KONRAD ADENAUER STIFTUNG

REGIONAL PROGRAMME
AUSTRALIA AND THE PACIFIC

A New Wave?

Case Studies

Edited by Sophia Brook and Katja Theodorakis

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PERISCOPE

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KONRAD ADENAUER STIFTUNG

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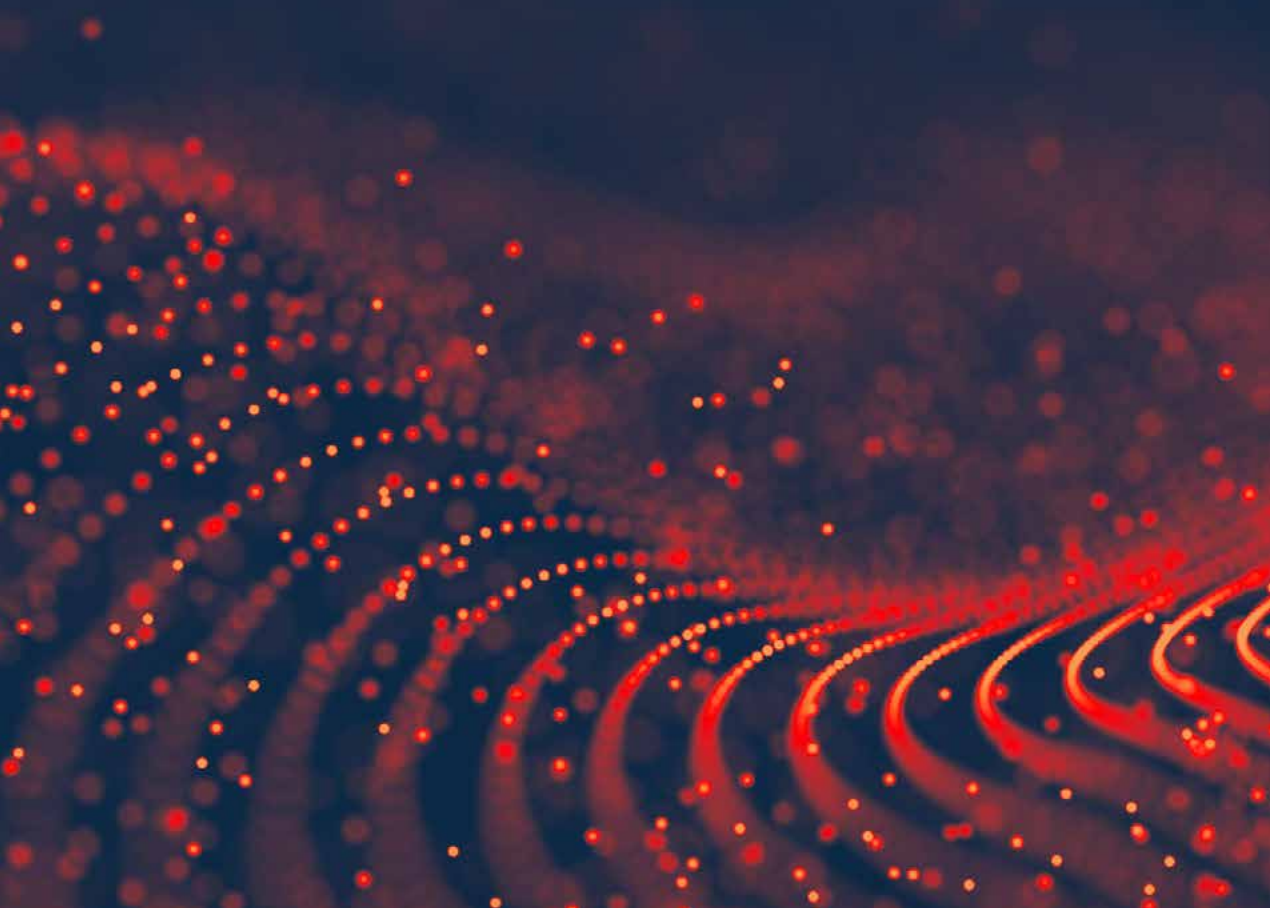

About the editors

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Foreword

As democracies, we must be prepared to defend ourselves against various threats, including those that challenge our way of life and exploit the vulnerabilities of open societies. Islamist terror attacks such as in the Paris opera, at the airport in Brussels, or at the Christmas market in Berlin shook our societies and lead to a necessary upgrade to our security policies.

The right-wing extremist attack on a synagogue in Halle in November 2019 prompted the German government to implement several further measures as a response to a surge in right-wing extremism (RWX), including the creation of an RWX coordination cell on a national intelligence level, a Cabinet committee to combat the RWX threat, and initiatives to combat racism, anti-Semitism, and hate speech. These measures contribute to greater national resilience against extremism, but recent events, such as the dismantling of a terror plot by a Reichsbürger faction, show that we cannot take our security or our democracy for granted.

To be resilient against extremism and anti-democratic forces, Western liberal democracies need comprehensive and targeted strategies. The enemies come in different forms and can instrumentalize crises to undermine trust in government and democratic institutions. For instance, the consequences of Putin's unlawful attack on Ukraine's sovereignty and the ensuing war extend beyond military and external security questions for Germany – they also have profound impact on our internal affairs, manifested in the need for Germany to be prepared for targeted acts of sabotage against critical infrastructure, for example. Internal and external security are certainly "two sides of the very same coin" in the 21st century.

Germany has been learning from Australia's legislative responses to foreign interference, and knowledge-exchange and cooperation with like-minded partners are key to devising comprehensive responses to these challenges. However, it is important to recognize that democracy often requires striking compromises. But we should not compromise on our foundational values and principles. We must recognize red lines and be attuned to emerging dynamics to negotiate our collective responses across and beyond existing fault lines. The cornerstones of a resilient democracy lie in these efforts.

Prof Dr Gűenter Krings

Former Parliamentary State Secretary
to the German Minister of the Interior;
Spokesman for Legal Affairs of the
CDU/CSU Parliamentary Group in the
German Bundestag

Introduction

As the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting government lockdowns brought a rupture to public life and social interactions, new communities and networks formed online where people connected and exchanged ideas driven by the unprecedented global crisis. Alternate realities grew stronger and found expression under the umbrella of a broadly conceived 'Freedom Movement'.

This resulted in a wave of ideological activism loosely united around the idea that Covid-19 was a secret, government-controlled conspiracy against 'the people'. Especially in Germany, this developed from a diverse ecosystem of existing ideological forces: from ethnonationalist populists and Identitarians, Sovereign Citizen-style Reichsbuerger, white supremacists and neo-Nazis to various stripes of anarchists and militant anti-capitalist. As the increasing transnationalization of the far-right became further interwoven with the expansion of QAnon, from a fringe phenomenon to a movement boasting hundreds of thousands of adherents worldwide, notable international connections emerged, including to Australia and New Zealand. The momentum spread through online and offline environments as they rallied around certain ideological flashpoints under the common denominator of opposing the powers that be, by violent and non-violent means.

Overall, the threat of terrorist violence is reported to be on the decline across liberal democracies, evident for example in the downgrading of the official terrorism threat level in Australia. But this should not invite complacency. Recent assessments by domestic security agencies in Australia, Germany and New Zealand have all highlighted a more diffuse and complex extremism landscape as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, including the rising danger of conspiracy narratives. We cannot dismiss that so-called single-issue movements like anti-mandate or eco-defence groups, are increasingly driven by anti-system ideas, not only in rebellion against the political status-quo but in rejection of the democratic order per se, accompanied by a greater willingness of 'ordinary citizens' to use violence.

Examining the dynamics behind the growing acceptance of such ideas and actions is crucial. This is the objective of the NEW WAVE series. Earlier PERISCOPE papers and briefs under this theme already addressed some of these issues.

But there is a need for a more focused deep-dive that grapples with more fundamental questions: about the evolving nature of extremism and terrorism, what their current manifestations look like across liberal societies, and societal enablers.

Asking such questions is more than an academic endeavour. The lens of a 'A NEW WAVE?' is intended to explore conceptual questions as a springboard into policy-related considerations. To this end, it is important not to shy away from conflicting perspectives and schools of thought that might be regarded as controversial – it is necessary to include a breadth of arguments in order to facilitate the type of dialogue that can also lead to realistic solutions. Because what is at stake is the

quality of our pluralist societies, any lasting changes can only come about through examining the widest possible mosaic of opinions and perceptions. Here, it is fundamental to keep in mind that threats to democratic societies do not come from extremists, but also an overall decline in the societal climate permitting the normalization of intolerant, anti-pluralist and misanthropic ideas. If a thriving pluralist order is the goal, it must also be the means to get there. Having guardrails for our democracy means learning to recognize when we are in danger of crossing red lines. These are not always easy to recognize since "society does not necessarily change with seismic jolts but rather can be shaped slowly and in tiny increments."[1]

As Nauel Semaan and Steven Bickel highlight in an earlier KAS article on the linkages between extremism and democracy, we cannot shy away from difficult discussions by using the label of extremism as a means to shut down unpalatable positions.[2]

The varied contributions by authors from Australia, Germany, New Zealand and the USA include analyses into the nature of terrorism and types of extremism, case-studies as well as examinations of responses and potential prevention methods. We hope that the outcome will be a series that contributes to a more differentiated assessment, to assist experts and policy-makers in developing responses and strategies for resilience that reflect and address the complexity of issues underlying extremism in democratic societies.

by Sophia Brook and Katja Theodorakis

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Countering Far–Right Violent Extremism

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About the Author

Dr Cynthia Miller-Idriss is a sociologist and professor in the School of Public Affairs and the School of Education, and runs the Polarization and Extremism Research & Innovation Lab (PERIL).

She has testified before the U.S. Congress and regularly briefs policy, security, education and intelligence agencies in the U.S., the United Nations, and other countries on trends in domestic violent extremism and strategies for prevention and disengagement. She is the author, co-author, or co-editor of six academic books, including Hate in the Homeland: The New Global Far Right (Princeton University Press, 2020). She has also published over one hundred peer-reviewed articles, book chapters, and essays on nationalism, extremism, education, higher education and internationalization.

Her research has been funded by grants and fellowships from the National Science Foundation, the U.S. Department of Education, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, the U.K. Cabinet, the Lumina Foundation, the Spencer Foundation, the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), the Economic and Social Research Council (U.K.) and the Goethe Institute, among others. From 2009-2012 she was a nominated fellow in the Teagle Foundation's National Forum on the Future of Liberal Education. She has received several research and teaching awards, including the 2019 DC Sociological Society's Morris Rosenberg Award and a 2013-14 global fellowship from Morphomata Center for Advanced Studies at the Universität zu Köln, Germany. She serves on the international advisory board of the Center for Research on Extremism (C-REX) in Oslo, Norway, and is a member of the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) Tracking Hate and Extremism Advisory Committee.

Introduction

The past several years has seen increasing violence and unrest from the far-right spectrum globally, both in the pace and impact of mass atrocities and terrorist attacks targeting individuals and groups based on their racial, ethnic, religious, gender, or sexual identities, and in violent protests against government facilities or elected officials. Recent far-right extremist attacks include mass shootings targeting Muslims, Jews, Latinos, Black Americans, Sikhs, and women in the U.S., New Zealand, Germany, Canada, the U.K., Singapore, and Norway, among others. Anti-government attacks include the January 6 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol, the truckers' convoy and protests in Ottawa, Canada, and anti-Corona protests in Germany, including an attack on the German Reichstag in August 2020.

Contested definitions: "far-right" and "extremism"

There is no agreed-upon definition of the "far right," either within individual countries or across the globe. Various countries – and agencies or ministries within each country – use terms like right-wing radicalism, right-wing extremism, domestic violent extremism, white supremacist, anti-government, or racially-and ethnically motivated violent extremism, and more. In this essay, I use "far right" as a term that encompasses two major kinds of extremist and terrorist movements.

On the one hand, the far right refers to supremacist movements and groups – most commonly white supremacist extremists, but also male supremacists, Christian supremacists, and Western supremacists, among others. These are groups and movements that establish hierarchies of superiority and inferiority that ultimately dehumanize the 'other' and create a sense of existential threat between 'us' and 'them' that is often met with extreme violence against immigrants, racial and ethnic minorities, or others on the basis of religion, sexuality, gender, disability, and more.

On the other hand, the 'far right' encompasses anti-government movements that work against the tenets and principles of liberal democracy by promoting authoritarianism or refusing to uphold aspects of democracy like the rule of law or the protection of minority rights. These may take the form of sovereign citizen groups that reject existing governments and their laws, but also manifest as unlawful militias who argue they are defending the country or its constitution. Some of these types of groups exist in other parts of the extremist spectrum as well, including on the far left. Rising anti-government extremism has been evident in a variety of global protest movements, for example, from the 2018 French "yellow vest" movement that began as a protest over diesel taxes to the global Black Lives Matter movement which gained momentum after the murder of George Floyd by a policeman in spring 2020. Far-right anti-government movements distinguish themselves from other anti-government protests because of their authoritarian or anti-democratic basis, their rejection of the authority of the government on legal or tax matters, and their rejection of key principles of inclusive and liberal democracies related to minority rights. Finally, the 'far right' typically includes some single-issue extremist groups such as anti-abortion groups and movements. And it holds a starring role within some conspiracy movements that are not exclusively far right, like QAnon.

The term "extremism" also requires an explanation. In both far-right categories identified above – supremacist movements and anti-government movements – there is considerable overlap and influence across groups and movements in the mainstream with those on the fringes. This means that ideas once considered quite extreme – such as Christian nationalist beliefs, Islamophobia and anti-immigrant beliefs, and antisemitic beliefs – have been significantly mainstreamed globally, including in places like the U.S., Italy, Poland, and Hungary. Anti-immigrant and Islamophobic ideas saw considerable mainstreaming in Europe following the 2015 migrant crisis, for example, as reflected in tens of thousands of participants in anti-immigrant PEGIDA (Patriotic Europeans against the Islamification of the Occident) protests, as well as the recent electoral successes of far-right parties in Sweden, Italy, Germany and elsewhere globally. This rapid mainstreaming of far-right ideas requires a definition of extremism that does not rely on its position vis-à-vis the mainstream. Therefore, following the scholar J.M. Berger, I define extremism as a way of us- versus- them thinking that positions the other as an existential threat who must be fought with violence.[1]

The global context of far-right violent extremism: Trends and Impact

On nearly every measure we have available, such as rising propaganda, numbers of hate groups and hate crimes, violent plots foiled by intelligence authorities, terrorist violence, and numbers of deaths, the past decade has seen exponential growth in the far right. Global far-right terrorism has grown 250% in recent years, according to the Global Terrorism Index – as illustrated by violent hate attacks and mass atrocities in Oslo, Norway, Christchurch, New Zealand, Halle and Hanau, Germany, and in the U.S. in Charleston, El Paso, Pittsburgh, and Buffalo, among dozens of other attacks globally.

The rise in far-right extremist violence must be understood within a global context that has seen increasing hate more broadly. The problem is much bigger than mass attacks that are officially classified as extremism or terrorism. In the U.S., for example, hate crimes – crimes motivated by bias against race, religion, disability, sexual orientation, ethnicity, gender, or gender identity – are now at the highest level in 12 years. Advocacy organizations for many marginalized communities have documented spikes or record-breaking reports of antisemitic, Islamophobic, anti-trans, and anti-Asian and Pacific Islander hate.[2] There is an increasing willingness to see these broader forms of hate-fueled violence as linked to far-right extremism and terrorism that typically comes in the form of mass atrocity attacks. Thus, the Biden administration held a White House Summit in September 2022 called the United We Stand Summit on hate-fueled violence, which was the first time the U.S. linked the issue of hate crimes with supremacist extremist violence and directed resources to address both types of hate-fueled violence simultaneously and in integrated ways.

Rising hate-fueled violence and far-right violent extremism have had a devastating impact on communities across the globe. The rise of far-right violent extremism has, first and foremost, affected the security and safety of marginalized and targeted members of society – which includes racial, ethnic, and religious minorities, women and the LGBTQI+ community, and migrants and refugees, among others. Researchers

have consistently documented a heightened sense of fear, depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress syndrome among members of targeted groups as a result of rising hate crimes and mass atrocities directed at members of their identity group.

Rising far-right extremist violence is also taking place within a broader context in which a diverse set of well-documented ills are affecting the strength of liberal democracies. These trends aren't only due to rising far-right extremism, but these issues create a kind of toxic feedback loop that reinforce and bolster harmful trends that are undermining liberal democracies. This includes rising polarization and moral disengagement and increased support for political violence, as well as declining trust in democratic institutions. It also includes a significant rollback of rights that had been previously accepted as stable in places like the U.S. and Poland **–** including losses of reproductive rights and attacks on the LGBTQ+ community.

These issues are all amplified by an information ecosystem that fosters problematic behaviors and attitudes. This includes the circulation and spread of disinformation, misinformation, malinformation, conspiracy theories, and propaganda **–** resulting in problematic outcomes like the growth in QAnon followers to the persistent belief in 'stolen' elections or false claims about the origins of Covid-19. It also includes a broad range of toxic online subcultures that valorize, trivialize, and gamify mass violence and atrocities. These issues undermine inclusive democracy at its core **–** and far-right extremism plays a role in all of them.

Countering far-right violent extremism

It is hard to overestimate the outsized impact that 9/11 had on counterterrorism and counterextremism. The infrastructure for the contemporary global effort to counter extremism was built in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. During this period, the United Nations launched its Office of Counterterrorism (UNOCT), the U.S. created the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), and the U.K. launched a series of national prevention programs, including the controversial PREVENT program, among others. Today, most of the global effort to counter terrorism and violent extremism exists in frameworks and structures that were crafted in the post 9/11 period.

This means that for nearly two decades, the global effort to counter and prevent extremism was almost exclusively focused on Islamist and jihadi terrorism. The strategies developed to counter those forms of extremism were designed to exploit specific features of this type of extremism **–** namely, extremism structured within hierarchical groups with a clear chain of command, ideological basis and attacks whose perpetrators pledged loyalty to a specific group. Counterterrorism efforts thus focused on efforts like infiltration, surveillance, monitoring, and disrupting plots from formal groups, alongside some prison deradicalization initiatives. There was also a significant (and flawed) effort to develop counternarratives.

Overall, this approach made for a heavily securitized approach to counterterrorism and counterextremism. There were clear successes, especially related to the interruption of plots that prevented significant violence; twenty-one terrorist plots were interrupted in the United States in

2020 alone, for example.[3] But the securitized approach was also roundly criticized for repeatedly violating civil rights, especially for Muslims, and had a documented impact on reduced trust in government from marginalized groups. These prevention approaches, in other words, contributed to and exacerbated social cohesion deficits that reduced a sense of belonging and trust.[4]

Germany was the major global outlier in this regard, having already launched significant investments in monitoring and prevention of extremism across a variety of sectors. This includes monitoring and data reporting services from Germany's Office of the Protection of the Constitution. It also includes the post-WWII creation of an independent agency tasked with rooting out extremism in the military, alongside significant investments in community-based, mobile advisory centers to counter right-wing extremism set up in the post-unification period amid a surge in neo-Nazi and right-wing extremist violence. The history of the Nazi regime combined with this post-unification resurgence of violent white supremacist extremism means that Germany now has the most comprehensive and well-developed counterterrorism and counterextremism infrastructure related to the extreme far right. This remains true even though Germany also increased its counterterrorism and prevention efforts related to Islamist and jihadi extremism in the wake of 9/11 and the rise of religious extremism and terrorist attacks in Europe.[5]

But for most of the world, especially across Western countries most affected by the rise of the far right, the securitized approach to countering extremist violence turned out to be a poor fit for far-right violent extremism. Far-right movements are today best characterized as "post-organizational," meaning that individuals are radicalized and violence is mobilized less through formal group memberships and initiation rites and more through toxic online subcultures with no clear linkages to formal extremist groups. These subcultures are continually evolving across a vast and ever-growing online ecosystem. Counterextremism strategies like infiltration and surveillance of formal groups were no match for this kind of mobilization and the ways it is more meme-based and less manifesto-driven than previous forms of extremist radicalization. And as individuals navigate the hyperlinked information infrastructure online, far-right ideologies themselves have become more muddled and less coherent in ways that have made it harder to respond with traditional counterextremism strategies.[6]

The struggle to adapt counterterrorism and counterextremism strategies created in the post-9/11 era to the far-right threat took on new urgency in the wake of mass atrocities in Christchurch, Pittsburgh, and El Paso. During the Covid-19 pandemic, as the far-right spectrum grew to incorporate new forms of anti-government mobilization against shutdowns and vaccines, alongside spikes in antisemitic conspiracy theories, anti-Asian violence, and increased hate crimes, this sense of urgency and attention to the problem grew. Policy shifts followed rapidly on the heels of scores of national parliamentary and Congressional hearings and briefings. The UN Office of Counterterrorism (UNOCT) held the first hearings on far-right extremism in fall 2019. National strategies to counter domestic violent extremism, far-right extremism or related forms of violence along with significant new investments and a transformed set of strategies emerged in several countries around the globe. For example, the post-Christchurch period led to significant

investments in prevention in New Zealand, including the creation of a new national center on diversity, equity and the prevention of violent extremism. Germany announced a one-billion Euro investment in 89 specific measures over a three year period from 2021-2024 to counter racism, xenophobia, and prevent violent extremism in Germany. And in June 2021, the Biden administration issued the first U.S. national strategy on countering domestic violent extremism, followed up with a White House Summit on hate-fueled violence in September 2022 that announced substantial new investments from a broader range of agencies, including education, finance, and health and human services investments.

This flurry of engagement resulted in a growing consensus in the countering violent extremism field across the globe that far-right extremism cannot be addressed with a focus on the fringes only – rather, it requires efforts to build resilience within the mainstream. This means that counterextremism strategies to prevent violence are increasingly integrated with broader domestic policy strategies to counter racism and xenophobia and to improve digital and information literacy in ways that build mainstream resilience to propaganda and disinformation.

This shift represents a sea-change in the global approach to the prevention of violent extremism, which many countries came to describe as a public health approach to addressing violent extremism. Unlike in the post-9/11 era, when the focus of counter-extremism was on already-radicalized individuals and organized extremist groups, this new approach advocates for a holistic approach that disrupts and prevents extremism much further upstream, through deep engagement in local communities and primary prevention strategies. Much like the treatment of physical health, a public-health style approach in counterextremism works to educate communities in ways that help individuals make attitudinal and behavioral choices that lead to reduced incidence of bad outcomes – in this case, radicalization or belief in conspiracies, disinformation, and propaganda.

Public health approaches can mean many things, however, and it is worth noting that in some cases, the pivot to a public health approach has been superficial. For this reason, it is worth elaborating on what an effective public health approach looks like.

A holistic model for public health prevention of violent extremism

A deep and effective public health approach to preventing violent extremism includes investments at the primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention levels. Primary prevention refers to efforts to address radicalization before it takes root, including through broad civic education and media literacy for the entire population focused on helping the public build resilience to harmful online content, propaganda, or false information.

Secondary prevention refers to efforts to mitigate the impacts of already radicalized people and groups, primarily through surveillance, monitoring, arrest, interruption of plots, barricading of doors, hardening of soft targets, etc. These strategies are key to crisis mitigation and violence prevention efforts, but cannot stand on their own as the sole prevention strategy for a community or a region.

Tertiary prevention refers to focused deradicalization efforts, including through prison deradicalization programs and "exit"-type counseling services that aim to help radicalized individuals leave extremist groups. These specialized efforts require significant training and require evidence-based

approaches aimed at preventing recidivism and are essential for probation officers and related roles.

An effective public health approach to countering violent extremism would require at least four simultaneous categories of effort that are a) rooted in communities' needs; b) holistic and whole-of-society; c) rely on evidence-based interventions; and d) focus on building resilient systems, not just resilient individuals. I address each of these in turn below.

Prevention that is responsive to and rooted in community needs

A public health model for preventing violent extremist must, first and foremost, be rooted in listening and responding to community needs. This is more than being merely "community-based" – it means being truly rooted in and grounded in solutions that are desired and meaningful to local communities. There is no one size fits all model because each community across any given country are struggling with different aspects of violent extremism and radicalization. Some communities will be grappling with white supremacist extremism, while others are plagued with unlawful militia violence or other forms of anti-government extremism. Even within any given community, there are variations in need across specific groups: the needs within K-12 schools trying to educate teenagers about digital literacy and harmful online content in youth subcultural platforms will vary from the needs of religious leaders grappling with growing conspiratorial beliefs in their congregations or of local hospitals facing threats to their gender-affirming care clinics. Public health prevention approaches must adapt to the changing needs of local communities.

A whole-of-society approach to prevention

Second, a deep and effective public health prevention approach to countering domestic terrorism requires to a more holistic, whole-of-government, whole-of-society and proactive response to domestic terrorism. This requires broadening understandings of intervention beyond what has been the largest set of investments – in secondary prevention (intervening with already-radicalized individuals or groups) – to include substantial investments in primary and tertiary prevention as well. Doing this well would involve deepening the engagement of a wide range of government offices, agencies, and organizations beyond the security and law enforcement sectors, such as the education, health and human services, and mental health sectors. It would include primary prevention efforts through the arts, community organizations, faith communities, or other community-based non-profits.

Such an approach engages parents and caregivers, teachers and educators, employers and unions, and a wide range of community leaders, including from the faith community, higher education community, athletic coaches, members of local performing arts and artistic communities, and a wide range of mental health counselors and first responders. Each of these communities should receive training on recognizing red flags and warning signs, initial pathways for off-ramping or intervention conversations, and where to get additional help. But they also need to be included and engaged in a robust set of primary prevention strategies that would include broad public civic education about key tenets of liberal democracy (including the rule of law, the protection of minority rights, etc.). And all communities need to

have access to evidence-based 'prebunking' and 'attitudinal inoculation' strategies that are proven effective tools for teaching people how manipulative and persuasive rhetoric works and how they can protect themselves from it.

Reliance on evidence-based interventions

Third, a true public health approach rests on evidence at all levels of intervention. Evidence has been thin across the field of prevention of violent extremism, especially in terms of the effectiveness of applied interventions. In most cases, evaluations of effectiveness are limited to outcome numbers that describe the numbers of people trained, the numbers of downloads of a particular tool, or other descriptive metrics that do not actually provide evidence of impact. A deeper understanding of impact would include both qualitative and quantitative impact assessments that include the use of pre- and post-testing, control groups, and significance testing. It would also include process evaluation and iterative assessment of how implementation of interventions is going, what practitioners need to improve delivery of interventions, and how the reception of those interventions is going at the community level. Multidisciplinary teams are essential both for the generation of new ideas and to ensure that impact assessment and evaluation of effectiveness is based on multiple epistemological and methodological approaches.

This will be challenging for non-academics to do in the absence of significant funding to either build out their own methodological expertise or partner with academic institutions. Funders must both incentivize and provide funding for rigorous impact assessment and evaluation that goes beyond one-time descriptive metrics.

Focus on resilient systems, not resilient individuals

Fourth and finally, a holistic public health approach must acknowledge and address structural and systemic issues that may contribute to the problem that is targeted for intervention. In the case of physical health, for example, this would mean that a public health approach not only educates communities about healthy eating and exercise choices as a way of reducing the incidence of cardiac disease and diabetes, but also acknowledges and resolves community issues related to food deserts or the lack of green spaces, time, or resources to exercise.

In the case of violent extremism, a public health approach to countering disinformation, for example, must acknowledge challenges related to media access and quality education, as well as the lack of effective content moderation strategies that reduce the amount of harmful online content that crosses people's screens. In the case of countries like the U.S., it must acknowledge the added challenge that issues related to gun access and gun safety add to the likelihood of violent actors' success and the lethality of their attacks. And a public health approach must also acknowledge deeply-rooted histories of racism, misogyny, and other forms of structural and systemic exclusion that live on today in legacies of unequal school quality, residential neighborhood safety, and more. These issues all affect individuals' attitudes and beliefs about race, gender, inequality, and their exposure to harmful content that can open

up pathways to radicalization. Resilience to propaganda and disinformation is not merely a technical skill, in other words: it is also rooted in national and community values and commitment to an inclusive democracy that must be reinforced, emphasized, and modeled in all aspects of life across the life course.

This also means that prevention approaches must understand their own impact on communities at risk and think about their broader impact on social cohesion. The damage done by prevention approaches in the post 9/11 context – in which some of the countering violent extremism approaches – even those with labels like "community cohesion" – were clearly focused on "integrating" immigrants or Muslims in order to "secure" the dominant group against perceived threats from the "other." That kind of prevention work produced social cohesion deficits that we are still reeling from – reduced trust, sense of belonging, and sense of community – among some of the most marginalized members of our societies. An effective and holistic public health approach must address structural and systemic issues in ways that listen to communities' needs, respond to their concerns, and focus on reducing the fertile ground in which hate and extremism can thrive. This means that a public health approach is not just aimed at creating resilient individuals – rather, the aim should be creating more resilient systems that leave little room for pathways to violent extremism to open up to begin with. This is a vision of a public health-style prevention system that works to prevent violence and counter harm while simultaneously promoting concrete steps toward inclusive equity, respect, coexistence, and real and symbolic recognition of difference.

Policy recommendations

Adopting an effective, holistic public health model to prevention like the one I have just outlined will require significant capacity building efforts across government agencies and employees. As new agencies, ministries, and organizations are asked to engage with prevention efforts, they will need training and knowledge about far-right extremism and other threats. Updated trainings are needed to more effectively address domestic terrorism on the public safety side, including through school safety officers, university community safety officers, public safety officers, and other private security staff, first responders, or public response personnel. The same trainings are needed for mental health and school counseling personnel, teachers, coaches, and other front-line personnel who might be able to recognize early red flags and warning signs.

All of these types of individuals need training related to the changing landscape of domestic terrorism toward post-organizational forms (i.e., online radicalization outside of groups) and a broader range of ideological motivations for violence (including violent incel/involuntary celibate and male supremacist violence, QAnon and conspiracy related violence, 'Western supremacist' violence, and a wide range of new white supremacist extremist and anti-government extremist groups, including unlawful militias and civil war oriented groups. They also need training with a specific focus on the increasingly blurry and muddy ideologies and changing types of warning signs, as well as the changing demographics of violent actors. And finally, there is a significant need for training and capacity-building to bolster expertise in and familiarity with online radicalization, including in the ways these groups and

subcultures communicate online, such as through memes and the use of humor, satire, irony, and jokes to dehumanize others, desensitize or gamify violence, or mobilize toward violent action. This includes a need for training in the range of platforms and the types of communication present in online radicalization, including through moderated and unmoderated social media platform chats and servers and in comment boards on mainstream sites.

States, regions, and federal governments should consider establishing regular training programs, including self-guided online training modules, to educate government employees, supervisors, and contractors about manipulative and harmful online rhetoric, conspiracy theories, false claims, and propaganda. Countries and regions should also establish or bolster funding and mechanisms for study and learning of other states and countries' regional and community-level responses to domestic terrorism, including both lessons learned and promising/best practice models, including possible small-scale focused in-person visits or study tours. Regions, states, and cities or local communities should consider establishing a dedicated staff member or team at the local or regional level to coordinate and direct these efforts, communicate best practices across the region, collect and report on data, and address each of the above points in coordination with national, regional, state, and local partners as well as counterpoints globally.

10. Conclusion

As we move toward public health style intervention and prevention initiatives to counter violent far-right extremism (and other forms of extremism), we necessarily spent more and more time on interventions that target the mainstream, rather than the fringes. In this light it is essential to note that all efforts to counter domestic terrorism must ensure there is no infringement on the right to freedom of expression. Prevention efforts cannot be directed toward suppression of speech, except in cases of incitement of violence or violation of policies established by employers, technology platforms, or codes of conduct, or in the case of specific legislation that restricts or bans the expression or display of particular symbols or references. Above all, it is critical to recognize that changing forms of mass violence, terrorism and extremism require new and different kinds of solutions. To effectively address rising far-right violent extremism, we need creative and imaginative ideas from unexpected disciplines and unconventional partners, including the world of the arts, culture, sports, and faith communities in addition to education, social work and mental health services, and conventional expertise from the terrorism sector. It will take a whole of society approach to counter the emerging threats analyzed and detailed here.

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Demarcating Australia's far right: Political fringe but social mainstream?

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1. Introduction

While far-right groups have been active in Australia for many decades, the mid-2010s have seen a significant expansion of radical and extreme right-wing movements in the country.[1] Fuelled by divisive messages from political leaders and other public figures and excessive, often sensationalist media reporting on Islam and jihadist terrorism, the public discourse was rife with moral panic about Muslim communities in Australia. In this context, various anti-Islam groups emerged, some of them holding nationally coordinated rallies across the country in 2015 and 2016. At the same time, a local anti-mosque conflict in the regional town of Bendigo (Victoria) escalated into a highly politicised show of force by external far-right groups that co-opted local grievances for their ideological ethno-nationalistic causes.[2] The Bendigo anti-mosque protests 'became a crucial crystallisation and mobilisation point for far-right groups [and] ultimately marked the breakthrough for new far-right movements'.[3]

The journalist Kevin Child (2015) described the anti-Islam protests in Bendigo as 'possibly the ugliest racist outbreak in Australia since the Cronulla riots 10 years ago', referring to the 2005 Cronulla race riots, where thousands of mostly young white Sydneysiders attacked Australians of Middle Eastern background.[4] Although the 2005 Cronulla riots resonated within Australian white supremacy milieus where it contributed to a shift towards a 'stronger anti-Muslim agenda'[5], they were not commonly associated with a rise of the far right – racist, yes, but not far-right.

The 2015 Bendigo anti-Islam protests and the 2005 Cronulla riots were characterised by similar ideological drivers: claims of cultural or racial superiority, racism (anti-Muslim racism in Bendigo) and exclusionary nationalism that rejects the basic liberal democratic principle of egalitarianism and targets an unwelcome 'out-group'. These sentiments align with key ideological markers of right-wing extremism, according to the established scholarship.[6] Why then were the Cronulla riots not also discussed as a far-right escalation?

I argue in this paper that far-right ideological attitudes are often rooted in the societal mainstream and commonly articulated in the broader public discourse. They are, therefore, insufficient to demarcate the far right as they would cast the net too wide ('Not every racist patriot is a far-right extremist'). If we want to understand the rise and continuous appeal of the far right in Australia, we need to revisit our approach to define far-right milieus. But we also need to acknowledge that these milieus may be situated at the *political* fringes but they operate in the midst of our society, complexly linked to mainstream attitudes and discourses.

2. Established definition of the far right: ideological markers

There may not be one unanimously agreed definition of right-wing extremism, but most conceptualisations have shown 'actually a high degree of consensus'.[7] Cas Mudde's seminal analysis of 26 definitions found that five ideological markers were particularly common: 'nationalism, racism, xenophobia, anti-democracy and the strong state.'[8] In 2018, Elisabeth Carter identified six key features of right-wing extremism, which dovetail with Mudde's list: 'strong state or authoritarianism, nationalism, racism, xenophobia, anti-democracy, and populism or anti-establishment rhetoric.'[9] Not all these ideological markers

need to be present to classify a group as far-right[10], although most far-right groups advocate some form of exclusionary nationalism and anti-egalitarianism, 'valorizing of inequality and hierarchy'.[11]

Several scholars propose a differentiation between right-wing *extremism* and *radicalism*.[12] While the former fundamentally rejects democracy and core democratic principles, the latter 'does not include an *explicitly* anti-democratic agenda'[13], but opposes key tenets of liberal democracy, most obviously the principle of equal human dignity and egalitarianism. The term far right is used as an umbrella to capture both right-wing extremism and radicalism.

3. Fragmented and increasingly extreme: an overview on the contemporary far right in Australia

Far-right extremism and radicalism have a long history in Australia, reaching back to the interwar period[14], but they have been less visible compared to North America and many European countries. Fleming and Mondon argue that, while Australia may have appeared less susceptible to the appeal of far-right movements, 'rather than immunity, the absence of extreme right politics can be explained by the ability and willingness of mainstream politics to readily, openly, and socially absorb such values'[15] – an assessment closely aligned with the key argument in this paper.

In the mid-2010s, the heightened moral panic in Australian society around Islam and Muslim communities 'created fertile ground for the emergence of new far-right groups.'[16] Aggressive anti-Islam narratives, which resonated with a significant proportion of the population, were central to the initial mobilisation success of these groups. Mainstream social media platform Facebook was their main rallying platform, but some also had a physical presence and engaged in relatively large street protests across Australia. Based on an online analysis in 2017-18, one of the first empirical studies of the contemporary far-right in Australia, found that these anti-Islam groups constitute one of three main types of far-right milieu, next to cultural and racial superiority groups.[17]

1. *Anti-Islam groups* such as Reclaim Australia or Stop the Mosque were particularly prolific, online and offline, and attracted large numbers of followers and supporters. Some of them counted well over 100,000 individual users on their Facebook pages (i.e. users who interacted with their page), frequently sharing highly Islamophobic content and claiming that Islam and/or Muslims pose a physical and cultural threat to Australia and the western world.
2. *Cultural superiority groups* such as Soldiers of Odin or True Blue Crew pushed a more nationalistic-focused agenda based on cultural supremacy claims and what Fozdar and Low described as 'ethnonationalism masquerading as civic nationalism'.[18] Most of these groups were organised locally, bringing together ideologically dedicated members who publicly demonstrated their group membership through specific logos and clothing and were actively involved in various public rallies. Their Facebook pages attracted usually smaller numbers of individual users compared to the anti-Islam groups, although one of them, led by a prominent far-right figure with previous neo-Nazi connections, counted over 163,000 users on his Facebook page.

3. *Racial superiority groups* pursued an agenda characterised by blatant antisemitism, white supremacy and rejection of democracy. They were small groups organised in physical spaces and had significantly fewer online followers. This type encompasses far-right extremist groups such as Combat 18, Southern Cross Hammerskins or Nationalist Alternative Australia, which have been in existence prior to the mid-2010s, as well as new groups such as Antipodean Resistance (now defunct but morphed into a different group).

While this three-fold typology is conceptually still useful, far-right milieus have changed significantly since this study was conducted. Not long after the re-emergence of the 'new' far right[19] under a predominately anti-Islam banner in the mid-2010s, the public hysteria around ISIS and jihadist terrorism had reached its peak and started to diminish. Anti-Islam street protests became less frequent and ultimately ceased; online anti-Islam groups became less prolific. Islamophobic content has remained widespread on social media, but these narratives have lost some of their initial traction as a core mobilisation theme within the far right.

Simultaneously, the messaging in far-right spaces shifted towards a more racialized agenda with expressions of aggressive ultra-nationalism, white supremacy and claims of an alleged 'white genocide'. The abovementioned 2018 study found evidence for an 'increasingly radical or extreme rhetoric, including statements that openly reject parliamentary democracy as a legitimate form of government, expressions of authoritarian attitudes, and the endorsement of violence.'[20] This ideological radicalisation process gained further momentum in the aftermaths of the March 2019 Christchurch terror attacks. Notwithstanding ongoing internal ideological differences and fragmentation, a racialised white supremacy agenda was no longer limited to neo-Nazi extremist groups but has swept across Australia's far-right milieus.

Both a symptom of, and a catalyst for, this radicalisation trend is the rising popularity of alt-tech social media platforms among the far right, especially in response to account takedowns on Facebook and Twitter after the Christchurch terror attacks. Many leading far-right figures, who had built up large online communities on Facebook through their anti-Islam agitation, moved their social media activities to other platforms with very limited content moderation such as Gab and Telegram – and tens of thousands of Australians followed them into these ideologically more radicalised online environments. The sub-group 'Australia' on Gab, for example, a platform described as a 'right-leaning echo-chamber'[21] where antisemitism and 'white identity' narratives are omnipresent[22], has gained enormous popularity with membership numbers skyrocketing from 4,700 in mid-March 2019 to currently almost 74,000. This is not to say that Twitter and Facebook have been abandoned by the far right[23], but they do not play the same central role in far-right mobilisation as in the mid-2010s.

With this proliferation of far-right ecosystems on alt-tech social media, organisational structures have diminished. While between 2015 and 2018, far-right groups such as Reclaim Australia, United Patriots Front, Soldiers of Odin or the True Blue Crew dominated the far-right scene and their online and offline mobilisation, all these groups have become defunct by the end of the decade. Australian far-right milieus today are characterised by markedly low organisational levels with

limited leadership capacities. It comprises mostly of ideologically likeminded individuals loosely connected on social media, forming online communities, and a number of small groups across the country who meet offline. The only significant exception currently is one particular hierarchical structured neo-Nazi organisation that has established itself as the leading and most prominent organisational actor within Australia's far-right (extremist) milieu.

A public climate rife with Islamophobia facilitated the re-emergence and initial proliferation of the far right, but its subsequent ideological radicalisation with rising prevalence of extremist, white supremacist agendas led to a contraction of far-right spaces, instead of a quantitative expansion, in the late 2010s. This, however, changed in the 2020s when new crises provided unprecedented opportunities for the far right to attract new sympathisers. The COVID-19 pandemic and respective public health responses created political discontent and grievances among many Australians. A significant proportion of them expressed anti-government and anti-establishment conspiratorial views similar to those that had emerged as dominant narratives in far-right milieus. According to an Essential Poll[24] in May 2020, one in five Australians believed the 'number of Covid-19 deaths have been exaggerated by the media and governments to scare the population'; 13% believed that 'Bill Gates played a role in the creation and spread of Covid-19' and that 'the virus is 'not dangerous and is being used to force people to get vaccines'. Far-right milieus extensively fuelled these conspiratorial sentiments through prolific posting of misinformation and racist, anti-government messaging, whilst offering a new home for those who opposed lockdowns and vaccinations and felt silenced and abandoned by the government.

As studies have shown, Covid-19 was the key mobilisation theme in far-right online environments in the early 2020s, both on mainstream platforms such as Facebook[25] and Twitter[26] as well as alt-tech sites such as Gab[27] – with significant effects: Tens of thousands of people have joined these far-right online ecosystems (see Figure 1), where they have been encountered broader far-right ideological messaging and become part of a parallel 'anti-public'[28] community defined by its hostility towards minorities and fundamental opposition to government, established institutions and democratic conventions.

4. Far-right ideologies and mainstream attitudes and discourses

These brief elaborations illustrate that we cannot understand the Australian far right without paying attention to the social context within which it has (re)emerged and evolved. Exclusivist, anti-egalitarian and anti-establishment sentiments – key ideological markers of the far right – are not limited to the societal fringes but substantially shape the public discourse and, in doing so, influence the rise and appeal of the far right.

Racism, xenophobia and Islamophobia are not limited to far-right milieus but have been, and continue to be, widespread in Australian society. A large survey in the mid-2010s found that almost one third of respondents expressed negative attitudes towards Australian Muslims, and one in five had negative feelings towards refugees.29 According to the annual Scanlon Mapping Social Cohesion survey30, anti-Muslim attitudes have been even more prevalent (41

% in 2017; 32% in 2021). Lead researcher of these annual surveys, Andrew Markus, concluded that 'the level of negative sentiment towards those of the Muslim faith, and by extension to immigrants from Muslim countries, is a factor of significance in contemporary Australian society.'31 More specifically, and particularly relevant to the Bendigo mosque conflict, Riaz Hassan found in his representative survey that almost one in four respondents (23.9%) expressed support for any policy that would stop building new mosques.32

The vast majority of Australians are proud of their country. It is, of course, entirely unproblematic that over 85% of Australians express a 'sense of pride in the Australian way of life and culture'.[33] However, when national pride is combined with anti-immigration, anti-egalitarian and cultural superiority attitudes, we are entering the far-right ideological territory of **exclusionary nationalism**. According to the Australian Election Study, around one in three Australians has negative views on immigration and immigrants: In the 2019 survey, 36% stated immigration increases the crime rate, 31% said immigrants take jobs away from Australians, and 32% were of the view that 'equal opportunities for immigrants have gone too far'.[34] Such findings have led some academics to the conclusion that 'Nativism is mainstream in Australia'.[35]

A majority of Australians want ethnic, cultural or religious minorities to 'behave more like mainstream Australians'[36] and think that 'too many immigrants are not adopting Australian values'.[37] Such assimilation claims reflect a widespread sense of **cultural superiority** and protective pride in 'our culture'; but they are also an ideological trademark of the far right. A group of anti-Islam protesters with ties to prominent far-right leaders expressed similar views during an interview, stressing that immigrants need to assimilate into the 'Australian culture'. They accepted that Australian society is 'multi-ethnic' but rejected 'multiculturalism', which they alleged is part of a nefarious secretive plot to 'break' Australian society by creating 'a series of tribes.'[38]

Cultural superiority attitudes are frequently articulated not only in the far right, but also – and in rhetorically very similar ways – in broader public discourses. Resonating with Huntington's 'clash of civilization' hypothesis, as the argument often goes, Western culture and civilization are under threat from *outside*, for example by non-European immigration, and from *inside* by the progressive ('woke') agenda of the political left or elites. Such claims are common in far-right online ecosystems[39], but they also appear in mainstream media[40], right-wing intellectual magazines such as *The Spectator* or *The Quadrant*[41], in books (including some by established academics[42]) available on platforms like Amazon, and even on Google Scholar or academic databases. There is limited representative data in Australia on the salience of such cultural threat attitudes. However, the soon-to-be-published findings from an explorative survey among 335 Australian men, conducted in 2021 by the author and colleagues as part of a larger Australian Research Council (ARC) project, show that over half of all respondents agreed with the statement that 'Western civilisation is under attack', with less than 29% disagreeing.

In parts of the far right such threat narratives are framed in an explicitly racialised way, claiming that not only is 'our' way of life, culture or civilisation under threat but so is **'white identity'**.[43] Such ideological beliefs are closely aligned with prominent white supremacy conspiracy theories of 'White

genocide' or 'Great Replacement', which have played an important role in driving far-right extremists to commit violent terrorist attacks, including Australian terrorist Brenton Tarrant, who killed 51 Muslims in Christchurch in 2019. *The Great Replacement* is the title of Tarrant's manifesto, inspired by a 2011 book with the same title by the French far-right intellectual Renaud Camus, who claims that the French (and European) population is being demographically and culturally replaced as a result of non-European immigration. It is worth noting that Camus's book *You Will Not Replace Us!*, described as an 'attempt at summing up in a short book, for the English-speaking (sic) and international public, such works as Le Grand Remplacement (The Great Replacement)', is available for purchase on Amazon.

Such ethno-racialized notions of white victimhood also manifest in allegations of anti-white racism. This has become a very common narrative within far-right spaces, but it is not limited to extremist political fringes. In October 2018, the right-wing populist One Nation Senator Pauline Hanson put forward her infamous 'it's okay to be white' motion in the Australian Senate making claims of a 'deplorable rise of anti-white racism and attacks on Western civilisation'. The motion was only narrowly defeated by 31 to 29 votes in the Senate.[44] More recently, an opinion piece in a popular mainstream tabloid referred to 'toxic new anti-white racism' in its headline[45], and several studies have found evidence that a not insignificant proportion of Australians believe that anti-white racism is a problem.[46] Findings from the aforementioned 2021 ARC survey among Australian men show that one in three respondents agreed with the statement that 'White people are the victims these days', although "only" a bit more than 5% agreed with the blatantly white supremacy statement that 'white people are superior to others' (although a further 9% did not disagree with that statement).

Explicit white supremacist attitudes may be held – or openly expressed – by only a small minority. However, a look at Australia's history leaves little doubt that white supremacy was at the core of its colonial project, nation-building and the early formation of its national identity.[47] The invasion and settlement by the British were based on the doctrine of 'terra nullius', *nobody's land*, to be settled by white British men where Indigenous peoples were seen as 'of such a lower order of culture and civilisation that there was no need to recognise their laws, their land and other possessions'[48]. In 1901, the first piece of legislation passed by the newly founded Federation was the Immigration Restriction Act, which institutionalised racism through its White Australia Policy for over half a century. At the time, the Attorney-General Alfred Deakin described the aim of this policy as 'securing a white Australia'[49], and the first Prime Minister Edmund Barton captured widely held views[50] when he declared during the parliamentary debate of the bill: 'I do not think … that the doctrine of the equality of man was really ever intended to include racial equality. There is no racial equality. There is that basic inequality. These races are, in comparison with white races – I think no one wants convincing of this fact – unequal and inferior.'[51]

These policies were gradually abolished in the 1950s and '60s and subsequently replaced by anti-discrimination legislation and multicultural policies since the 1970s. But the institutionalisation of racism and white supremacy, which reflected and shaped the collective national psyche for

decades, offers the contemporary far right in Australia a rhetorical bridge to what Paul Taggart called 'heartland', an ideological place 'constructed retrospectively from the past', which 'unlike utopias, … has already been lived and so shown to be feasible'[52]. It is frequently being used in far-right milieus as a nostalgic, but historically accurate reference point through which a white supremacy ideological agenda is sought to be justified, legitimated and normalized. A recent study of far-right online messaging around the ANZAC legend, for example, illustrated how the ANZACs' military actions in World War I can be co-opted and re-interpreted as a struggle for a white Australia – in the words of a far-right user on Facebook: 'Lest we forget those proud Australian diggers that gave their lives for their country and for a White Australia … The ANZACs would be rolling in their graves if they knew the multicultural/multiracial abomination their beloved nation has become'.[53]

Anti-democratic, authoritarian and anti-establishment views are regarded as core ideological markers of the far right, but they, too, are relatively widespread in Australian society. According to the annual Lowy Institute poll[54], three of four Australians regard democracy as 'preferable to any other kind of government'. But that leaves one quarter who disagree, and 18% stated that 'in some circumstances, a non-democratic government can be preferable'. According to the Australian Values Survey in 2018[55], more than one in ten thought that 'having a democratic political system' was fairly bad (8%) or very bad (3%), and even one third expressed authoritarian attitudes stating that 'having a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament and elections' would be fairly good (24%) or very good (9%). Anti-establishment attitudes, especially towards governments, political leaders and the media, are even shared by a majority of Australians. The latest Edelmann trust Barometer survey[56] found that a majority thought that journalists (65%), business leaders (61%) and government leaders (61%) 'are purposively trying to mislead the people'. According to the 2021 Scanlon study[57], almost four in ten believed the system of government in Australia needs 'major changes' or should be 'replaced' all together, and only a minority stated the 'government in Canberra can be trusted to do the right thing for the Australian people.'

5. Conspiratorial meta-narrative, action and 'anti-public' identity: Demarcation of the far right

How suitable are established sets of ideological characteristics for defining the far right if 'authoritarianism, nationalism, racism, xenophobia, anti-democracy, and … anti-establishment rhetoric'[58] are so widespread across society? Arguing that they are important but in themselves insufficient elements to demarcate the far right, I propose an alternative approach that rests on three interrelated factors: (1) construction of a conspiratorial meta-narrative, (2) ideologically driven political actions, and (3) individuals' identification with an 'anti-public' community. In elaborating on these factors, I will also apply them to answer the question posed in the introduction as to why the 2005 Cronulla race riots were not a manifestation of far-right extremism or radicalism – despite their alignment with far-right ideologies.

Ideologies: A conspiracy-based meta-narrative

What characterises the far right is not so much *what* people think, but *how* they think. Someone may hold racist or anti-establishments views but what makes these attitudes an indicator for far-right allegiance is *how* these attitudes shape and cement an overarching meta-narrative. This grand narrative is typically centered on the conspiratorial conviction – or allegation – that secretive forces deliberately seek to destroy 'us', Western civilisation or the 'white race'. These alleged forces are often described as a powerful global cabal – often in openly antisemitic terms, as a Jewish conspiracy – which controls supra-national institutions like the UN or WHO, governments, mainstream media, social media platforms like Facebook and other influential actors. Racism, anti-establishment, anti-democratic and other far-right attitudes become functionally embedded into this large conspiracy narrative.[59]

According to this 'logic', for example, non-white immigrants may be dehumanized and targeted as an inferior outgroup, but the real enemy for the far right are those who facilitate immigration and promote multiculturalism with the alleged intention to destroy "our" society, as a prominent far-right figurehead stated in his speech at a rally in Melbourne in early 2019. Similarly, far-right messaging on Gab frequently expressed hostility toward Black Lives Matter (BLM) activists and anti-fascist movements, but these groups are often only secondary targets – 'useful idiots' controlled by alleged global Jewish elites. 'Antifa and BLM are just Jewish created golems' as one Gab user posted. Another Gab user described black BLM activists and Antifa as 'useful idiots, who can be dealt with once we have won back our liberty and self-determination. The true enemy is the globalist Jewish ruling class, the corporate media they own, and the politicians they buy'.[60]

This conspiracy narrative constitutes an unquestionable truth in far-right milieus, obvious to all those ('red-pilled') who claim they have managed to look behind the smokescreen set up by the allegedly nefarious elites to mislead and control 'the people'. Such a meta-narrative not only binds various ideological attitudes together in what seem to be an internally coherent belief system. It also creates a sense of urgency, epistemic superiority and moral righteousness, strengthens the collective identity of the in-group, and legitimises (potentially also violent) actions against those who are considered to represent this alleged hostile Goliathan system.

Such conspiratorial meta-narratives were expressed in sections of the far-right anti-mosque movement in Bendigo in 2015 and they have been articulated at many other far-right demonstrations and in online spaces, but they were absent during the 2005 riots in Cronulla, which were driven by blatant racism and nativism.

Behaviour: Ideologically driven activism

Jérôme Jamin highlights that right-wing extremism refers to 'a "total" way of acting to give shape to the nationalist project in support of the acknowledgement of inequality.'[61] Holding certain ideological views may not justify the far-right label unless the person also takes certain actions to promote or advocate their ideological-political cause. I interviewed people who shared exclusionary, conspiratorial views. But while some of them had no desire to make their views public and did not consider themselves 'activists', others proudly claimed the badge of political activism and

considered it their mission to 'educate' others.[62] Ideologically oriented actions may manifest in various ways from attempts to spread these ideological messages and 'red-pill' others to attending a far-right rally, joining a far-right group or even committing an act of violence.

The young rioters in Cronulla certainly acted aggressively, and many of them have engaged in what may amount to racist hate speech and hate crimes. What constitutes a political mission and the boundaries between hate-driven behaviour and politically motivated actions is notoriously hard to determine [63], but the racist actions in Cronulla did not appear to pursue a broader political agenda. Instead they were driven by racism and the goal to assert an Anglo-white dominance in a social space.

Collective identity: belonging to a parallel 'anti-public' community

The third factor that helps demark the far right is related to an individual's personal identification with an ideologically shaped parallel community that rejects the basic rules of public and democratic engagement or what Chantal Mouffe called the 'ethico-political principles of liberal democracy'.[64] Mark Davis uses the term 'anti-publics' to refer to such spaces, characterised by a disregard for 'principles of argumentation, evidence, truthfulness, mutuality, reciprocity, good faith and inclusiveness' and 'a level of hostility to democratic conventions … that in general exceeds … even the most permissive notion of an "agonistic" public sphere.'[65] Developing a collective identity, a sense of belonging and connection to such an anti-public community, shaped by far-right ideologies, may well be the strongest indicator that a person has become part of the far-right milieu. Within such anti-public communities (online and/or offline), affirmative interaction with ideologically likeminded others, using insider memes, coded language and symbols, can further strengthen in-group identification and consolidate and amplify far-right ideological beliefs systems shared with a community they trust and feel respected and heard.

The aggressors in Cronulla did not seem to identify with an anti-public counter-hegemonic fringe community. To the contrary, they acted, in their views, as ordinary white 'Aussies' seeking to 'reclaim the beach'. Thus, the 2005 Cronulla riots do not constitute a far-right escalation; instead they were a violent manifestation of widespread racism, perpetrated by young people from the midst of Australian society, fuelled by tabloid media and facilitated by the broader public discourse of anti-Arab moral panic.[66]

In this paper, I argue for an alternative approach to defining the far right based on a more holistic assessment that moves beyond a checklist of ideological markers. Established sets of ideological characteristics are important elements but insufficient to demarcate the far right due the prevalence of these ideological attitudes across significant segments of mainstream society. How can we develop effective intervention strategies to address far-right extremism if we struggle to differentiate it from social ills such as racism, nativism or homophobia or issues such as growing government mistrust or anti-establishment sentiments? At the same time, however, tackling the appeal of the far-right is also destined to remain ineffective if we ignore how profoundly connected these political fringe milieus are with mainstream Australia and how salient far-right narratives appear in the public realm.

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