Rediscovery of American Conservatism Broadly Conceived," *OAH Magazine of History* 17, no. 2 (2003): 5.

which viewed US history as an enduring struggle between popular democratic forces and entrenched interests.[6] Meanwhile, scholars in other disciplines began to turn their attention to newer and more radical manifestations, such as the second Ku Klux Klan. At the height of its influence in the wake of World War I, Dartmouth sociologist John Mecklin offered a diagnosis that was as condescending as it was influential, attributing its rise largely to the "well-meaning but more or less ignorant and unthinking middle class" of small Southern towns, governed by "a provincial fear of all things foreign" and a stifling urge to conform.[7] This reading captured the public view of the Klan in those years.[8]

The following decade brought a surge of interest in fascism, both abroad and at home, as the Great Depression led many to fear that America itself might be drifting toward authoritarian rule. Some, like the prominent journalist Raymond Gram Swing, warned darkly that "fascism lies ahead for America," while others, such as Lawrence Dennis, whom *Life* later called "America's No. 1 intellectual Fascist," openly embraced the prospect.[9] The conversation spilled across popular culture and politics alike: films such as *The President Vanishes* (1934), inspired by the so-called Business Plot against Roosevelt, and *Black Legion* (1937), starring Humphrey Bogart, dramatized domestic fascist threats, while the McCormack-Dickstein Committee conducted hearings in 1934 investigating the activities of various homegrown fascist groups. In academic circles, the debate remained cautious. Writing in the *American Political Science Review*, H. Arthur Steiner noted for instance certain parallels between American right-wing movements and aspects of European fascism but nonetheless concluded that, in the United States, these movements amounted to "little more than an ebullient justification of economic reaction, to the fanfare of much waving of the flag and playing of the Star Spangled Banner."[10] In this, he echoed Marxist analysts like Lewis Corey, who saw fascism as a tool of the "upper bourgeoisie," mobilizing the "petty-bourgeois masses (including the agrarian) . . . to act as a counter-revolutionary mass force."[11] The writer Sinclair Lewis, in his best-selling satire

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6 The most influential version of this school was expressed in Charles A. Beard and Mary Ritter Beard, *The Rise of American Civilization* (Macmillan, 1927).

7 John Moffatt Mecklin, *The Ku Klux Klan: A Study of the American Mind* (Harcourt, Brace, 1924), 101, 103, 107.

8 See for instance Frank Tannenbaum, *Darker Phases of the South* (G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1924); Robert Staughton Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown: A Study in American Culture* (Harcourt, Brace, 1929).

9 Raymond Gram Swing, *Forerunners of American Fascism* (Julian Messner, 1935), 32; "The Ism of Appeasement," *Life*, January 20, 1941; Lawrence Dennis, *The Coming American Fascism* (Harper & Brothers, 1936); on Dennis, see Gerald Horne, *The Color of Fascism: Lawrence Dennis, Racial Passing, and the Rise of Right-Wing Extremism in the United States* (New York University Press, 2006).

10 H. Arthur Steiner, "Fascism in America?," *American Political Science Review* 29, no. 5 (1935): 830.

11 Lewis Corey, *The Decline of American Capitalism* (Covici, Friede, 1934), 511.

*It Can't Happen Here* (1935), similarly traced the appeal of fascism to the frustrations of the lower middle class.[12]

Amid these anxieties, a distinct tradition of "right-watchers" began to take shape. Drawing inspiration from the muckraking journalism of the Progressive Era, they formed a loose network of journalists, activists, and public intellectuals who devoted themselves to monitoring the far right and sounding the alarm about its growth. Already in the late 1930s, the Institute for Propaganda Analysis—a coalition of scholars, educators, and journalists—sought to expose the mechanics of propaganda produced on both extremes of the political spectrum and to educate the public about its dangers. Funded in part by progressive philanthropist Edward Filene, the institute's work laid the foundation for more targeted efforts in the following decade, including Dorothy Parker's Voice of Freedom Committee, which tracked the rise of right-wing radio demagogues, and George Seldes's *In Fact* newsletter, a pioneering venture in investigative press criticism.[13] Some took even more daring steps: After four years infiltrating domestic fascist groups such as the Christian Front, Arthur Derounian—writing under the pseudonym John Roy Carlson—published *Under Cover* (1943), a sensational and best-selling account of the far-right underground.[14] Others pursued quieter but no less vital work. Upon returning from service in the Pacific after World War II, Gordon Hall began collecting printed propaganda from what he saw as "extremist" groups on both the left and the right, building an archive that would eventually become the Hall-Hoag Collection of Dissenting and Extremist Printed Propaganda at Brown University, which remains a crucial resource for scholars investigating the history of the US far right today.

While World War II delivered a major blow to both foreign and domestic advocates of fascism, it did little to dispel lingering fears that authoritarian tendencies might resurface on American soil. In the postwar years, the specter of fascism remained a potent reference point, especially among liberals and progressives who viewed the Second Red Scare with growing alarm. Veterans' organizations such as the American Legion, which rallied behind the Wisconsin senator Joseph McCarthy, became lightning rods for accusations that fascist impulses were once again taking root—this time under the guise of patriotic anti-communism.[15] McCarthy's assaults frequently targeted the "East Coast

12 Sinclair Lewis, *It Can't Happen Here* (Doubleday, Doran, 1935).

13 J. Michael Sproule, *Propaganda and Democracy: The American Experience of Media and Mass Persuasion* (Cambridge University Press, 2005); A. J. Bauer, "Agent and Archive: Chip Berlet and the Historicity of Right-Watchers," in *Exposing the Right and Fighting for Democracy: Celebrating Chip Berlet as Journalist and Scholar*, ed. Pam Chamberlain et al. (Routledge, 2022).

14 John Roy Carlson, *Under Cover: My Four Years in the Nazi Underworld of America* (E. P. Dutton, 1943).

15 Justin Gray, "The Legion's Americanism," *New Republic* 119, no. 3 (1948): 19–21.

establishment" and in particular the academic world, denouncing professors as subversive "fellow travelers" corrupting America's youth.[16]

It was in response to these attacks, and to the broader climate of repression they fostered, that a group of prominent liberal intellectuals such as Richard Hofstadter, Daniel Bell, Seymour Martin Lipset, Nathan Glazer, Peter Viereck, and Talcott Parsons began, in the mid-1950s, to craft a new interpretation of the far right. Building on many of the themes already circulating in earlier debates, this framework would come to dominate scholarly and public understandings of the far right for much of the next half century. Combining psychological theories with a dismissive view of conservatives as marginal and irrational actors, they introduced concepts like "status anxiety" (the idea that some middle-class groups that had recently achieved this status now feared displacement) and "pseudoconservatism" (a notion first articulated by Theodor Adorno to designate individuals defending American traditions in ways that undermined liberal democratic norms). Richard Hofstadter later added the influential concept of the "paranoid style" to describe conspiratorial and apocalyptic tendencies in American political culture, linking McCarthyism, the Populists of the 1890s, the second Ku Klux Klan, and the John Birch Society as expressions of the same anti-elitist but irrational tradition. These interpretations, which pathologized far-right politics as emotional and incoherent, were central to works like Bell's edited collection, *The New American Right* (1955), and Lipset and Earl Raab's *The Politics of Unreason* (1970).[17]

Together, they offered what later scholars called the "centrist/extremist" model, which posits mainstream liberal democracy as fundamentally sound and stable, with threats coming primarily from "extreme" groups outside the political center.[18] This approach was never consensual. As early as the 1950s, scholars like Morris Janowitz and Morris Schonbach, who conducted extensive primary research, rejected the notion that far-right leaders were psychologically disturbed outliers, arguing instead that these movements had significant popular appeal and ideological coherence.[19] Despite these challenges, the mid-century centrist/extremist model left a lasting imprint on both academic and public discourse. Hofstadter's and Bell's diagnoses are routinely exhumed in moments of right-

16 Ellen Schrecker, *No Ivory Tower: McCarthyism and the Universities* (Oxford University Press, 1986).

17 Theodor W. Adorno, Else Frenkel-Brunskwik, Daniel Levinson, Nevitt Sanford, *The Authoritarian Personality* (Harper, 1950); Daniel Bell, ed., *The New American Right* (Criterion Books, 1955); Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics, and Other Essays* (Knopf, 1965); Seymour Martin Lipset and Earl Raab, *The Politics of Unreason: Right-Wing Extremism in America, 1790–1977* (Harper & Row, 1970).

18 Eric Ward, ed., *Conspiracies: Real Grievances, Paranoia, and Mass Movements* (Peanut Butter Pub, 1996), 121; Chip Berlet and Matthew N. Lyons, introduction to *Right-Wing Populism in America: Too Close for Comfort* (Guilford, 2000).

19 Morris Janowitz, "Black Legions on the March," in *America in Crisis: Fourteen Crucial Episodes in American History*, ed. Daniel Aaron (Knopf, 1952), 318; Morris Schonbach, *Native American Fascism during the 1930s and 1940s: A Study of Its Roots, Its Growth, and Its Decline* (Garland, 1985), 2–3, 28–29, 32.

wing ferment, from Goldwater's rise in 1964 to the Religious Right of the late twentieth century and the eruption of the Tea Party movement in 2009.[20] By casting the far right chiefly in psychological or pathological terms, their work reinforced the longstanding tendency to downplay or even ignore the intellectual sophistication of some of its thinkers.

Despite their long afterlife, the core interpretations of liberal intellectuals were quickly dismissed by academic specialists. As New Left scholars were the first to point out, the claim that the Populist movement of the 1890s spawned the post-1945 "radical right" was misleading, as was Hofstadter's portrayal of conspiratorial antisemitism as the core of Populism. A wave of research dismantled these assumptions and shifted the focus back to Populism's serious, left-wing, and egalitarian agenda.[21] Scholars of the Second Red Scare likewise challenged the use of a psychological lens to understand McCarthyism by pointing to the movement's partisan dynamics as a Republican strategy to undermine the New Deal coalition.[22]

In hindsight, we can say that the sharp scholarly recoil against the mid-century accounts of Bell and Hofstadter may have overcorrected. In their eagerness to rescue the Populists from caricature, for instance, some scholars edged toward hagiography, downplaying the movement's more unsavory currents. The Populists were not uniquely antisemitic or conspiratorially minded compared to many of their fin-de-siècle contemporaries—indeed, in some respects, they were less so. Yet they were hardly immune to such impulses either, and efforts to cast them solely as virtuous tribunes of the people risk substituting one distortion for another.[23] Some of the key analytical tools advanced by liberal intellectuals in the 1950s have likewise proved surprisingly durable. What mid-century thinkers described as "status anxiety" is now more commonly recognized as the fear of social displacement, a key engine of far-right mobilization.[24] What was once dismissed as evidence of a "paranoid style" is today seen as constitutive of "affective polarization," as scholars have increasingly acknowledged the centrality of resentment and

20 Aside from Hofstadter's essay collection *Paranoid Style*, see Daniel Bell, ed., *The Radical Right: The New American Right*, expanded ed. (Doubleday, 1964); Daniel Bell, ed., *The Radical Right*, 3rd ed. (Transaction Publishers, 2002); Richard Hofstadter, *Hofstadter: Anti-Intellectualism in American Life, The Paranoid Style in American Politics, Uncollected Essays 1956–1965*, ed. Sean Wilentz (Library of America, 2020); Richard Hofstadter, *Le style paranoïaque: Théories du complot et droite radicale en Amérique*, ed. Philippe Raynaud, trans. Julien Charnay (François Bourin Editeur, 2012).

21 For a recent overview of the evolution of this debate, see Charles Postel, "Populism as a Concept and the Challenge of U.S. History," *IdeAs. Idées d'Amériques*, no. 14 (2019): 14.

22 Michael Paul Rogin, *The Intellectuals and McCarthy: The Radical Specter* (MIT Press, 1967).

23 Robert D. Johnston, "The Age of Reform: A Defense of Richard Hofstadter Fifty Years On," *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 6, no. 2 (2007): 127–37.

24 See Arlie Russell Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right* (New Press, 2016).

negative emotion in politics.[25] Most presciently, Bell and Hofstadter were right to alert us to the "illiberal, intolerant, and bigoted in democratic mass movements," which is once again plainly visible.[26] In their haste to redeem "the people," their New Left critics often overlooked the authoritarian and violent impulses that can accompany populist politics.

This ambivalence toward popular movements, particularly those perceived as illiberal, persisted from the 1970s through the 1990s. During this period, scholars of the far right gravitated primarily toward two interwar phenomena: the second Ku Klux Klan and the constellation of right-wing activists who emerged in the 1930s. Let us examine both in turn.

The interest in grassroots movements and social history that emerged in the 1960s reshaped the historiography of the second Ku Klux Klan. In contrast to the dismissive portrayal advanced by Mecklin in the 1920s, historians of this later period offered a more nuanced account.[27] Leading this revisionist turn was Leonard Moore, who offered a "populist revision" of Klan historiography in the early 1990s.[28] Building on recent scholarship, Moore argued that the second Klan should not be seen as a fringe movement defined solely by radicalism and persecution, but rather as a relatively conventional social organization with broad appeal among white Protestants. While he acknowledged regional variations in the Klan's character and activity, Moore emphasized that in Indiana—perhaps the center of the group's influence in the 1920s, and the focus of Moore's own research—it functioned less as a violent vigilante group or a bastion of Protestant fundamentalism than as a civic and fraternal institution. Its primary functions, he argued, lay in organizing public spectacles, fostering community cohesion, and engaging in philanthropic endeavors.[29] Moore went so far as to contend that the Indiana Klan "is best understood not as a nativist . . . but rather as a populist organization," defining it as a movement concerned "primarily not with persecuting ethnic minorities but with promoting the ability of average citizens to influence the workings of society and government."[30] Although he did not ignore examples of the Klan's intolerance, Moore tended to treat them as marginal to

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25 On affective polarization, see for instance Shanto Iyengar and Sean J. Westwood, "Fear and Loathing across Party Lines: New Evidence on Group Polarization," *American Journal of Political Science* 59, no. 3 (2015): 690–707.

26 Gary Marotta, "Richard Hofstadter's Populist Problem and His Identity as a Jewish Intellectual," in *Transformations of Populism in Europe and the Americas: History and Recent Tendencies*, ed. John Abromeit, York Norman, Gary Marotta, and Bridget María Chesterton (Bloomsbury, 2016), 113.

27 David Harry Bennett, *The Party of Fear: From Nativist Movements to the New Right in American History* (University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 204; Lipset and Raab, *Politics of Unreason*, chapter 4.

28 Leonard J. Moore, "Historical Interpretations of the 1920's Klan: The Traditional View and the Populist Revision," *Journal of Social History* 24, no. 2 (1990): 341; Leonard Joseph Moore, *Citizen Klansmen: The Ku Klux Klan in Indiana, 1921–1928* (University of North Carolina Press, 1991). For another representative of this approach, see Shawn Lay, ed., *The Invisible Empire in the West: Toward a New Historical Appraisal of the Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s* (University of Illinois Press, 1992).

29 Moore, "Historical Interpretations," 350–52.

30 Moore, *Citizen Klansmen*, 11.

the organization's appeal. In his effort to underscore the group's mainstream character, he seemed reluctant to fully reckon with the extent to which bigotry and exclusion were not anecdotal but constitutive elements of the Klan's vision of civic belonging.

The interpretations of this "populist" school were never widely accepted. As early as the mid-1960s, some scholars had already begun to move beyond the artificial binary between civic respectability and ideological extremism. Writing only a few years after Hannah Arendt published *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963), one historian described Klansmen as "deeply anxious men" who were not pathologically monstrous but rather emblematic of the "banality of evil." He portrayed the second Klan as a "counterrevolutionary movement" whose emphasis on racial purity, ethnonationalist nostalgia, and the exclusion of perceived outsiders would, "if spawned in Europe," have rightfully earned it "the designation 'fascist.'"[31] Nancy MacLean extended this line of analysis three decades later, insisting that the Klan's appeal lay precisely in its ability to be both ordinary and extreme. Far from being merely a channel for civic engagement or communal energy, the organization was also animated by racism and violence. Like her predecessor, MacLean drew explicit parallels between the second Klan and the fascist movements of interwar Europe, noting shared ideological themes, overlapping social bases, and common origins in periods of "class polarization" and postwar dislocation.[32] Similarly, Glenn Feldman emphasized the centrality of violence in the Klan's identity, characterizing it as "the most visible, resilient, and terrible version of fascism that America has ever produced."[33]

These contrasting views notwithstanding, the same tendency to understate the radical and violent potential of far-right movements also marked the body of works that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s on the constellation of activists who constituted the 1930s American right. These studies decisively rejected the centrist/extremist framework. In his examination of George Sylvester Viereck, the German-American poet and writer who used congressional franking privileges to disseminate Nazi propaganda in the United States, Neil Johnson argued for instance that the man did not fit the mold of Adorno's "authoritarian personality." Far from being "rigid and unimaginative," "herd minded," or a "moral purist," Viereck defied the profile: he had neither suffered under a domineering father nor emerged from a lower middle class gripped by fears of proletarianization.[34] Leo Ribuffo offered a similarly revisionist perspective in his landmark study of the "Protestant Far Right" of the 1930s, where he focused on William Dudley Pelley, Gerald

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31 Robert Moats Miller, "The Ku Klux Klan," in *Change and Continuity in Twentieth-Century America*, ed. John Braeman, Robert H. Bremner, and Everett Walters (Ohio State University Press, 1965), 228.

32 Nancy MacLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry: The Making of the Second Ku Klux Klan* (Oxford University Press, 1994), 181–82.

33 Glenn Feldman, *Politics, Society, and the Klan in Alabama, 1915–1949* (University of Alabama Press, 1999), 1.

34 Niel M. Johnson, *George Sylvester Viereck: German-American Propagandist* (University of Illinois Press, 1972), 263–64.

B. Winrod, and Gerald L. K. Smith. Rejecting reductive psychologizing, Ribuffo stressed how their ideas "often converged with the cultural and political mainstream," particularly in their propensity to draw on broader streams of anti-communism, antisemitism, and conspiratorial thinking that were deeply embedded in public life.[35] Decades later, Ribuffo underscored the central insight of his work—that, "for good or ill, the center in practice is rarely sealed off from the so-called extremes." The boundaries separating far-right demagogues from respectable conservatives, or genteel antisemitism from its more virulent and violent variants, were in his view far more permeable than typically acknowledged.[36]

Like Moore before him, Ribuffo approached his subject with a marked ambivalence, stopping short of fully reckoning with the far right's radicalism. In an effort to counter the tendency of contemporary critics to portray far-right figures as mere pawns of a foreign conspiracy, Ribuffo drew on previous scholarship that emphasized their American roots and agency.[37] He went one step further, however, in arguing that these figures were victims of what he termed a "Brown Scare," in which adversaries of the far right "often exaggerated both its power and its Axis connections" in order to facilitate its repression. According to Ribuffo, this exaggeration "set precedents" for the suppression of domestic dissent during the Second Red Scare by curtailing "expressions that were only distantly dangerous or merely obnoxious."[38] While Ribuffo was right to expose the sensationalist tone that often infused liberal and left-wing exposés like Derounian's *Under Cover*, he erred in the other direction, downplaying the ideological extremism of figures such as Pelley, Winrod, and Smith. Rather than reckoning with the ways their ideas strained, and at times broke, the bounds of liberal democratic politics, he cast them as eccentric outgrowths of familiar traditions. In doing so, he minimized the degree to which their critics had legitimate

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35 Leo P. Ribuffo, *The Old Christian Right: The Protestant Far Right from the Great Depression to the Cold War* (Temple University Press, 1983), xii.

36 Leo P. Ribuffo, "Retrospective Roundtable on Leo Ribuffo's *Old Christian Right*: Final Entry from Ribuffo," *Society for US Intellectual History* (blog), December 9, 2018, https://s-usih.org/2018/12/retrospective-roundtable-on-leo-ribuffos-old-christian-right-final-entry-from-ribuffo/.

37 For early scholarship on the Nazi movement in the interwar United States, see Susan Canedy, *America's Nazis: A Democratic Dilemma, A History of the German American Bund* (Markgraf Publications Group, 1990); Dieter Berninger, "Milwaukee's German-American Community and the Nazi Challenge of the 1930's," *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 71, no. 2 (1987): 118–42; Sander A. Diamond, *The Nazi Movement in the United States, 1924–1941* (Cornell University Press, 1974); Leland V. Bell, *In Hitler's Shadow: The Anatomy of American Nazism* (Kennikat Press, 1973); Leland V. Bell, "The Failure of Nazism in America: The German American Bund, 1936–1941," *Political Science Quarterly* 85, no. 4 (1970): 585–99. On Italian American fascists, see Luciano J. Iorizzo, "Fascism," in *The Italian American Experience: An Encyclopedia* (Garland Publishing, 2000); Luca de Caprariis, "'Fascism for Export'? The Rise and Eclipse of the Fasci Italiani All'Estero," *Journal of Contemporary History* 35, no. 2 (2000): 151–83; Philip V. Cannistraro, *Blackshirts in Little Italy: Italian Americans and Fascism, 1921–1929* (Bordighera, 1999); John P. Diggins, *Mussolini and Fascism: The View from America* (Princeton University Press, 1972); Alan Cassels, "Fascism for Export: Italy and the United States in the Twenties," *American Historical Review* 69, no. 3 (1964): 707–12.

38 Ribuffo, *Old Christian Right*, 178, 215.

reasons to sound the alarm, especially without our benefit of hindsight.[39] By advancing the concept of a "Brown Scare," Ribuffo inadvertently reinforced his peers' reluctance to treat the far right as a serious subject of historical inquiry. Influenced by his analysis, the few historians who did engage with the topic concluded that fascism had never posed any real threat in the United States.[40]

In his classic *Voices of Protest* (1983), which explored the lives of Huey Long and Charles Coughlin, Alan Brinkley was slightly more critical. Even as some aspects of his analysis echoed that of mid-century liberals—he argued that many of Long and Coughlin's ideas were rooted in the Populist tradition and that their followers were largely middle-class people afraid of losing their hard-won status—Brinkley also stressed that their ideology was neither irrational nor insignificant. More importantly, he noted the ambivalent and evolving character of their views, which he recognized as bearing strong similarities with fascism. Both men, he wrote, appealed to "the idea of the traditional, rooted community and the special virtues of the common people," focused on "the dangers posed by distant, hidden forces," and displayed clear "hostility toward 'internationalism.'" The parallel went even further for Coughlin, who in the late 1930s veered toward overt antisemitism and openly praised fascism. It was little surprise, then, that many domestic fascists saw these two figures as the likeliest candidates for leadership of their movement. Although Brinkley concluded that Long and Coughlin were not "fascists in any meaningful sense of the term," his analysis also demonstrated the many overlaps between this tradition and populism.[41]

At the same time as historians of the second Ku Klux Klan and of the 1930s far right debated whether these movements should be considered fringe and whether to label them fascist, the scholarship on mainstream conservatism was undergoing a remarkable transformation, moving from the periphery to the center of the historical profession. In the decade following Ronald Reagan's election to the White House in 1980, many historians seeking to understand the roots of the "conservative revolution" that he embodied still operated within the intellectual framework established by mid-century intellectuals. Though they rejected their predecessors' "dismissive and condescending attitudes," they continued to interpret conservatism primarily as a form of populist backlash, emphasizing how opposition to civil rights and liberalism in the late 1960s and 1970s had driven many

39 On this point, see Alex McPhee-Browne, "Reimagining the Far Right," *Reviews in American History* 51, no. 3 (2023): 305–9.

40 Peter H. Amann, "A 'Dog in the Nighttime' Problem: American Fascism in the 1930s," *History Teacher* 19, no. 4 (1986): 559–84; Francis MacDonnell, *Insidious Foes: The Axis Fifth Column and the American Home Front* (Oxford University Press, 1995); Glen Jeansonne, *Women of the Far Right: The Mothers' Movement and World War II* (University of Chicago Press, 1996), 179.

41 Alan Brinkley, *Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin, and the Great Depression* (Knopf, 1982), 278–79, 282.

white workers to the right.[42] The turning point came in the 1990s, when historians finally acknowledged the centrality of conservatism in US politics and the need to accord it serious scholarly attention.[43] Energized by the simultaneous revival of political history, a new generation of scholars moved past the focus on "Reagan Democrats," tracing the roots of the conservative movement back to the 1930s and 1940s, and examining the interplay between formal politics and a broader constellation of actors, including grassroots activists, intellectual currents, institutions, and organizations.[44]

Scholarship on the far right was not exempt from these broader intellectual shifts. In the 1990s, for example, Philip Jenkins published a remarkable local study of the "extreme right" in Pennsylvania from 1925 to 1950, in which he rejected both the centrist/extremist model and the "Brown Scare" framework. While acknowledging the limited size of this movement, he emphasized that it "genuinely had a political base." He rejected the exaggerations of its contemporary critics but found that there were nonetheless "dozens of extremist groups on the far Right, forming an interlocking network" that "operated as a recognized presence within the 'normal' landscape of social and political life" during this period. He also criticized American historians for their reluctance to view these far-right movements as part of a broader international phenomenon, with parallels in Europe, Latin America, and the Middle East.[45] Turning to a later period, Frederick Simonelli's 1999 biography of George Lincoln Rockwell, the founder of the American Nazi Party, was the first comprehensive scholarly work dedicated to neo-Nazism in the United States. His study underscored Rockwell's significance in shaping the modern far right, pushing back against his frequent dismissal as a mere eccentric. The biography highlighted his pivotal role in popularizing the "white power" slogan, promoting Holocaust denial, and forging connections with the nascent Christian Identity (CI) movement.[46]

Indeed, the rise of CI to prominence within the far right during the 1980s and 1990s, epitomized by the central role of Richard Butler's Aryan Nations compound in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, catalyzed a series of scholarly works that, much like Ribuffo's exploration

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42 Kim Phillips-Fein, "Conservatism: A State of the Field," *Journal of American History* 98, no. 3 (2011): 726.

43 On this shift, see Michael Kazin, "The Grass-Roots Right: New Histories of U.S. Conservatism in the Twentieth Century," *American Historical Review* 97, no. 1 (1992): 136–55; Alan Brinkley, "The Problem of American Conservatism," *American Historical Review* 99, no. 2 (1994): 409–29; Leo P. Ribuffo, "Why Is There So Much Conservatism in the United States and Why Do So Few Historians Know Anything About It?," *American Historical Review* 99, no. 2 (1994): 438–49.

44 On this revival, see Meg Jacobs, William J. Novak, and Julian E. Zelizer, eds., *The Democratic Experiment: New Directions in American Political History* (Princeton University Press, 2003).

45 Philip Jenkins, *Hoods and Shirts: The Extreme Right in Pennsylvania, 1925–1950* (University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 5–6, 8–9, 23.

46 Frederick J. Simonelli, *American Fuehrer: George Lincoln Rockwell and the American Nazi Party* (University of Illinois Press, 1999).

of the interwar period, emphasized the influence of religion. One of the earliest to tackle this subject was James Aho, whose sociological study situated CI within the broader context of the Religious Right, framing the former as the more "extremist" wing of this larger movement.[47] A few years later, Michael Barkun traced CI's roots back to British Israelism (the belief, originating in the seventeenth century, that Anglo-Saxons were the true descendants of the biblical Israelites), its spread to the East Coast during the Gilded Age, and its increasing embrace of overt antisemitic rhetoric as it migrated westward in the 1930s and 1940s. Over time, this belief system shifted from upholding the status quo to advocating for revolutionary insurrection.[48] Expanding the scope further, Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke and Mattias Gardell examined the influence of neopaganism and esoteric cults such as Wotansvolk and the Church of the Creator, which not only provided theological underpinnings for ideologies that championed Aryan supremacy but also linked the US far-right struggle to similar movements across Europe.[49]

In the 2000s and early 2010s, the scholarship on conservatism came to the forefront of the profession. New works shed light on the roots of the movement not only before the backlash of the 1970s but also in some of the more prosperous areas of the country, particularly in the post–World War II Sunbelt. Studies of groups like Young Americans for Freedom, which served as training grounds for a new generation of conservative activists in the 1950s and 1960s, embraced Ribuffo's view that the far right was never hermetically sealed from the mainstream, stressing "the overlapping concerns and personae that linked the organizations once seen as radical to the more respectable and electorally oriented Right."[50] In her classic study of grassroots conservatives in Orange County, California, Lisa McGirr noted the difficulty of establishing clear boundaries between the extremes and the center, for even "conservatives who embraced conspiratorial thinking shared a sufficient set of complaints, assumptions, and common enemies that united them with their more 'respectable' cohorts in one movement." In reaction to the tendency in public discourse to paint anyone voicing clearly conservative views as "far right" or "ultraconservative," she argued that such terms "should be limited to white supremacist, paramilitary, and fascist fringe groups like the KKK and the Minute Men, groups that stepped outside of

47 James A. Aho, *The Politics of Righteousness: Idaho Christian Patriotism* (University of Washington Press, 1990).

48 Michael Barkun, *Religion and the Racist Right: The Origins of the Christian Identity Movement* (University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

49 Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *Black Sun: Aryan Cults, Esoteric Nazism and the Politics of Identity* (New York University Press, 2002); Mattias Gardell, *Gods of the Blood: The Pagan Revival and White Separatism* (Duke University Press, 2003).

50 Phillips-Fein, "Conservatism," 728. For works on YAF, see Gregory L. Schneider, *Cadres for Conservatism: Young Americans for Freedom and the Rise of the Contemporary Right* (New York University Press, 1999); John Andrew, *The Other Side of the Sixties: Young Americans for Freedom and the Rise of Conservative Politics* (Rutgers University Press, 1997).

democratic political processes to achieve their goals."[51] Such organizations continued to attract relatively little scholarly attention. Preoccupied with dismantling the condescending yet still influential assumptions of mid-century intellectuals, most historians followed in McGirr's footpath and sought to display empathy toward their subjects by concentrating "on elements of the Right they felt able to normalize, if not to endorse."[52] In doing so, they often drew sharp distinctions between groups, ideas, and figures situated closer to the political mainstream and the more radical or conspiratorial elements relegated to its radical fringes, whose role they tended to minimize.

The scholarship on the militia movement provides a clear example of this dynamic. Emerging from the Minutemen of the 1960s and the Posse Comitatus of the 1970s and 1980s, modern-day militias gained prominence in the early 1990s, following the events at Ruby Ridge, Idaho, and Waco, Texas, as well as the passage of the federal assault weapons ban under President Bill Clinton. Catherine Stock, for instance, characterized the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing as the latest manifestation of a long tradition of "rural radicalism." This tradition, she argued, had fostered a strain of "vigilantism and intolerance" dating back to the South Carolina Regulators of the 1760s and reinvigorated during the farm crisis of the 1980s.[53] Darren Mulloy and Evelyn Schlatter, in their studies of the militia movement and white supremacist groups in the western US, focused not on what set these groups apart from mainstream American society but on what they shared, namely a common support for traditional masculinity and a romanticized vision of the American Revolution and the American West.[54] However, some scholars went further and sought to downplay the radical nature of the movement by drawing on Ribuffo's work. In 2009, Robert Churchill argued that the militia movement had been the victim of a "second American Brown scare," with left-wing scholars and watchdog groups misleadingly associating it with racism. He contended instead that the militia movement was driven primarily by legitimate opposition to the federal government's excessive use of force.[55] The effort to soften the militia movement's radical edge was hardly limited to academic circles. From its emergence in the 1990s, conservative voices in the media and national politics framed its adherents as ordinary American "patriots," heirs to a venerable

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51 Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton University Press, 2001), 10.

52 Samuel Goldman, "The Problem of American Conservatism, Revisited," *American Political Thought* 13, no. 2 (2024): 242; Phillips-Fein, "Conservatism," 736.

53 Catherine McNicol Stock, *Rural Radicals: From Bacon's Rebellion to the Oklahoma City Bombing* (Penguin, 1997), 13.

54 Darren Mulloy, *American Extremism: History, Politics and the Militia Movement* (Routledge, 2004); Evelyn Schlatter, *Aryan Cowboys: White Supremacists and the Search for a New Frontier, 1970–2000* (University of Texas Press, 2006).

55 Robert H. Churchill, *To Shake Their Guns in the Tyrant's Face: Libertarian Political Violence and the Origins of the Militia Movement* (University of Michigan Press, 2009), 9–11.

tradition of armed self-defense stretching back to the Revolution and standing guard against government tyranny.[56] Drawn by the militia's anti-statist and anti-globalization outlook, segments of the left also rallied to its defense, demonstrating once again the cross-partisan appeal of populist rhetoric.[57]

To be sure, such arguments were hardly undisputed. Other historians pointed out that the roots of the militias went back to the mid-century fight against racial integration.[58] In a wide-ranging work of cultural analysis published in 1994, James William Gibson connected the spread of paramilitary groups in the 1980s and 1990s to the humiliating defeat in Vietnam and the backlash against liberalism and feminism, which gave birth to a "New War culture" dominated by *Death Wish*, *Rambo*, and *Dirty Harry*-style figures—aggressive white men who despised liberal elites, rejected all rules of warfare, and fought alone against predominantly nonwhite enemies. Gibson further noted that the tropes of "despair and search for rebirth" that marked this culture were in many ways similar to the "stab-in-the-back" myth that pervaded Weimar Germany after World War I. The cultivation of a male warrior ethos glorifying war and despising political liberalism represented, as he put it, "the core of fascist culture."[59]

The militia movement was not the only far-right campaign in which scholars detected traces of fascism. The same was true of historians who explored the "massive resistance" movement against racial integration in the postwar South, a topic that witnessed renewed attention in the late 1990s and the 2000s.[60] Neo-Nazis were actively involved in this effort as early as the late 1940s, when the Columbians, Inc., a group of young white men, attempted to block the integration of residential neighborhoods in Atlanta by adopting "Nazi-style brown shirts, insignia, militancy, and apocalyptic promises of final, genocidal

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56 For an example of this approach, see Mack Tanner, "Extreme Prejudice: How the Media Misrepresent the Militia Movement," *Reason*, July 1995, 42–48. On the allies of the far right in 1990s Washington, see James Ridgeway, *Blood in the Face: The Ku Klux Klan, Aryan Nations, Nazi Skinheads, and the Rise of a New White Culture*, 2nd ed. (Thunder Mouth Press, 1995), 23.

57 Janet Biehl, "The Fallacy of 'Neither Left nor Right': Militia Fever," *Green Perspectives*, Institute for Social Ecology, No. 37, April 1996.

58 Stuart A. Wright, *Patriots, Politics, and the Oklahoma City Bombing* (Cambridge University Press, 2007); Daniel Levitas, *The Terrorist Next Door: The Militia Movement and the Radical Right* (Thomas Dunne Books / St. Martin's, 2002).

59 James William Gibson, *Warrior Dreams: Paramilitary Culture in Post-Vietnam America* (Hill and Wang, 1994), 32, 117, and esp. chapter 10. Kathleen Belew made a similar argument in *Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America* (Harvard University Press, 2018).

60 For early scholarship on this subject, see Neil R. McMillen, *The Citizens' Council: Organized Resistance to the Second Reconstruction, 1954–64* (University of Illinois Press, 1971); Numan V. Bartley, *The Rise of Massive Resistance: Race and Politics in the South During the 1950's* (Louisiana State University Press, 1969). For a state of the field in the mid-2000s, see Clive Webb, ed., *Massive Resistance: Southern Opposition to the Second Reconstruction* (Oxford University Press, 2005).

violence."[61] In the 1950s, various "rabble rousers," as Clive Webb has called them, played a key role in energizing grassroots resistance to the civil rights movement across the South by deploying just the kind of populist, overtly racist, and rabidly antisemitic rhetoric that southern Democratic lawmakers were trying to downplay in their own efforts to defend segregation in Congress. One of the leading firebrands in this group was J. B. Stoner, who in 1958 helped found the National States Rights Party, a group that merged Lost Cause and Nazi symbols (its flag featured the SS thunderbolt on top of a Confederate battle-flag motif).[62] Beyond these relatively small organizations, the more outwardly respectable White Citizens' Council cultivated close ties with the far right, with local members often encouraging or actively engaging in acts of violence against civil rights activists.[63] After its heyday in the mid-1950s, the group continued to be involved in these circles, for instance by helping support George Wallace's 1968 campaign, building ties to the Klan, or broadcasting radio and TV programs in which it increasingly cloaked its "white supremacist activism in the colorblind rhetoric of conservatism."[64]

The White Citizens' Council was one of the chief proponents of what the activist-scholar Leonard Zeskind described as a strategy of "mainstreaming." In his overlooked yet essential *Blood and Politics* (2009), which remains the most comprehensive survey of white nationalism in the United States since the mid-twentieth century, Zeskind distinguished between "mainstreamers" and "vanguardists." The former—including the council, Willis Carto, and David Duke—sought to advance their ideas through (mostly) nonviolent advocacy and movement-building within the bounds of the existing legal and political system. By contrast, "vanguardists" such as William Pierce, author of *The Turner Diaries* (1979), abandoned any hope of winning over more than "a slim minority" of whites and instead sought to "build smaller organizations of highly dedicated cadres with the intention of forcefully dragging the rest of society behind them" through the use of terrorist methods. Zeskind argued that the history of the far right since the 1950s had been marked by a constant oscillation between these two poles. He also emphasized that the movement had never been confined to the margins, despite frequent portrayals in the media to that effect. Rather, "white nationalists look like a demographic slice of

61 Steven Weisenburger, "The Columbians, Inc.: A Chapter of Racial Hatred from the Post–World War II South," *Journal of Southern History* 69, no. 4 (2003): 823. See also Robert Pierce Patrick, "A Nail in the Coffin of Racism: The Story of the Columbians," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 85, no. 2 (2001): 245–66.

62 Clive Webb, *Rabble Rousers: The American Far Right in the Civil Rights Era* (University of Georgia Press, 2010).

63 McMillen, *Citizens' Council*, 360; On the role of Leander Perez, leader of the New Orleans Citizens' Council, in inciting a white mob's assault on a school administration building in 1960, see Glen Jeansonne, *Leander Perez: Boss of the Delta*, 2nd ed. (University Press of Mississippi, 2006).

64 Rebecca Brückmann, "Citizens' Councils, Conservatism and White Supremacy in Louisiana, 1964–1972," *European Journal of American Studies* 14, no. 1 (2019): 7; Stephanie R. Rolph, *Resisting Equality: The Citizens' Council, 1954–1989* (Louisiana State University Press, 2018).

white America: mostly blue collar and working middle class with a small number of wealthy individuals." According to his estimate, their core membership numbered around thirty thousand, with an additional two hundred thousand people occupying the broader "periphery" of the movement.[65]

As the founder of the Institute for Research and Education on Human Rights in 1983, Leonard Zeskind belonged to the same tradition of right-watchers that had emerged in the interwar period. This small but active network coalesced in the late twentieth century around several watchdog organizations, including the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), and Political Research Associates (PRA). Among its leading figures were Ken Stern, who investigated the spread of antisemitism and militia activity for the American Jewish Committee; Mark Potok and Heidi Beirich, who oversaw much of the SPLC's extensive monitoring of far-right groups; Pam Chamberlain, whose work at PRA's *The Public Eye* offered critical analyses of Christian nationalism; and Frederick Clarkson, who exposed the rise of dominionist and Christian Reconstructionist movements. Several other activists continued the documentary tradition pioneered by Gordon Hall after World War II. Mark Pitcavage, for instance, built one of the most comprehensive records of militia activity through his *Militia Watchdog* website. After a career in journalism, Wesley McCune founded Group Research Inc. in 1962, which collected materials on the far right for more than four decades. Three years later, Laird Wilcox began donating his collection of extremist publications to the University of Kansas. Today, both McCune's archive, now housed at Columbia University, and Wilcox's remain among the most important repositories of material on US political extremism. Ernie Lazar also amassed and digitized a vast trove of primary sources and bibliographies related to extremist organizations across the political spectrum, creating a unique resource that continues to serve journalists and scholars alike.[66] Working largely on their own, these various figures played a crucial role in crafting a nuanced portrait of the far right, emphasizing its factionalism and internal contradictions rather than reducing it to a single monolithic force (today, this tradition continues with podcasts like *Know Your Enemy*).

Although much of their work unfolded outside the confines of academia, these right-watchers were anything but detached from scholarly debates. The most ambitious synthesis of their insights came with *Right-Wing Populism in America* (2000), coauthored by Chip Berlet, a veteran investigative journalist and researcher at PRA, and Matthew Lyons, a longtime analyst of right-wing movements and editor of the antifascist blog *Three Way Fight*. Rejecting the centrist/extremist model, Berlet and Lyons insisted that right-wing populism, defined as the fusion of "attacks on socially oppressed groups with grassroots

65 Leonard Zeskind, *Blood and Politics: The History of the White Nationalist Movement from the Margins to the Mainstream* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009), xviii–xxi.

66 Lazar's work is accessible at "CRWS Archives and Resources," Institute for the Study of Societal Issues, UC Berkeley, accessed June 24, 2025, https://issi.berkeley.edu/centers/crws/archives.

mass mobilization and distorted forms of antielitism based on scapegoating," was not some foreign aberration but was deeply embedded in American political traditions. Far from being irrational fringe elements, these movements drew strength from precarious middle layers of society, notably middle- and working-class whites, as well as disaffected segments of the elite seeking to harness popular resentment for their own ends. Fascism, they argued, represented only the most virulent strain within this larger ecosystem—dangerous not because of its dominance but because of its capacity to interact with and amplify other factions of the right.[67] Their granular mapping of far-right factions did not lose sight of the structural forces that united its various strands. In a 2004 essay, Berlet for instance distinguished between a reformist conservative right (represented by institutions like the GOP and the Heritage Foundation), a dissident right (including the Christian right and militia movements), and an extreme right that openly rejected democracy (such as neo-Nazis and the Klan). While emphasizing the heterogeneity of these currents, Berlet also underscored that they shared not only the same "targets" but also "common styles, frames, and narratives."[68] In this respect, his work not only echoed earlier left-leaning critiques like Ribuffo's but helped lay a foundation for much of the scholarship that would follow, even as mainstream academia largely ignored his contributions.

The recognition by scholars such as Zeskind, Berlet, and Lyons that a fascist tradition had long existed on American soil was largely absent from the "fascism debate" that followed Trump's rise to the presidency in 2016.[69] The iconoclastic style and rhetoric of the forty-fifth president led many commentators to claim that Trump and his supporters were either fascist or harbored fascist potential. Skeptics dismissed these arguments as alarmist, preferring to interpret his ascent through other frameworks—polarization, oligarchy, or democratic backsliding—but both sides shared the mistaken assumption that fascism was a foreign import with no real roots in the United States. Because most of the debate's leading voices were not specialists on the US far right, they tended to ignore the extensive body of scholarship on the subject. Their arguments, shaped more by present-day political anxieties than by historical research, often strayed far from the archival record. In his study of how the concept of "fascism" has been invoked in US politics and culture since the interwar years, for instance, Bruce Kuklick criticized those who employed the term for projecting the shortcomings of their own democracy onto an external threat, even as he overlooked the reality of American fascists and neo-Nazis after 1945.[70] Ultimately,

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67 Berlet and Lyons, introduction to *Right-Wing Populism*.

68 Abby L. Ferber, "Mapping the Political Right: Gender and Race Oppression in Right-Wing Movements," in *Home-Grown Hate: Gender and Organized Racism*, ed. Chip Berlet (Routledge, 2004), 22–25.

69 For a review of this debate, see Daniel Steinmetz-Jenkins, ed., *Did It Happen Here? Perspectives on Fascism and America* (W. W. Norton, 2024); Gavriel D. Rosenfeld and Janet Ward, introduction to *Fascism in America: Past and Present*, ed. Gavriel D. Rosenfeld and Janet Ward (Cambridge University Press, 2023).

70 Bruce Kuklick, *Fascism Comes to America: A Century of Obsession in Politics and Culture* (University of Chicago Press, 2022), 192.

the debate shed more light on the political divides of the late 2010s and early 2020s than on the history of fascism in the United States. It also underscored the insularity of much US scholarship on the far right, which had remained largely disconnected from broader international debates.

Despite its shortcomings, the fascism debate played a key role in pushing scholars to take the far right more seriously, stimulating new research and bringing greater visibility to existing work. Taken as a whole, this new wave of studies reached several conclusions. It demonstrated, first and foremost, that earlier generations of scholars underestimated the strength of the far right in the United States, both in terms of its membership and of its broader circles of sympathizers within civil society and the state.[71] Second, it revealed that some of the movement's most notorious ideas and slogans—such as "America First"—had far deeper historical roots in popular culture than is commonly assumed.[72] Third, it cast new light on the far right's transnational character, showing that its leaders not only sought ideological inspiration and material support abroad, but that they actively positioned themselves as part of a global struggle against leftist and progressive forces.[73] Fourth, these works challenged the prevailing view that the defeat of fascist regimes in World War II dealt a decisive blow to the movement. They emphasized instead the significant continuities between the "old right," with its isolationist, antisemitic, and fascist sympathies, and the more outwardly respectable conservative movement that emerged after the war.[74] Finally, even as they pushed back against Ribuffo's tendency to downplay the movement's influence in the interwar period, these scholars agreed with his view that these years did not see clear distinctions between mainstream conservatives and more radical figures.[75] Where earlier historians had tried to normalize the right by emphasizing its internal divisions, this new scholarship followed Perlstein's lead, attempting instead to

71 See, for instance, Charles R. Gallagher, *Nazis of Copley Square: The Forgotten Story of the Christian Front* (Harvard University Press, 2021); Bradley W. Hart, *Hitler's American Friends: The Third Reich's Supporters in the United States* (Thomas Dunne Books, 2018); Belew, *Bring the War Home*; Steven Joseph Ross, *Hitler in Los Angeles: How Jews Foiled Nazi Plots Against Hollywood and America* (Bloomsbury Press, 2017).

72 Sarah Churchwell, *Behold, America: The Entangled History of "America First" and "the American Dream"* (Basic Books, 2018).

73 Joseph Fronczak, "The Fascist Game: Transnational Political Transmission and the Genesis of the U.S. Modern Right," *Journal of American History* 105, no. 3 (2018): 563–88; Kyle Burke, *Revolutionaries for the Right: Anticommunist Internationalism and Paramilitary Warfare in the Cold War* (University of North Carolina Press, 2018).

74 Fronczak, "Fascist Game"; Alex McPhee-Browne, "The Menace of Globalism: Merwin K. Hart and Nationalist Conservatism, 1930–1960," *Journal of Right-Wing Studies* 3, no. 1 (2025): 2–30.

75 Kim Phillips-Fein, "'A Fight Between Two Systems of Thought': Gerald B. Winrod and the Kansas Senate Race of 1938," *Journal of American History* 108, no. 3 (2021): 521–44.

de-normalize it by underscoring the ideological affinities, mutual borrowings, and shared impulses that knit its many factions together.[76]

The recent turn toward emphasizing commonalities over distinctions is also evident in the evolving scholarship on anti-communism. Though it was the Second Red Scare that birthed the centrist/extremist model so long dominant in studies of the right, the literature on anti-communism had for decades developed almost entirely apart from the historiography of conservatism.[77] Earlier scholars had often been content to cleave anti-communism in two: a rational, liberal strain deemed responsible, and a more unhinged, reactionary variant consigned to the far right. But this dichotomy has lately come under fire. As Nick Fischer observed, attempts to "unscramble the anticommunist omelet" have largely failed because there was never much of a distinction to begin with. In his account, liberal and conservative anti-communists shared not only principles and tactics but also a remarkable degree of ideological cohesion and institutional continuity, their unity mirroring the very "spider web" metaphor they deployed against their foes.[78] To be sure, some crusaders were more fanatical than others, but anti-communism nevertheless acted as a binding agent that tethered the far right to the political mainstream by providing both with a common enemy, at once imagined and real. Moving away from the long-held focus on the first post–World War II decade, newer scholarship has pushed the origins of anti-communism earlier, challenged the myth of its interwar dormancy, and shown how its fervor outlived McCarthy, providing the scaffolding for modern conservatism.[79] Nowhere is this convergence more visible than in the surge of scholarship on the John Birch Society, which has bridged the gap between histories of anti-communism and studies of the conservative ascendancy.[80]

More broadly, such work has unsettled the familiar narrative of conservatism's smooth ascent back to power since the 1930s, exposing the movement's internal contradictions and drawing attention to the actors and ideas that, though often overlooked by the media,

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76 Goldman, "Problem of American Conservatism."

77 For recent historiographical surveys, see Jennifer Delton, "Rethinking Post–World War II Anti-communism," *Journal of the Historical Society* 10, no. 1 (2010): 1–41; Marc J. Selverstone, "A Literature So Immense: The Historiography of Anticommunism," *OAH Magazine of History* 24, no. 4 (2010): 7–11.

78 Nick Fischer, *Spider Web: The Birth of American Anticommunism* (University of Illinois Press, 2016), 80–81, 276–77.

79 Clay Risen, *Red Scare: Blacklists, McCarthyism and the Making of Modern America* (Scribner, 2025); Hubert Villeneuve, *Teaching Anticommunism: Fred Schwarz and American Postwar Conservatism* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020); Robert Justin Goldstein, ed., *Little "Red Scares": Anti-Communism and Political Repression in the United States, 1921–1946* (Ashgate, 2014).

80 Matthew Dallek, *Birchers: How the John Birch Society Radicalized the American Right* (Basic Books, 2023); Edward H. Miller, *A Conspiratorial Life: Robert Welch, the John Birch Society, and the Revolution of American Conservatism* (University of Chicago Press, 2021); D. J. Mulloy, *The World of the John Birch Society: Conspiracy, Conservatism, and the Cold War* (Vanderbilt University Press, 2014).

have long simmered beneath its public facade.[81] David Walsh has argued that modern conservatism was never hermetically separated from the far right but instead emerged in tandem with it in the 1930s, as both formed a "right-wing popular front" against the New Deal. This ad hoc coalition lasted well into the 1960s, and its collapse was never as complete as "respectable" conservative advocates like William Buckley Jr. sought to portray it to the general public, for far-right voices continued to play a major role in right-wing politics well into the 1990s.[82] John Huntington has made a similar claim, portraying the far right as the "vanguard" of modern conservatism—the source of many of the shock troops, ideas, and organizations that played a crucial role in helping the conservative movement grow—and stressing that there was never a firm dividing line between these two camps.[83] Focusing on Merwin K. Hart, the founder of the National Economic Council and a central figure in right-wing circles from the 1930s to the late 1950s, Alex McPhee-Browne has described him as a "policy entrepreneur, fashioning a range of positions that would later rise to prominence on the right."[84]

Although scholarship on the far right long predates Trump, his first term marked a turning point. Much like the movement it studies, scholarship on the far right has shifted from the margins to the mainstream since the mid-2010s, and not only in the United States. The creation of this journal in 2023, nearly a decade and a half after the foundation of Berkeley's Center for Right-Wing Studies, reflects that belated recognition.[85] After neglecting the far right for decades during the Cold War, scholarship is once again in a moment closer to the interwar years, when public discourse was seized by urgent debates over the far right as a looming threat to democracy.

## Contours and Horizons: Rethinking the Far Right

Precisely because there is so much discussion of this topic, it is important to clarify what we mean when we speak of the "far right." The term itself has become dominant in recent years, replacing substitutes such as "right-wing populism" in the early 2000s, "radical right" in the 1990s, and "extreme right" in the 1980s. Cas Mudde has defined the "far right" in

81 A. J. Bauer, "The Alternative Historiography of the Alt-Right: Conservative Historical Subjectivity from the Tea Party to Trump," in *Far-Right Revisionism and the End of History: Alt/Histories*, ed. Louie Dean Valencia-García (Routledge, 2020).

82 David Austin Walsh, *Taking America Back: The Conservative Movement and the Far Right* (Yale University Press, 2024).

83 John S. Huntington, *Far-Right Vanguard: The Radical Roots of Modern Conservatism* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021).

84 McPhee-Browne, "Menace of Globalism," 11.

85 Hilal Ahmed, Fred Block, Eliah Bures, et al., "Right-Wing Studies: A Roundtable on the State of the Field," *Journal of Right-Wing Studies* 1, no. 0 (2023): 2–36. The CRWS was founded in 2009.

opposition to the "mainstream right," which accepts liberal democracy, and divided the former into two subgroups: the "radical right," which opposes the checks and balances and rule of law of *liberal* democracy but nonetheless accepts the principle of popular sovereignty and majority rule; and the "extreme right," which entirely rejects liberalism *and* democracy and calls for revolutionary violence.[86] This definition echoes Berlet's three-tiered typology but says little about what the far right actually believes in.[87] In their study of the European far right, Jean-Yves Camus and Nicolas Lebourg identify "organicism" (the belief that society functions like a living organism) as the foundation of its worldview. This outlook naturalizes hierarchy and inequality, rejects universalist ideals, and exalts a chosen in-group while defining itself against an excluded other. Far-right movements envision a "closed society" rooted in a mythic past and animated by a redemptive mission. They reject liberal democracy, cast themselves as a new ruling elite, and draw on narratives of decline, lost golden ages, and conspiratorial betrayal to justify their project.[88]

Among the many camps that compose the broad constellation of the US far right, one tradition has drawn particular public and scholarly scrutiny: fascism. While debates over the term often suggest a mire of conceptual confusion, a broad consensus has in fact taken shape in recent decades around the complementary frameworks of Roger Griffin and Robert Paxton. Approaching the question from different angles, both identified fascism as a populist and ultranationalist project of national rebirth, fueled by anxieties of civilizational decay and justified through the embrace of political violence as a means of regeneration.[89] Far from being confined to interwar Europe, this definition has been applied with equal rigor to other contexts such as Latin America, Africa, and Asia.[90] This more rigorous lens makes clear that fascism, while a valid and necessary category, has historically represented only one faction within the wider far-right spectrum. Other subgroups may pursue parallel aims through more conventional means: electoral politics, gradual reform, or legal manipulation. The dividing line between fascist and non-fascist

86 Cas Mudde, *The Far Right Today* (Polity, 2019), 7.

87 Ferber, "Mapping the Political Right."

88 Nicolas Lebourg and Jean-Yves Camus, *Far-Right Politics in Europe* (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2017), 21–22.

89 Roger Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism* (Routledge, 1993); Robert O. Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism* (Knopf, 2004).

90 For examples of such works, see Gabriela de Lima Grecco and Leandro Pereira Gonçalves, eds., *Fascismos iberoamericanos* (Alianza Editorial, 2022); Christoph Marx, *Oxwagon Sentinel: Radical Afrikaner Nationalism and the History of the Ossewabrandwag* (Lit Verlag, 2009); Marzia Casolari, *In the Shadow of the Swastika: The Relationships Between Indian Radical Nationalism, Italian Fascism and Nazism* (Routledge, 2020); Maggie Clinton, *Revolutionary Nativism: Fascism and Culture in China, 1925–1937* (Duke University Press, 2017); Reto Hofmann, *The Fascist Effect: Japan and Italy, 1915–1952* (Cornell University Press, 2015).

actors, in this sense, lies less in their ultimate visions than in the methods they are willing to employ.

This leads us to the closely related question of the far right's relationship with mainstream politics and with the state itself. Since at least the New Deal, a defining feature of far-right movements in the US has been a deep sense of dispossession: the conviction that they speak for a historically dominant group (white, Christian, heterosexual men) that has been unfairly pushed aside by liberals, Jews, racial minorities, women, and immigrants. Yet while narratives of exclusion and victimhood have been central to the far right's self-understanding, this movement has not always been relegated to the political margins, nor has it invariably positioned itself in opposition to state power. Beyond the obvious example of the present moment, when far-right forces seem in control of both the Republican Party and much of the federal government, history offers other precedents. In the 1920s, for instance, the Ku Klux Klan operated as a kind of "parastate," collaborating with public authorities to violently enforce Prohibition on the ground.[91]

The work of sociologist Sara Diamond and political scientist Ehud Sprinzak can help us overcome this presentist bias. In *Roads to Dominion* (1992), Diamond examined the evolving relationship between right-wing movements and the state, drawing a distinction between the latter's role as an "enforcer of order"—a function the right has typically endorsed—and as a redistributor of wealth and power toward historically marginalized groups, which the right has opposed. So long as the state confined itself to the former function, acting primarily as a guardian of the status quo, right-wing movements generally aligned themselves with it. But when the state sought to reshape existing hierarchies in the name of equity or inclusion, it increasingly became a target of right-wing hostility.[92] Sprinzak touched upon a similar dynamic with his concept of "split delegitimization." While right-wing violence often originates in hostility toward perceived "enemies" within society, such movements become truly radicalized and begin using terrorist violence only once they conclude that the state itself has failed to defend their own in-group.[93] In sum, what defines the far right is not so much its oscillating stance toward the state, which has ranged from confrontation to support, as its persistent rejection of state interventions *perceived* to benefit an illegitimate out-group (even modest or ineffectual efforts to challenge entrenched racial or gender hierarchies can be construed as existential threats provoking outsized responses).

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91 Lisa McGirr, *The War on Alcohol: Prohibition and the Rise of the American State* (W. W. Norton, 2015), chapter 5. On the concept of "parastate" organizations, see Eldon J. Eisenach, *The Lost Promise of Progressivism* (University Press of Kansas, 1994), 18.

92 Sara Diamond, *Roads to Dominion: Right-Wing Movements and Political Power in the United States* (Guilford, 1995), 6–11.

93 Ehud Sprinzak, "Right-Wing Terrorism in a Comparative Perspective: The Case of Split Delegitimization," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 7, no. 1 (1995): 17–43.

In closing this discussion of definitions, we should note that an excessive fixation on rigid typologies—drawing firm lines between the groups that count as "far right" and those that do not—would be counterproductive. The political terrain is rarely so neatly divided. Movements shift with the winds of history; some people may grow more moderate while others radicalize; and, crucially, the most consequential actors often operate in the twilight zones where categories blur. In its early years, for instance, the John Birch Society mattered precisely because of its dual identity: it offered extremists a home while projecting just enough mainstream polish to remain within the bounds of respectable conservatism, thus allowing fringe ideologies to migrate into public life. An obsession with taxonomic precision risks missing the forest for the trees, for the purity of a group's ideology is not always as important as its ability to build bridges between disavowed margins and the political center.

As the study of the far right itself becomes more mainstream, however, it will be important not to lose sight of the actors who remained beyond the pale. It is, after all, the movement's willingness to embrace seemingly irrational, conspiratorial, or fringe beliefs that gives it much of its radical character and sets it apart from the broader political culture it seeks to subvert. Beginning in the 1970s, skinheads exemplified this dynamic. Emerging from a British tradition and fueled by punk rock, heavy drinking, violence, and hostility to authority, they formed youth subcultures that helped revitalize the far right in the final decades of the twentieth century.[94] Skinhead gangs not only popularized white power and black metal music but also blurred the boundaries between politics and spirituality, with some adherents dabbling in occult traditions or Satanist sects while simultaneously affiliating with neo-Nazi groups.[95]

Indeed, religion remains an area where more research is needed. Scholars have long shown the limits of the conventional wisdom that identifies the US far right as tied to the defense of a conservative version of Christianity—one that, in recent years, has grown increasingly more authoritarian and illiberal.[96] Aside from Nordic paganism or occult hybrids, many of its members have found inspiration in the esoteric doctrines of traditionalism, a diffuse intellectual current. Rooted in the early twentieth-century writings of René Guénon and later expanded by Julius Evola, traditionalism rejects modernity wholesale, opposing secularism, democracy, and liberalism as corruptions of a primordial sacred order. Though never a mass movement, traditionalism has deeply

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94 Jack B. Moore, *Skinheads Shaved for Battle: A Cultural History of American Skinheads* (Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1993); Zeskind, *Blood and Politics*, chapter 22; Goodrick-Clarke, *Black Sun*, chapter 10.

95 Damon T. Berry, *Blood & Faith: Christianity in American White Nationalism* (Syracuse University Press, 2017).

96 Matthew D. Taylor, *The Violent Take It by Force: The Christian Movement That Is Threatening Our Democracy* (Broadleaf Books, 2024); Tim Alberta, *The Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory: American Evangelicals in an Age of Extremism* (Harper, 2023).

influenced segments of the far right, such as the Russian neo-Eurasianism of Aleksandr Dugin.[97] Even within explicitly Christian contexts, then, the far right's religious landscape is not monolithic but instead accommodates a remarkably wide and increasingly global range of illiberal spiritual visions.

Religion often interacted with other factors, of which one of the most prominent was gender. In her book *Killing for Life* (2002), Carol Mason explored the apocalyptic narrative of anti-abortion activists who committed terrorist attacks against clinics and providers, tracing its origins back to Gibson's concept of a "New War culture."[98] And many works have explored the essential role of women in the far right, which may seem counterintuitive given the movement's insistence on defending a patriarchal model of society.[99] Others have focused on analyzing its worldview through a gendered lens. Following in the footsteps of Barbara Spackman's classic *Fascist Virilities* (1996), Abby Ferber has highlighted how white supremacist discourse is inseparable from anxieties over white masculinity, portraying white men as emasculated by feminism and interracial sexuality. Kathleen Blee's work dissects white women's various roles in the white power movement "as ethereal Nordic goddesses and racial victims, as potential 'race traitors,' as wifely supporters of male racial warriors and bearers of the next generation of Aryans, or as racist activists in their own right."[100] More work remains to be done along this track, particularly to trace the evolution of masculinity as an ideal within the far right.[101]

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97 Mark J. Sedgwick, *Traditionalism: The Radical Project for Restoring Sacred Order* (Oxford University Press, 2023); Mark J. Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World: Traditionalism and the Secret Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century* (Oxford University Press, 2004).

98 Carol Mason, *Killing for Life: The Apocalyptic Narrative of Pro-Life Politics* (Cornell University Press, 2002), chapter 1.

99 Linda Gordon, *The Second Coming of the KKK: The Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s and the American Political Tradition* (Liveright, 2017), chapters 6–7; Jennifer L. Johnson, *Grandmothers on Guard: Gender, Aging, and the Minutemen at the US-Mexico Border* (University of Texas Press, 2021); Seyward Darby, *Sisters in Hate: American Women on the Front Lines of White Nationalism* (Little, Brown, 2020); Elizabeth Gillespie McRae, *Mothers of Massive Resistance: White Women and the Politics of White Supremacy* (Oxford University Press, 2018); June Melby Benowitz, *Days of Discontent: American Women and Right-Wing Politics, 1933–1945* (Northern Illinois University Press, 2002); Kim E. Nielsen, *Un-American Womanhood: Antiradicalism, Antifeminism, and the First Red Scare* (Ohio State University Press, 2001); Jeansonne, *Women of the Far Right*.

100 Kathleen M. Blee, *Inside Organized Racism: Women in the Hate Movement* (University of California Press, 2002), 115; Abby L. Ferber, *White Man Falling: Race, Gender, and White Supremacy* (Rowman & Littlefield, 1998); Barbara Spackman, *Fascist Virilities: Rhetoric, Ideology, and Social Fantasy in Italy* (University of Minnesota Press, 1996). See also Abby L. Ferber, ed., *Home-Grown Hate: Gender and Organized Racism* (Routledge, 2004); Laura McEnaney, "He-Men and Christian Mothers: The America First Movement and the Gendered Meanings of Patriotism and Isolationism," *Diplomatic History* 18, no. 1 (January 1994): 47–57.

101 For a recent example of such work, see Emily K. Carian, Alex DiBranco, and Chelsea Ebin, eds., *Male Supremacism in the United States: From Patriarchal Traditionalism to Misogynist Incels and the Alt-Right* (Routledge, 2022).

A renewed focus on culture and grassroots activism should not eclipse another area where further research is urgently needed: the far right's relationship with capital. Multiple avenues remain largely unexplored here. One of the most obvious concerns the role of wealthy patrons who, often away from public scrutiny, have channeled critical funding to far-right actors. Historians of postwar conservatism and journalists like Jane Mayer have charted this dynamic in the mainstream right and the Tea Party movement, a story that also sits within the broader "counterrevolution" in public finance analyzed by Melinda Cooper.[102] Yet we still know little about similar patterns on the far right before 9/11, though recent work has begun to blaze that trail.[103] Investigating this relationship is all the more crucial given the persistence of conspiratorial tropes that reduce far-right actors to mere puppets of big business. The real value of such research lies in tracing the intra-class tensions among elites and highlighting the agency of far-right movements, whose aims do not always align neatly with those of their backers.

Another line of inquiry in the study of the far right's relationship with capital would explore its ideological and material affinities with the libertarian movement, whose ideology (captured most notably in Ayn Rand's work) has traditionally been embraced by many business leaders.[104] These ties were brought into sharp relief when the failed 2008 presidential bid of its standard-bearer Ron Paul helped catalyze the Tea Party insurgency. Despite its significance, Paul's career has yet to receive the scholarly treatment it deserves. An equally vital direction would shift attention away from capital and toward its traditional enemy, labor. For example, how did far-right actors position themselves in relation to working-class grievances, union movements, and the racialized restructuring of labor markets across the twentieth century? Finally, scholars should also investigate the far right's own entrepreneurial endeavors, which often aimed to turn conspiratorial thinking into profit. Long before Alex Jones launched Infowars in 1999, for example, the explosive growth of the second Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s owed much to its "multilevel marketing structure fueled by an army of highly incentivized sales agents," generating annual revenues of at least $25 million at its peak.[105]

Where the interwar Klan relied primarily on print and radio, today's far right has proved particularly adept at using social media and podcast platforms. While this

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102 Kim Phillips-Fein, *Invisible Hands: The Making of the Conservative Movement from the New Deal to Reagan* (W.W. Norton, 2009); Jane Mayer, *Dark Money: The Hidden History of the Billionaires Behind the Rise of the Radical Right* (Doubleday, 2016); Melinda Cooper, *Counterrevolution: Extravagance and Austerity in Public Finance* (Zone Books, 2024).

103 Chad Pearson, *Capital's Terrorists: Klansmen, Lawmen, and Employers in the Long Nineteenth Century* (University of North Carolina Press, 2022); Kathryn S. Olmsted, *The Newspaper Axis: Six Press Barons Who Enabled Hitler* (Yale University Press, 2022).

104 Jennifer Burns, *Goddess of the Market: Ayn Rand and the American Right* (Oxford University Press, 2009).

105 Roland G. Fryer and Steven D. Levitt, "Hatred and Profits: Under the Hood of the Ku Klux Klan," *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 127, no. 4 (2012): 1,883.

may seem surprising for a movement that has long derided the mainstream media as the tool of a global conspiracy, it is precisely this self-perception as a marginalized and besieged outsider that drove the far right early on to construct its own alternative media infrastructure—an investment that is now paying dividends. Watchdog reports and journalistic investigations have begun to chart the contours of this digital ecosystem, but we still lack a clear understanding of how the far right gained such a dominant foothold online.[106] Additional work may help complicate dominant narratives about Silicon Valley. While historians such as Margaret O'Mara have long debunked the mythology of entrepreneurial genius centered on figures like Steve Jobs and Bill Gates, we lack a clear sense of how the digital tools pioneered by their industry became instrumental in amplifying far-right ideologies, and of how prominent tech leaders such as Peter Thiel, Elon Musk, or Mark Zuckerberg have proven susceptible to such views.[107] In tracing the affinities between Silicon Valley and the right, we need not limit ourselves to the recent past: Stanford University's founding president David Starr Jordan was, after all, a leading proponent of eugenics at the turn of the twentieth century, and one of its most famous professors helped develop the Stanford-Binet IQ test. Both contributed to the scientific legitimation of white supremacist ideas long before the Internet era.

The global reach of modern communication technologies underscores another area in need of further research: the relationship of the US far right with the wider world. Admittedly, this topic has seen a growing wave of scholarly attention in recent years, as noted earlier. Historians have shown that, despite their deeply nationalist orientation, far-right movements frequently operated with a transnational outlook and sought connections with ideologically aligned activists abroad. Still, the ideas, trajectories, and transnational networks of several key far-right actors—ranging from Carto and Duke to earlier figures such as Rockwell, Ezra Pound, and Francis Parker Yockey, author of *Imperium* (1948)—await sustained historical examination.[108] This is also true of lesser-known activists like Gary Lauck, the "Farm Belt Führer" who produced and distributed vast quantities of

106 Mike Rothschild, *The Storm Is upon Us: How QAnon Became a Movement, Cult, and Conspiracy Theory of Everything* (Melville House, 2021); Andrew Marantz, *Antisocial: How Online Extremists Broke America* (Picador, 2019); Megan Squire and Hannah Gais, "Inside the Far-Right Podcast Ecosystem, Part 1: Building a Network of Hate," *Southern Poverty Law Center*, September 29, 2021, https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2021/09/29/inside-far-right-podcast-ecosystem-part-1-building-network-hate.

107 Margaret Pugh O'Mara, *The Code: Silicon Valley and the Remaking of America* (Penguin Press, 2019); Margaret Pugh O'Mara, *Cities of Knowledge: Cold War Science and the Search for the Next Silicon Valley* (Princeton University Press, 2005).

108 Tyler Bridges, *The Rise and Fall of David Duke* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2018); George Michael, *Willis Carto and the American Far Right* (University Press of Florida, 2008); Matthew Feldman, *Ezra Pound's Fascist Propaganda, 1935–45* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013). On Yockey, see Kevin Coogan, *Dreamer of the Day: Francis Parker Yockey and the Postwar Fascist International* (Autonomedia, 1999).

neo-Nazi materials to far-right groups in Europe, particularly Germany, until his arrest in 1995.[109]

In sum, the field remains rich with untapped terrain. Spatial and regional histories, in particular, beg for deeper excavation: How does geography (urban/rural divides, suburban politics, or exurban migration) shape far-right activism? And how do the various regional genealogies of the far right (the South's Lost Cause, Midwestern isolationism, and the Pacific Northwest's "white homeland" mythos) relate to each other? Ostensibly fallow periods, like the late 1960s and early 1970s, also demand reappraisal. The links between George Wallace's segregationist populism, the National Youth Alliance, and William Pierce's later ideological ventures remain surprisingly unstudied. Likewise, the American variants of ecofascism—infused with anti-urbanism, homesteading romanticism, and "blood and soil" nostalgia—deserve far greater scrutiny. Closely related are the patterns of unorthodox health practices that run through the far right. Distrust of mainstream medicine and faith in miracle cures, from Gerald Winrod's promotion of Hoxsey remedies to Cold War fears of water fluoridation and more recently the Make America Healthy Again movement, form a continuous thread awaiting systematic study. Intellectual history, for its part, has only skimmed the surface: figures like Revilo Oliver, Paul Gottfried, Robert Pearson, and Steve Sailer continue to cast long shadows without having yet received the attention they warrant, in part because of the persistent if misguided tendency to dismiss far-right ideas as unworthy of serious study. And finally, the carceral state remains a glaring omission: Prison has long served as both an incubator and a megaphone for far-right ideologies, while the institutions of incarceration themselves have played an underexamined role in drawing the line between dissent and extremism.

## Conclusion

In grappling with these questions, scholars of the far right are doing more than reframing their own field—they have the potential to challenge the master narratives of modern American history. At its core, the study of the far right shows that democracy in the United States was not a stable inheritance but a fragile, hard-won, and often fiercely contested achievement. It compels us to reckon with how deeply antidemocratic currents have run through not merely the fringes of American life but its very center. As Robert Mickey has argued, a fully consolidated democracy, with universal suffrage and equal rights, did not arrive until nearly two centuries after the nation's founding. "If," he asked, "the consolidation of democracy across the entire polity took so long to occur, was so complex and contingent, should we view it as permanent?"[110] The question hangs heavy,

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109 Michelle Lynn Kahn, "The American Influence on German Neo-Nazism: An Entangled History of Hate, 1970s–1990s," *Journal of Holocaust Research* 35, no. 2 (2021): 91–105.

110 Robert Mickey, *Paths out of Dixie: The Democratization of Authoritarian Enclaves in America's Deep South, 1944–1972* (Princeton University Press, 2015), 32, 352–53.

particularly in the current era of renewed democratic erosion. Likewise, as Samuel Goldman has noted, the growing body of work on conservatism unsettles the "widespread yet unstated assumption" among many academics "that the 'arc of history' points to the left." A deeper understanding of the far right's historical embeddedness may well flip the script: Conservatives begin to appear not as "weird exceptions or unruly rebels" but as defenders of a dominant consensus, while the left assumes the role of perennial outsider.[111]

Such questions exceed the boundaries of this introduction. What this overview has sought to offer is not a definitive map but a set of waypoints in a century-old conversation about the American far right. Three in particular bear emphasis. First, the scholarship on this subject is deeper and more enduring than many assume, a point worth stressing given how routinely it has been ignored in the high-profile "fascism debate." Second, this neglect has long extended to the historical profession itself, which, until quite recently, accorded the far right only glancing attention. Scholarship on the topic has slowly advanced from the periphery to the center. Third, a throughline in this body of work has been the far right's uneasy relationship to the mainstream. Where mid-century liberals dismissed it as marginal and irrational, later historians traced its roots into the cultural and political heart of American life, sometimes at the cost of underplaying its extremism. More recent scholarship has sought to reconcile these views, recognizing that far-right ideas can be both radical and pervasive. In doing so, the field has come full circle, recovering the more critical view of far-right mass movements that defined mid-century critiques while discarding their condescension.

The articles and essays in this special issue make clear that the far right is not a political aberration but a persistent undercurrent in US history, one that has taken root across regions, decades, and institutions. Its protean nature and deep entanglements with the mainstream demand analytical tools that are both conceptually rigorous and historically grounded. If there is a unifying thread in the recent historiography, it is the recognition that studying the far right is not merely a matter of tracing political extremism but of interrogating the boundaries of American democracy itself—its exclusions, its contradictions, and its fragilities. In that sense, this field of study is not just about the far right; it is also about us.

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111 Goldman, "Problem of American Conservatism," 250.