Mario Faust-Scalisi,
Susan Arndt (eds.)

COUNTERING THE FAR RIGHT IN EUROPE AND BEYOND

Activist, Academic, and Artistic Resistance and Intervention

[transcript]

Right-Wing Extremism and Populism

Mario Faust-Scalisi, Susan Arndt (eds.)
Countering the Far Right in Europe and Beyond

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An Introduction

Mario Faust-Scalisi and Susan Arndt

Globally, fascism is on the rise. Again. In truth, it never truly disappeared. There is a longevity of racist sexism and sexist racism, to which fascism as its very extreme is but the tip of the iceberg. Put differently, the blatant affirmation of racial and gendered segregation, and the corresponding structural violation of rights and lives, has only ever been possible because the mainstreams of *white* societies in Europe and in *white* settler colonies across the globe have either actively applauded or passively tolerated patriarchy's *white* supremacy. This system rests on the claim that the so-called 'white race' is inherently superior to all other 'races,' and hence entitled, if not called to, to dominate the globe – and on building respective structures, while also reinforcing the binary power structures of patriarchal heteronormativity (e.g. Césaire, 1972). As Puja Kaur Matta's contribution in this volume shows, such claims of *white* and patriarchal superiority have deep roots in colonial projects and their gendered, missionary justifications – continuities that remain central to understanding today's far-right movements. Fascism is not a uniform phenomenon, and neither is the far right. The term 'far right' encompasses a variety of phenomena, and there are always exceptions – situations and circumstances that challenge the prevailing impression of a uniformly rising far right. And these counterexamples matter and are important. They may offer hope or allow to draw conclusions on how resistance can be organized. But they do not negate the broader trend of surging far-right influence – not only in Europe, but globally – a development that has been unfolding for several years now (Rodríguez-Aguilera, 2014, pp. 178ff.). Further, this rise is not limited to the growth of far-right parties, but also includes increasing influence on societal discourses and a surge in violence – specifically, transnationally connected far-right violence that takes multiple forms (Adamcová & Burrell, 2022, pp. 02ff.). Numerous explanations and interpretive frameworks have been proposed for this rise, often from a particular perspective or with underlying, sometimes unstated, agendas (see for example Gagatek, 2024, p. 265ff.). This raises the question: Why is

there a need for another anthology on the topic of the far right, and more so, one that does not focus on a specific country or far-right actor?

The far right cannot be adequately understood in isolation from the historical context of sexist racism. A transnational approach is essential that examines national specificities while also interrogating (historically embedded) national(istic) specifics. This is one very approach of this anthology. What is more, this book aims at intertwining academic, journalistic, artistic, and activist approaches and perspectives – drawing on each contributor's specific expertise in a region, societal context, or manifestation of the far right (including the freedom to use different, yet interrelated, conceptual labels). Bringing these perspectives together is not done arbitrarily, but with the clear purpose of better understanding how to counter the far right – whether in a specific region, within a state, across Europe, or beyond. To this end, the anthology presents a variety of interventions: from writing as a form of intervention to activism or artistic resistance. Sometimes this leans into the activist's own perspective; other times it takes a more analytical stance. But throughout, it adheres to the standards of scientific rigor and accuracy. This is not a conventional academic publication, yet it clearly follows scholarly standards, such as evidence-based reasoning and proper proof reading – while intentionally pushing the boundaries of form and disciplinary scope.

About this publication

The collection of texts and their authors was established during two events. The first was a workshop focused on developing arguments to counter the populist claims of the German far-right party *'Alternative für Deutschland'* (AfD). The group analyzed party programs and collectively authored a book under the collective authorship Deutschland Solidarisch Gestalten (2025), presenting factual rebuttals to populist lies. To complement the focus on Germany, a second event was organized: an international conference hosted by the Doctoral College of Intersectionality Studies, titled "Mapping Intersectional Commitment Against Rightwing Extremism in Europe. Analysis, Communication, Intervention" (22–23 November 2024, University of Bayreuth, Germany). This conference was already eager to explore different European and non-European countries, while also addressing various societal realms (e.g. government and parliament, racist populism, journalism, neo-Nazi communities, and anti-racist NGOs). It also brought together most of the authors featured in this volume. The event showed the need to move beyond disciplinary boundaries to allow for effective intervention, while also highlighting the challenges of communicating with one another and with broader audiences. In doing so, the ongoing cycle of analysis, communication and intervention served as the central framework. Naturally, combating the far right requires a deep understanding of

its structure and substance, that is, thorough analysis. However, such findings must then be communicated effectively across different contexts and audiences. Any such analytically grounded communication is already a form of intervention. Yet intervention also represents a mode of resistance that goes beyond merely understanding or discussing the far right. And just as analysis and communication are key to intervention, interventions themselves must be subject to analysis and discussion. However, interventions often require compromises and may be based on incomplete information or analysis. Waiting for a fully comprehensive picture can delay or hinder necessary action, however – as illustrated here in the chapter on Christian Fundamentalism by Ruby Rebelde and Zoe Luginsland. In keeping with the unity-in-disunity of the book's core pillars, not every chapter engages equally with all of them – but the book as a whole fulfills this overarching agenda. The main perspective here is that of intervention, uniting different approaches and perspectives. Hence, this anthology focuses on various forms of interventions and resistance. Underpinning all the contributions are analyses, expanded and complicated here through mapping as a specific method of gaining empirical insights, not only in general, but with regard to spatial phenomena, too (Genz et al., 2024). Communication also remains a central pillar: this anthology itself is part of the broader effort to communicate findings, including best-practices. But while analysis, mapping, and communication have different significance for the diverse approaches and perspectives presented here, all revolve around or emerge as forms of intervention and resistance, in diversity. Interventions and resistance against the far right, in all its varieties, are shaped by compromises and limitations, but this does not diminish their importance. Taking this into account, this anthology is dedicated to countering the far right in Europe and beyond. It is built on the necessity of not remaining passive or confined to mere observation but instead actively engaging in analysis and intervention. This is both the aspiration and the guiding, unifying principle of the volume. To intervene in und thus resist the far right in Europe and beyond, is this book's goal – well knowing that it is one act among many.

Intersectionality, the far right and this anthology

As argued above, fascism is rooted in sexist racism and racist sexism. Yet it is also feeding from other forms of oppression. Some of the approaches presented at the conference did not prove as unifying and are therefore less prominent in this anthology. This especially applies to intersectionality, which was part of the conference title, but is not as prominent here again, although it remains an element of many of the chapters here. The far right does not only rely on racism and sexism for its arguments, but also on other power structures (most notably economically

driven class segregation) and various modes of discrimination – like ableism, psychism or ageism. Furthermore, the far right typically aligns itself with populism. Populism seeks to deny existing complexities and reduce them to simplistic truths. In doing so, it tends to, on the one hand, construct major societal conflicts and problems only to declare them unsolvable. Governmental and non-governmental actors of the far right often collaborate to create and instrumentalize failure, and so, generate social discontent. On the other hand, populism tends to offer overly simplistic explanations for existing problems, followed by equally simplistic solutions. These ultimately lead to discriminatory actions such as racist expulsions of 'migrants' or the enforcement of binary worldviews and heterosexual family models, in which 'women' are reduced to the roles of wife and motherhood (as shown in studies on populism and the far right including Schwartz et al., 2022, pp. 3218ff.). Studies show how governmental and non-governmental actors of the far right come together to create examples of failure, legitimize denial and distraction, or instrumentalize general social discontent. Transformation – when experienced as painful or challenging – and the lack of intersectional responses, which leave already disadvantaged groups even further behind, can foster the rise of the far right. These experiences are actively exploited by the far right, as shown in recent research (Harder, 2023, pp. 219ff.). This anthology also highlights how constructed 'traditions' or so-called 'traditional values' (like Christian fundamentalism) are used by the far right to discriminate, as discussed by Puja Kaur Matta, or explored in the contribution by Ruby Rebelde and Zoe Luginsland as used against sex-workers. Tobias Ginsburg, in turn, looks at how masculinity is constructed as a far-right promise that offers a toxic ideal, whose premise is that a return to the patriarchal past is the only way to solve contemporary problems. This logic leads the far right to claim that there are 'too many measures in favor of women,' ultimately declaring anti-discrimination laws and initiatives as discriminatory toward themselves, or against the so constructed 'male-read' individual. This weaponization of 'tradition' and patriarchal nostalgia is further contextualized in Puja Kaur Matta's contribution, which traces its historical entanglement with colonial rule and argues that today's anti-queer and anti-feminist far-right ideologies actively glorify a colonial past that was always already structured by racialized, gendered violence. Such sentiments reflect how the far right instrumentalizes a form of 'selected intersectionality,' as studies have already shown (Yazar & Haarstad, 2023).

Based on Kimberlé Crenshaw's (i.a. 1991) framework, this anthology argues that to counter this, intersectionality offers a most potent tool. It allows us to understand how different power-structures intersect and mutually reinforce one another. Different privileges amplify each other just as experiences of being discriminated against by multiple systems of power compounds have intersectional effects. Eventually, there are communities and individuals who are both privileged and discriminated against – positioned at varying degrees of access to power, privilege, and their denial. The far right seeks to exploit this by employing the strategy of divide-et-im-

pera (Henderson, 2024). Intersectionality, in contrast, aims to mobilize solidarity that leverages existing privileges to intervene into modes of discrimination. Intersectional solidarity can serve as a major driving force and guiding principle in countering the far right. Intersectionality asserts that the acting against discrimination should not be confined to a single axis, nor should it be the sole responsibility of those directly affected – such as 'women' fighting sexism, queer-identifying people against homophobia, or Black people fighting anti-Black racism. Rather, power structures and their tendency to privilege some while marginalizing others, must be collectively challenged. This requires solidaristic intersectional interventions that involve not only recognizing one's own privileges but also sharing or relinquishing them, thus contributing to the liberation of those who face discrimination (for example Kamasak et al., 2019, pp. 456ff.).

Thus framed, intersectionality serves both as a tool to understand the complexities of far-right policies and violence, and as a means to communicate about and resist them. It helps explain why certain political strategies fail, how backlashes gain momentum, and how far-right populism operates. This has been examined, for example, by Yazar (2024), who looked at how resistance to decarbonization and broader climate action intersects with ideology, particularly considering populism's eagerness to obscure given causalities (pp. 2452ff.). But this perspective does not encompass all forms of intervention or resistance discussed here. In practice, an intersectional perspective often remains limited, be it due to a lack of data or differing focal points. This can pose a potential risk and is certainly a limitation, but it can also form part of the necessary compromises in countering the far right – provided that the limitation is not treated as set in stone. This issue was discussed at the 2024 conference, leading to the decision to make intersectionality less central in this anthology. However, this by no means implies abandoning an intersectional perspective, as emphasized in the chapter by Mario Faust-Scalisi. Rather, or by Puja Kaur Matta, it reflects the choice not to adopt it as a unifying framework across all chapters. Instead, the diversity of approaches and perspectives is repeatedly enriched by an intersectional lens, highlighting the importance of complexity and maintaining a power-critical stance – regardless of the different (claimed) needs for compromise in intervention. Together the volume's overarching framework ultimately emerges as an intersectional intervention. This already foretells that not all the perspectives presented in each of the chapters are shared by all authors or the editors. This is evident, for instance, in the use of terminology.

The far right, right-wing, radical right or populist right?

As readers will have noticed, the 2024 conference still included the term 'right-wing extremism' in its title. Similarly, in this anthology, various terminologies are in use

alongside 'far right.' In part, the anthology contributors agreed to disagree on which terms to use, while being united in consistently using the term far right. In the chapter by Guillermo Fernández-Vázquez, the term Populist Radical Right Parties PRRP is used, too. This terminology is quite common in political science to describe far-right parties that follow a populist approach and is used in multiple studies (for example, Schwörer & Fernández-García, 2022, pp. 545ff.). However, not all actors on the far right adopt populism. Moreover, the term populism is frequently debated, especially when applied to both the far left and far right. Nonetheless, the term persists and continues to be used and justified, including in efforts to analyze both ends of the political spectrum together (Rooduijn et al., 2023, pp. 969ff.). Merely labelling a party as populist does not suffice to define its political goals. Populism is, after all, primarily a rhetorical structure of manipulation. The authors collected in this volume do not all follow the approach of foregrounding populism in discussions of the far right, nor do they uniformly apply the term, 'radical right.' Hence such terminologies cannot be applied to all perspectives and approaches that discuss how to counter the far right.

Similarly, this holds true for the term 'extremism,' as in right-wing extremism. Labelling parties or mindsets as 'extreme' carries the implication that the actors' worldviews and policies violate fundamental human norms or values. Some authors in this volume, such as Arash Beidollahkhani make prominent use of this terminology. In some other contexts, the term 'right-wing extremism' is commonly used – for instance, by the 'Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz,' (BfV) the German Domestic Intelligence Service. The BfV classifies actors as politically right or as 'right-wing extremists,' with the latter typically summarized to mean 'overrating ethical belonging' or rejecting the fundamental principle of equality (Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz, 2025). In Germany, it matters whether a far-right party such as the AfD is officially classified as 'right-wing extremist.' However, from an analytical perspective, this distinction is less significant. Analytically the AfD is clearly a far-right party (Deutschland Solidarisch Gestalten, 2025). This holds true in other contexts as well. The term 'right-wing extremism' does not work equally well for all authors in this anthology, or for all the contexts discussed here. Since this anthology aims to bring together diverse and wide-ranging perspectives and approaches from different backgrounds, terminology like 'right-wing extremist' is not universally applicable.

Already at the conference, it was agreed to use the unifying term 'far right' to encompass multiple, and at times only loosely connected, phenomena. This aligns with existing research and insights that aim to describe these varied phenomena. Moreover, it is not a unique idea that is being introduced here, rather, one that is firmly grounded in scholarly literature and academic discourse (see, for example, Carter, 2018, pp. 157ff.). In general, it refers to, but is not limited to, the following conceptual idea:

> "The term 'far right' is an umbrella concept used to refer to the '(populist) radical' and 'extreme' variants of right-wing politics. It is, by definition, a generic term used to identify and bring together collective actors located on the rightmost end of the *ideological* left–right spectrum, but it is not devoid of meaning because of this aggregative property. Although the term evokes position and spatial location, it is also substantive as it refers to constituent parts (i.e. radical/extremist collective actors) discernible on the basis of their democratic/anti-democratic outlook (…). [T]he far right includes all those ultranationalist collective actors sharing a common exclusionary and authoritarian worldview – predominantly determined on sociocultural criteria – yet varying allegiances to democracy." (Pirro, 2023, p. 103)

Even though some may dismiss this as 'just terminology,' terminology does matter. It plays an important role in bringing together diverse perspectives and phenomena – enabling the understanding that examining national phenomena such as the far right in the United Kingdom would also require an awareness of transnational links and networks; and that the same terminologies may be employed for widely different yet highly interconnected perspectives and phenomena covered under different terminologies, as in Germany, for instance, the term 'right-wing extremism.' This is a main reason why we have chosen to use the unifying term – the 'far right' – while still allowing for variation and nuance within it. For example, the chapter by Konrad Moussa Ibrahima Erben uses the term 'extreme far right' to better capture the specific German context from this perspective, while Guillermo Fernández-Vázquez refers to PRRP (Populist Radical Right Parties) in his chapter. Meanwhile, Susan Arndt chooses the term 'fascism' to highlight not only the ideological and rhetorical aspects of populism, but also the preferred modes of governance and control exercised by the far-right parties and movements looked at.

In this sense, this anthology is also a plea to adopt the term 'far right,' not only to map and analyze the far right in all its 21st century diversity, but also to connect the various forms of intervention and resistance. The aim is to counter the far right as a whole, rather than merely addressing some of its manifestations in isolation. Despite this call for unity, engaging with the diversity and variety collected here presents some challenges. They, at times, necessitate a degree of distance and the courage to disagree with certain perspectives, terminologies or approaches – albeit without rejecting the premise of an entire chapter or intervention. This diversity and debate are seen as a strength of the anthology as such, and of the collective effort of its contributors. Nonetheless, it is worth highlighting a few specific aspects.

Composition of the Volume

Understanding that resistance needs multiple voices and diverse perspectives – that it needs the "art of plurality" (Thorne, 2022, pp. 567ff.) to be effective – this volume brings together a range of viewpoints. The anthology does not present a unanimous voice or a single perspective. This also means that certain framings or interpretations are not shared by all contributors. For example, the authors of this introduction see the connections drawn out by Arash Beidollahkhani between the far right and Islamic fundamentalism and the framing of what is meant by the umbrella term 'Islamic fundamentalism' as alternative viewpoint. Nevertheless, this highly insightful chapter is crucial for recognizing that such links exist and must be considered when countering the far right.

A similar point can be made regarding some of the terminologies employed in the chapter by Konrad Moussa Ibrahima Erben, which have been, and can be, critically examined from an intersectional perspective, particularly with respect to gender. However, as with each chapter in the volume, the respective author(s) is/are responsible for their own contributions, presenting their unique perspectives, and choosing their own approaches to intervention and resistance – particularly in how to counter the far right. Not only do the two chapters mentioned above reflect the kind of internal debates and discussions we encountered in this process, but they also provide insight into the thorough review process undertaken – including decisions we made on what to retain and what to revise. This applies to all the chapters in the collection, resulting in an anthology that adheres to certain shared standards, such as regarding terminology – while ultimately allowing for a broad diversity of viewpoints. This heterogeneity is in part due to the different professional backgrounds reflected here. At the same time, key academic debates and partial disagreements are present throughout the volume – sometimes explicitly, sometimes more subtly – such as differing views on the use of the concept of Eurocentrism. But, as emphasized earlier, these reflect the well-considered decisions of the authors of the individual chapters and were discussed before publication. Each contribution holds its own value and rationale, regardless of whether the editors or other readers fully agree with the framing, description, or terminology. What matters is fostering a more open and pluralistic understanding.

The willingness to share knowledge and engage in dialogue across different approaches to confronting far-right positions is a fundamental basis for building alliances and practicing intersectional solidarity. Of course, certain core values must be shared – such as an outright rejection of structural discrimination and the abuse of power. But based on this common commitment, flexibility and openness towards each other's theoretical accents is pertinent. This spirit of mutual respect affirms our shared understanding: that, ultimately, we all stand united against the far right and envision a similar alternate future.

Reasoning

Behind these decisions lies the insight that those countering the far right too often become divided – not only by the far right, but also through disagreements about certain concepts, foci or other issues. These circumstances have been discussed for years, and there is an ongoing debate about whether this view holds true (Banerjee, 2013, pp. 14ff.). At least as much it also makes sense to repeatedly highlight the divisions within the far right itself, for example, regarding questions of foreign policy (Becker & Ondarza, 2024). The point to be considered here is not whether 'the left' is more divided than 'the far right.' Instead, what matters is the insight that division endangers the effectiveness of efforts to counter the far right. As authors of this introduction, we do not have to agree with every sentence in its wording, conclusions, or perspectives. Once again – these collected texts reflect the views of their respective authors. But there is an underlying consensus, not only in using the terminology of far right, but also regarding the necessity of countering the far right and intervening against it in all its diversity, both in Europe and beyond. The approaches differ, and there is good reason to write here about activist, academic, and artistic interventions and forms of resistance. Yet they all move in the same direction, each considering which path they see as most fitting to counter the far right. This anthology focuses on the far right in the 21st century and its rise, but it does so from the perspective of countering this rise, reflecting on and exchanging ideas about resistance and interventions.

Structure of the anthology

This volume intertwines activist, academic and artistic approaches to resistance and intervention. In doing so, it follows a structure that organizes the chapters into three parts, linked to the fundamental triad of analysis, communication, and intervention, without merely repeating it. The first part brings together more theoretical and general approaches, focusing on communication and related perspectives. This is followed by the largest section of the anthology – Part 2 – which centers on mapping and analysis. It discusses these both as forms of intervention and as foundations for it, bringing together a variety of activist, academic and artistic modes of intervention and resistance informed by diverse approaches to analysis and mapping. Finally, the anthology concludes with Part 3 on mapping as intervention, and mapping alongside intervention, delving further into practices of intervention and resistance while discussing the central role of mapping in this context. Before outlining these sections and their chapters in more detail, it should be noted that the structure is itself a 'construct under construction.' Nonetheless, it follows an internal logic, guiding the reader from more general to more specific perspectives, repeat-

edly combining (more) academic with (more) activist approaches. The various chapters and parts complement each other, offering a complex and nuanced perspective on how to counter the far right in Europe and beyond. In this way, the volume demonstrates how activist, academic, and artistic forms of resistance and intervention operate, emphasizing why it is worthwhile to engage with all of them.

Part 1 – Theory, Communication and General Approaches

Following the title of this volume, the focus is specifically on activist, academic and artistic approaches to resistance and intervention, explored from a variety of perspectives, whether more journalistic or more academic. Nonetheless, this remains an academic anthology that aspired to meet scholarly standards, while also taking into account the diverse backgrounds of its authors and their different approaches to various topics. The first part of the book eagerly discusses the overarching ideas of the volume by examining the concepts of activist, academic and artistic resistance, and intervention. This is first addressed by Mario Faust-Scalisi, who looks at the necessity of adopting an intersectional perspective when confronting the far right. Considering that the far right is not only racist – in various degrees and forms – and sexist – also in diverse ways – but also ableist, classist, and adultist, to name only some of its pillars of discrimination, confronting only one of these aspects will always limit the effectiveness of resistance and intervention. Thus, Mario Faust-Scalisi explores the power and agency of intersectional solidarity as a means to counter the far right.

In the next chapter of this section Natascha Strobl discusses 'Culture Wars' as far-right attacks on anti-discrimination work, framing them as a main pillar of postmodern fascism. Providing an overview and a less theoretical discussion of how culture wars are advanced and 'fought' – while still firmly grounded in theory – Natascha Strobl examines both the term as an analytical lens and the topic of Culture Wars itself, in order to better understand the new far right.

In the last chapter of this section, Susan Arndt writes about empathy as tool to counter 'necropolitics' as used by the far right to dehumanize. By explaining how racism is foundational to the far right and has been designed to 'legitimate' violence to such an extent that it has muted empathy, Susan Arndt shows how a return to global empathy may serve as an affective strategy in the fight against fascism's inhuman tactics. All three chapters show that theory, its communication, and its analysis come together and are central to first understanding and then countering the far right. This already indicates that the organisation into separate parts will always remain, to some degree, an artificial one.

Part 2 – Mapping and Analysis

The second part of this volume focuses more on analysis and brings together a range of specific approaches. While the first part is not limited to constructed national identities or a single perspective, Part 2 presents more targeted analyses. Yet, taken together in their diversity, these contributions provide a complex perspective on the importance of analysis and the need to map the status quo and current developments to counter the far right. The first chapter in this section, by Safia Dahani, examines the far right in France, focusing specifically on its development into what is now constructed as the 'middle of society.' Following the provocative question, 'How did we get here?,' Safia Dahani outlines how Marine Le Pen developed from outcast to 'respected politician.' By mapping the status quo and analyzing the developments that led to it, Safia Dahani shows how empty the notion of 'normalization' truly is, and highlights the role the media play in strengthening this narrative.

A different perspective is offered by Daniel Trilling, who focuses on the United Kingdom. Drawing on his professional background, this journalistic account takes the far-right riots in Northern England in 2024 as a vantage point. The article also maps the development of the far right in the United Kingdom, both within party structures and beyond. Being a journalistic account, this chapter also highlights the need for such perspectives: journalism as activism and artistic resistance to counter the far right through mapping and analysis, while also striving to go beyond these approaches.

Konrad Moussa Ibrahima Erben examines Germany and the German far right, focusing on its use of the narrative of 'migrant crime' to justify far-right policies. Through academic analysis, this chapter shows how the narrative of 'criminal foreigners out' is instrumentalized by the far right to normalize its positions. This links the discussion of the German far right in this chapter to the chapters by Safia Dahani and Natascha Strobl, which look at strategies of 'normalization,' here with a focus on constructing and reporting crime. Analyzing the constructedness of motives such as 'criminal foreigner' allows for mapping the communication strategies employed by far-right actors and related tactics.

In terms of more activist forms of resistance, while Konrad Moussa Ibrahima Erben's approach can be seen as academic resistance to counter the far right, the following chapter looks at the project 'Deutschland Solidarisch Gestalten,' written and summarized by Mario Faust-Scalisi. This chapter traces the development of the project from its roots in academic discourse to its emergence as a broader network. Major encounters and approaches within 'Deutschland Solidarisch Gestalten' are outlined, showing how the network brought together academics and activists to intervene against the far right, through exchange, analysis, and mapping of developments and the status-quo. Interestingly, Konrad Moussa Ibrahima Erben was, next to other authors here, also part of 'Deutschland Solidarisch Gestalten.'

Both chapters demonstrate the necessity of a broad approach to countering the far right, emphasizing exchange and the integration of different intervention strategies. This also includes the need to go beyond Europe in both perspective and analysis. This is the leading principle of the final chapters in this section of the anthology as well. Guillermo Fernández-Vázquez examines how the Spanish far-right party Vox, although not the most electorally successful, functions as a major actor within international far-right networks, especially in relation to the Americas. At the same time, this chapter highlights the need for an intersectional perspective, illustrating how Vox constructs a distinct form of racism through the idea of the 'Iberosphere,' and differentiates between migrants according to perceived 'classes.' Examining this specific case allows for mapping how the far right operates beyond party structures and is highly dependent on specific actors and topics. Consequently, effectively countering the far right requires a differentiated analysis, mapping out the variety and diversity of far-right actors and movements. Guillermo Fernández-Vázquez provides such an analysis through his in-depth exploration of influence within a transnationally connected far right beyond Europe.

The need for such an expanded perspective is also emphasized in the following chapter by Arash Beidollahkhani, who examines the links between the far right and Islamic fundamentalism. This innovative approach of looking at the linguistic connections and similarities, reveals that these two loosely connected groups, often constructed as oppositional to each other, in fact share more in common than is generally recognized. In the chapter, this is described as 'antagonistic symbiosis,' discussing and showing how both sides contribute to and benefit from global polarization. On the one hand this underscores the need to broaden our perspective to develop a more complex and nuanced picture of the far right in Europe and beyond. On the other hand, it highlights the importance of conceptual analysis to map developments and the status quo within these movements, to allow for intervention and resistance.

The latter is even more of a guiding principle for Ruby Rebelde and Zoe Luginsland from FundiWatch, who, in their article, look at Christian fundamentalism and its strategic use of storytelling and the spread of moral panic. This analysis again links to the Culture Wars, showing that Christian fundamentalism is not only part of these conflicts but also operated through international networks far beyond Europe. This chapter takes the form of an activist and artistic intervention and resistance, while remaining academically grounded, as it is written by activists rather than scholars. Lastly, as in the chapter by Arash Beidollahkhani, it focuses on an aspect of the far right that is often overlooked. However, instead of examining links to Islamic fundamentalism, it analyzes connections to Christian fundamentalism as yet another form of constructed religious fundamentalism. By analyzing and mapping how Christian fundamentalism strategically fosters moral panic to 'normalize' far-right ideologies – with examples mainly drawn from Germany – this chap-

ter provides insights into effective interventions. This is precisely what FundiWatch seeks to achieve through this article and its broader work.

Part 3 – Mapping and/as Intervention

And this again connects to Part 3 of the anthology, which emphasizes mapping as intervention, as well as mapping *and* intervention – examining activist, academic and/or artistic forms of resistance and intervention. The first chapter in this third section particularly focuses on a concrete artistic intervention. Mario Faust-Scalisi looks at two comics as media of antifascist intersectional solidarity. By mapping antifascism through labels and movements, with a focus on Europe – and specifically Germany and Italy in relation to the comics – the chapter demonstrates how comics enable connectedness, whether through their free distribution or through funding initiatives for those in danger. The comics are presented as forms of artistic resistance and intervention aimed at countering the far right in Europe by mapping antifascist resistance alongside far-right counteractivities, with a particular focus on Hungary and Germany. Both examples clearly show the need to confront the far right from a European perspective, moving national boundaries time and again, and by combining analysis, activism, and artistic resistance and intervention. This chapter centers on the specific position and work of the Italian artist Zerocalcare, examining two of his comics as published in Germany and Italy. Here, too, the links to the other two parts of the anthology are clearly visible. These connections also serve as a guiding principle in the following chapter.

Puja Kaur Matta's chapter delivers an intersectional intervention by tracing the colonial continuities that underpin contemporary far-right ideologies in Europe. Through a close examination of the Christian missionary-military complex in German South-West Africa (present-day Namibia), she reveals how colonialism operated as a system of control over bodies, spaces, and territories, violently gendered and racialized that justified gender and racial segregation. Her chapter connects this history to current far-right formations, focusing on actors such as Tradition, Family, Property (TFP), to demonstrate how today's anti-gender campaigns are not merely ideological but deeply rooted in a romanticized vision of Europe's colonial past. She argues that these far-right interventions are sustained by Europe's refusal to reckon with its imperial legacy, and that resisting the far right requires dismantling the colonial epistemologies that continue to shape European identity and political structures. Puja Kaur Matta not only contributed to the text of *Deutschland Solidarisch Gestalten* but also highly contributed in the editorial process. This chapter connects to the other chapter on Christian fundamentalism, but adopts an interventionist approach, functioning as both academic resistance and intervention. It shows how countering the far right requires understanding these historical con-

tinuities and the Eurocentric foundations underpinning current far-right policies and claims.

These more academic, interventionist approaches are followed by two chapters that focus on activism. The first is the chapter by Tobias Ginsburg titled "Beyond the Firewall," which describes his approach of infiltrating the far right, and more specifically, infiltrating spaces of fascist masculinities. This chapter highlights the importance of examining masculinities to be able to effectively counter the far right and its anti-feminism. However, this focus on masculinities serves only as a vantage point; while analysis enables intervention, it is not the main form of intervention presented in this chapter. Instead, the intervention here is infiltration itself – becoming temporarily part of these structures to better understand what is frightening and plainly dangerous. Tobias Ginsburg brings together mapping as intervention with activist and artistic resistance, providing an 'insider' perspective on how to counter the far right.

The final chapter of this anthology again presents a concrete intervention, focusing here on activist resistance grounded in academic analysis and the mapping of far-right policies. Unlike previous chapters that address Europe and beyond, this chapter emphasizes the importance of local action. Broader perspectives and an understanding of global links have limited interventionist impact if these insights are not localized. This is precisely the focus of the last chapter of this volume, which examines concrete resistance against the introduction of banking cards with limited functions for asylum seekers, replacing the previous system of cash payments in Germany. The effects of these policies, along with the rhetorics linked to their clear far-right roots, are mapped and analyzed here, enabling counter-interventions, and encouraging activist resistance. Thus, this chapter takes an abstract and broad approach, and re-concretizes and localizes it through specific, situated activism.

Countering the far right in Europe and beyond

All these chapters, organized into three parts, demonstrate the variety of ways to counter the far right in Europe and beyond. They bring together academic, journalistic, activist, and artistic forms of resistance and intervention, highlighting different approaches, their limits and challenges. Yet, they also create space for agency, resistance and hope, illustrating pathways to counter the far right, locally, regionally, at constructed national levels, and beyond. This diversity of perspectives and approaches is essential to confronting a rising far right. Academic analysis is key, as are communication and the variety of interventionist forms of resistance. These insights emerge from the discussions underpinning this anthology and are precisely why this volume brings them together. Interventions need analysis and mapping; they often require academic approaches as well as artistic interventions. Yet, all analysis and

mapping efforts remain limited without communication and intervention – indeed, the communication of academic findings can itself be an intervention or part of it (Bange, 2023, p. 481ff.). Bringing together multiple approaches and highly diverse authors, this anthology shows how to counter the far right in Europe and beyond. It is also a call to action: to take these encounters, insights and approaches and become active yourself, in the way you find most appropriate. And reading this volume is already a first step of resistance and intervention.

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Part I: Theory, Communication and General Approaches

The Necessity of Intersectional Perspectives and Intersectional Solidarity to Counter the Rise of the Far Right

Mario Faust-Scalisi

The far right on the rise

The far right in Europe and beyond is on the rise. The signs of this rise are visible to all and are only getting more and more visible. Nonetheless, there have been incidents that seemingly stood against this trend, moments of hope, at least for some, but too often just situations of 'it could have been worse.' And it is necessary to take these moments and tendencies into account, not the least to get empowered and energized. This can be more votes for a certain party in an election or the far right not winning, maybe even some political forces from the political right not winning with far-right rhetorics. Even though this may give hope, it does not neglect the overall tendency and development. These circumstances more visibly accelerated in 2024. And just for the purpose of an example most may be able to grasp easily, it makes sense to visualize this by looking beyond Europe and at the USA. In November 2024, the world saw the victory of Donald Trump, after an election campaign that, more clearly and obviously than other campaigns before in the last decades, was built on racism, sexism, classism, and ableism. Do not get me wrong – Donald Trump always was a misogynist, always was a racist and classist, and never hid this (Robson, 2020). However, in the 2024 electoral campaign, these characteristics became more of a cornerstone, an argument to vote for Donald Trump, not despite these characteristics. Voters could not vote for Donald Trump anymore despite being a misogynist racist, as some at least tried to rationalize after the last success in 2016, but seemingly because he is a misogynist racist (Bump, 2024; Lempinen et al., 2024). This came as a shock to many, but at the same time, protests against the victory, and in the first months of 2025 against the new policies by Donald Trump, remained at least relatively weak (Allsop, 2025). Some clearly remain shocked and afraid, but at least as many, seemingly many more, just explain(ed) away, shrug(ed) their shoulders and go/went on. This allows asking if this is the so often called for 'new normal.' Is racist misogyny the 'new normal'? Is this the end of fights against intersectional privileges

and discrimination? I argue here: Not at all. Instead, these developments make it even more necessary to work against all forms of discrimination and to counter the rising far right. This is no easy task to achieve, nor is it a safe or secure path. However, it is essential not to neglect recent developments, but to actively work against them. To achieve this, interventions grounded in solidarity are absolutely necessary – guided by an intersectional perspective and a firm commitment to collective well-being. Before getting into the details of intersectionality, it is important to first consider the necessary interventions to counter the far right – examining its components and interconnections – to formulate a genuinely intersectional intervention.

An intersectional intervention is an intervention based on analysis and clear communication

For any form of commitment and intersectional solidarity, it is necessary to understand what we are confronting. Such commitment is based on a clear and differentiated analysis. Extremism of the far right is no uniform phenomenon. This diversity, going as far as contradictions within the connected phenomenon, is enriched with problematic terminologies: Shouldn't we call the phenomenon and its actors 'right-wing populism?' What is 'right' and what is 'far right' or even 'far-right extremism?' Depending on the choices regarding description and terminology, the phenomenon we are confronted with is discussed differently in various contexts (Pirro, 2022, p. 101ff.). The best fitting term, however, to cover all diversity is the writing of the far right. This challenge in analysis can be exemplified by looking at Donald Trump once again. Latest from 2024 onwards it was discussed if Donald Trump is to be called a 'fascist' or not. This question has often been addressed in overly simplistic terms, with responses such as: 'Donald Trump is not Benito Mussolini,' or in a different historical framing, 'He is not Adolf Hitler' (as argued in Moritz, 2025). Another rhetorical strategy used to reject the applicability of the term 'fascist' to Donald Trump involves emphasizing that his movement does not represent 'original' Italian fascism (Drabek, 2024). From this premise, the conclusion is drawn that Trump cannot be considered a fascist. Arguing this way is nothing better than trivializing far-right extremism as just another form of 'populism.' There are scientific definitions of fascism, and there are indicators of what makes one person or a party fascist. For sure, they are debated and not universal, but still, they try to fix the phenomenon. Drawing on what is perhaps the most well-known definition by Stanley G. Payne, fascism consists of specific goals – such as the establishment of a nationalist dictatorship – distinct negations of, notably, communism and liberalism, and a particular political style marked by the promotion of masculinity and charismatic leadership (Payne, 1983). Taking this as a trial for the question of Donald Trump being fascist, there are good arguments to call Donald Trump a fascist. More so, failing to engage critically

with Trumpism and writing it off as merely a new form of conservatism – perhaps even an 'authoritarian' variant or a form of 'radicalized conservatism' (Strobl, 2021) personified by Donald Trump – risks once again trivializing his rhetoric and positions, or failing to take them seriously. This does not mean it is not relevant, and necessary, to discuss if the US-Republicans are now only 'Trumpists' and if nowadays 'Trumpism' is a form of fascism (Goldberg, 2020). Engaging in this discussion is essential. However, such engagement should not involve obscuring evident fascist tendencies just to be on the 'safe side,' nor should it rely on artificial distinctions between rhetoric and actions as a kind of preemptive defense – particularly one that exempts figures like Donald Trump, the white and male-read, from accountability for their statements and potential conduct. While it remains debatable if the concept of fascism fully applies to Donald Trump and Trumpism, outright dismissal of the term hinders a meaningful understanding and effective confrontation of the phenomenon. For this, a thorough and critical analysis is needed.

But this is by far not the only area or question requiring analysis. It is equally important to identify fitting concepts and terminologies. At the same time, and closely intertwined with the discussion of terminologies and concepts, it is essential to critically analyze the statements, actions, and demands associated with the phenomenon in question. The far right and far-right extremist parties and their actors are notorious liars (Törnberg & Chueri, 2025, p. 01ff.). This holds true for Donald Trump, despite repeated attempts to camouflage falsehoods as so-called 'alternative facts' (Atolagbe, 2017, p. 119ff.), but for many far-right parties, too. Thus, analyzing lies is key for any serious form of political and scholarly commitment. As discussed in more detail later in this book, this also applies, to the actions of the German far-right party 'Alternative für Deutschland / AfD.' A close examination of the AfD's argumentation reveals incomplete reasoning, hatred and plain lies. Based on such an analysis, one can critically compare the party's stated goals and core demands with their actual political program. A major finding – probably not surprising to most readers of this text – is this: many of those voting for the far-right AfD would not profit from its program but would, in fact, suffer cuts and increased hardship (Deutschland Solidarisch Gestalten, 2025). And, to close the circle once again to developments in the USA: lower- to middle-class Black male-read voters of Donald Trump may try to overlook Donald Trump's racism, but they certainly do stand to benefit from his policies. Such belief is a form of self-deception (Sanders, 2024). Identifying far-right policies as often fundamentally neoliberal, both in Germany and the US is, therefore, a key task of any analysis.

And from analyzing lies or far-right ideas and policies, there follows a necessary next step: communication. Science needs to communicate its results, activists, or journalists, at least as much. This communication is already a form of commitment. At the same time, this means addressing the power and influence of so-called 'alternative facts.' A need that has to recognize the growing presence of 'alternative media'

as more or less closed 'information' circles leaning towards the far right or even far-right extremism (Cowburn & Knüpfer, 2023, p. 319ff.). Studies show that traditional news channels, such as newspapers or TV news, are losing reach and influence, in comparison to before, though they remain far from irrelevant. Instead, alternative media outlets are gaining ground, often circulating a different kind of 'truth' – at best, a different perspective, but all too often, plain lies (Lipka & Shearer, 2023). Once again, the difference between both media spheres can be exemplified by looking at the USA. One can consult 'classical' media outlets like 'The New York Times' or 'CNN' to stay informed about the USA. However, those who lean in a different political direction often rely on other sources, such as 'Breitbart News' or 'Fox News.' Studies have shown how the consumption of different media and news channels defines and constructs different realities (Wang et al., 2024, p. 708ff.). Increasingly, these are actively insulated from each other. One can draw a direct line from users of platforms like 'Truth Social' to voters of Donald Trump, linking the narratives and policies they prefer. This phenomenon is not limited to the USA, even as the US provides a particularly good example here. Curiously, these media-aligned groups often see themselves as informed–and even particularly well-informed (this self-perception has been studied, e.g., in relation to COVID-19 information, see Lee et al., 2023, p. 1730ff.). This leads to the challenge that communication becomes ever more complicated especially when even basic facts are disputed. It becomes harder to reach and inform those who do not rely on the same media sources. What counts as fantasy and what is considered as reported 'reality' is not necessarily common ground. Perceptions of the world, at least in part or in tendency, drift apart, sometimes even becoming polar opposites. While it is vital to identify and expose lies in far-right narratives, this effort remains limited if it does not reach out to the supporters and potential voters of such movements to explain what the lies are and why these are lies. Communication, then, becomes not only essential – but also challenging work. And this can include a necessity for compromises, such as language-wise reducing gender-sensitive language or using problematic or debatable terms for collectives without criticizing them from the beginning. Further, it can include the need to use media outlets otherwise criticized or ignored to reach out. Many stay on and continued to use 'X' (formerly 'Twitter') despite seeing all the challenges linked to it; they stay to keep in touch, to be informed, but to reach out, too (Robertson, 2024). In this context, transformations of media outlets are another challenge, be it 'Twitter' becoming 'X' or 'The Washington Post' changing its opinion section direction-wise. Just ignoring the media or the change does not work here if it is about (out)reach, communication and communication as commitment against the far right. Working on and about far-right extremism always involves not only communicating about it but also, at least occasionally, communicating with actors and individuals linked to the far right. This does not necessarily mean everyone has to talk to the constructed 'fascist next door,' (Thielman, 2019) or to people like Donald Trump, if there is any

chance to do so. Instead, it means trying to communicate, at least if the possibilities exist, with voters and supporters who might be open to changing their positions, doing so in a way and to the extent that feels personally appropriate. This is a major task of commitment against the far right. And this attempt at communication then is a kind of intervention, just as a clear analysis may also be considered as an act of intervention.

This commitment based on analysis and communication can take many forms. It may be political or civic education, campaigning, investigation or scientific communication. Attending the next demonstration, starting a petition or countering far-right trolls on social media – all these activities are potential forms of intervention and commitment. Taking this as a starting ground, it is overall about an intervention together in difference and diversity – an intervention rooted in plurality and in a form of polylogue (Wimmer, 2004). This act of intervening together and in dialogue or polylogue is a form of shared responsibility in countering the rise of the far right, not only in the USA but globally. There are many forms such interventions can take, including simply speaking up in a specific situation, and they are neither wrong nor problematic as such. However, intervention for its own sake remains ineffective. And internal conflicts over details will weaken the impact of the broader intervention against far-right actors and policies, too. This is not to argue against or even prevent controversial or fruitful debate, nor to dismiss differing opinions or perspectives. On the contrary – such debates are necessary; they are of great value and represent a chance for change. Rather, the point is not to work against one another while sharing common ground. It is ultimately a question of focus and solidarity. To allow for this, it is essential to see, recognize and value difference, and not in service of preserving the status quo, but for positive change. In a sense, this follows the idea of "El pueblo unido jamás será vencido" – 'The people united will never be defeated' (Wandler & Meiners, 2016). Yes, this may sound like a simplistic ideal, which has been used before to obscure internal forms of discrimination. Chile under Allende, where this chant became popular, may have represented a socialist experiment, but it was still, inter alia, a very sexist and racist place (Farías, 2005).[1] It is necessary to ask who are 'the people' here, and how meaningful is unity if injustice is not fought in all areas.

Yet, by maintaining an open and inclusive concept of 'the people' and using this basic idea as a start and guide, it becomes possible to channel it into a broader fight against all forms of discrimination, and ultimately into a sustained intervention and commitment against the far right. Because there is more than a grain of truth in

1 However, this does not at all mean Salvador Allende as a person was more racist than all white people in white-dominated societies have at least racist tendencies. Clearly different positions, as by Farias (2005) claiming Allende to be specially racist and antisemitic, do not hold.

this simple message. There are many historical examples where the united fight was weakened by internal divide, with groups turning against each other over details rather than building on common ground. A good example can be found in Germany during the 1970s when left-wing politics and activism lost momentum to infighting over the 'right way to be leftist.' Similarly, struggles between competing communist groups, the so-called '*K-Gruppen Auseinandersetzungen*,' (with K standing for *Kommunismus*, or communism), fragmented, rather than strengthened the movement (Benicke, 2019). A meaningful intervention does not require a homogenized, 'united people' that ignores all difference, but it also cannot be driven solely by subjective, personal perspectives. The latter only opens up doors for a more united and organized far right. The 2024 U.S. elections, for example, revealed a very well-organized and strategically united political right, focused on opposing liberal rights, equality and concepts such as intersectionality. In contrast, those leaning to the Democratic side appeared divided, fighting inter alia about questions that their right-wing opponents easily framed as 'identity politics' (Coopman, 2024; Previous studies on the 2020 elections already challenged the simplistic idea that 'the left' is being divided by 'identity' as: Gin, 2021). However, presenting and positioning one's own subjective position as the only valid one, and the resulting divisions, undermines collective interventions against the far right. What is needed instead, is acknowledging that there are different ways of intervention: not everyone writes books, not everyone is made for demonstrations. Yet, solidarity in action – across these differences – is essential to building a successful and sustainable opposition to the far right. Crucially, this solidarity must be grounded in an intersectional perspective to avoid the perpetuation of the same discriminatory patterns it is seeking to dismantle. To better understand this claim, a closer examination of intersectionality as a theory and concept is necessary.

Intersectionality – the history

Worlds, societies or dynamics are shaped and permeated by power. But power is never distributed equally. Access to power, for example, is distributed extremely unevenly. Those with power typically strive to maintain it. Privileges, such as exclusive access to resources, secured property rights, or dominant positions in society play a crucial role in maintaining imbalances. These privileges also include the ability to define social norms. Those excluded from such privileges, who are often constructed as 'others,' experience this exclusion, among other things, in the form of oppression or discrimination. This inequality is secured in systems and structures, for example through mechanisms of divide and rule/conquer, making experiences comparable. But concrete and specific spatial or historical contexts tend to lead to changes within these systems and structures (Deflers & Muschalek, 2022, p. 5ff.). Experiences of

inequality are a human constant. Systemic and structural inequalities position all people along different axes and constructed categories. One example of this is the gender binary separation. This is a powerful process through which positions and norms are imposed rather than freely chosen. This shapes identities, collectively as well as individually, and is experienced as rule by others. In contrast, systemic privileges are often not consciously recognized. The systemic and structural power associated with being socially constructed as a 'man' is therefore repeatedly overlooked. More so, one's own privileged position is perceived as justified, as right or deserved. In simplified terms, one's own privilege is considered 'normal' – as the default state of being. And from this, it too often follows 'logically' that the non-privileged status of the 'others' is their own 'fault.' This can even lead to a complete denial of the existing inequality itself, for example, by pointing out one's own perceived disadvantages or claim a lack of privilege even while benefiting from structural and systemic advantages. This dynamic has been particularly explored, for example, in relation to white privilege and the negation of racism as captured in the concept of "white fragility" (DiAngelo, 2018). Accordingly, systemic and structural inequality, which manifests as discrimination, is repeatedly trivialized, treated as isolated incidents, or dismissed as overreactions or 'hypersensitivity.' But what is not acknowledged cannot be confronted or changed – so discrimination persists.

This phenomenon is neither new nor unexplored. In fact, multiple forms of discrimination and privilege have been identified, and various conceptual frameworks have been developed for their analysis. However, research has repeatedly shown that adopting discriminatory concepts and terms uncritically can be problematic for overcoming the very inequalities they aim to address. At the same time, avoiding these issues leads to the obscuration of corresponding problems. The concept of a 'strategic essentialism' by Gayatri Spivak, which was first put forward in 1984 and then further expanded and differentiated over the years, argued – as a kind of 'solution' to this challenge – for a strategic use of these discriminating concepts. Spivak herself eventually distanced herself from the term, but not from the goal associated with it (Spivak, 2008, p. 260). In line with this concept, Spivak advocated for the targeted use of categories to be able to name and thus challenge power-coded attributions and positionalities. The aim behind this strategy is to enable the appropriation of terms and concepts as empowerment. Reclaimed in this way, such categories can foster resistance and resilience, instead of serving to reproduce inequality (Kurzwelly et al., 2020, p. 65ff.). Intersectionality, both as a concept and strategy, is also based on precisely this.

Historically, the idea of intersectionality emerged from Black feminism, rooted in the fight against both sexism and racism. This concept always included other dimensions, such as classism, but it initially focused on confronting sexism and racism, driven by the realization that mainstream feminism had a *white* agenda, while existing anti-racist movements often lacked a gendered perspective. The

Black civil rights movement was deeply patriarchal, and so constructed women were confronted with the expectation that so-called 'feminist interests' would have to take a back seat to the fight against racism. Black voices were present throughout the feminist struggle, but they were a minority and often pressured to subordinate themselves to the predominantly *white* 'feminist agenda' (Chapman, 2019). The Nigerian feminist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie later summarized this emphasis on only one axis of discrimination as "The danger of a single story" (Adichie, 2009), a characteristic of many social movements or even liberation theories. A dedicated theorization of this gained significance and visibility from the 1970s onwards. This often followed the concept of 'triple oppression,' bringing together racism, sexism and classism. Fundamental to this was the work of the Combahee River Collective, which saw itself as a group of Black lesbian feminists. The joint 'Combahee River Collective Statement' of 1977 was foundational in this context, underlining the unique position and challenges faced by Black women*, while also adopting an anti-capitalist and socialist stance. According to the statement, any policy aimed at combatting discrimination must be based primarily on the specific lived experiences of those affected, a principle associated with the term 'identity politics.' This statement became a cornerstone for a wide range of social movements (Taylor, 2017).

Intersectionality – the basics

Building on these foundations, legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw published the seminal "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex" in 1989. In this article, Crenshaw discussed the inadequacies of US anti-discrimination regulations in prohibiting racism and sexism. She referred to the 1976 lawsuit DeGraffenreid v. General Motors, which was dismissed because General Motors employed Black people and women* and by doing so, according to the court, did not discriminate against Black women*. However, as Crenshaw points out, these were Black so constructed men* and *white* so constructed women*, while Black so constructed women* were the last to be hired and the first to be fired. Crenshaw introduced the term intersectionality in this article to describe the unique situation of Black women*, who are positioned at the intersection of different levels of discrimination, which do not simply add up, but rather converge to create a distinct and unique experience of marginalization. Referencing the idea of an intersection, intersectionality is a prism through which to look at the exact point where, depending on the individual constellation, racism, sexism, classism or else overlap, thus acting simultaneously by merging and influencing each other (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 139ff.). This image was not completely new. Crenshaw, for example, built on Evelyn Nakano Glenn and her 1985 article (p. 86ff.). Nevertheless, Crenshaw's 1989 article added greater nuance and analytical depth to this conceptual image. And while the idea of intersectionality was introduced in

1989, it was initially constructed in a very case-specific way. So, soon after, Crenshaw developed it into a more systematic framework and applied it to different contexts. Crenshaw's 1991 article "Mapping the Margins" is considered the basis of intersectionality as a comprehensive theory and concept. From the outset, intersectionality was designed as an interdisciplinary approach and has been understood in a transdisciplinary manner – establishing a clear connection between science and, for example, social movements, activism and other forms of intervention (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1241ff.). This basis was quickly taken up, expanded, and further concretized and critically discussed.

Crenshaw's worked out prism, initially presented and discussed in relation to Black women* of a constructable working class, was quickly adopted and applied to other examples and levels of analysis. This marked an expansion beyond the U.S. context and a broadening of disciplinary boundaries. While Crenshaw's arguments were primarily rooted in legal analysis, other disciplines soon began to use intersectionality as a prism for case analysis. This clearly followed Crenshaw's approach that was inherently interdisciplinary and drew from various disciplines and research fields, particularly from sociological and social science research, for example on Black feminist thought (Hill Collins, 1986, p. S14ff.). Some of the researchers whose work Crenshaw built upon were also among the earliest adapters of intersectionality as a concept. In principle, the adoption of intersectionality as a concept initially followed a critical approach that argued for pointing out and challenging power relations through critical analysis. This was combined with other approaches of the 1980s, such as coming from the margins to the center, both in analysis and in activism, as well as the societal and the global margins (hooks, 1984). As a result, intersectional approaches also necessitated a critical examination of the situatedness of knowledge, an idea that was developed within feminist perspectives by Donna Haraway in the late 1980s. The relationship between privilege, power, and knowledge, has remained a central concern of intersectional approaches. Thus considered, a critical examination of situated knowledge offers a means to draw conclusions about power relations, structures of privilege and mechanisms of discrimination (Haraway, 1988, p. 57ff.).

Intersectionality – central developments

Overall, the 1990s and early 2000s saw a gradual increase in the adaptation and adoption of intersectionality as a concept and analytical framework. Above all, this meant an increasing integration of different power structures into intersectionality theory. While this meant taking axes of power such as age or ability equally into account, others insisted that any intersectional analysis must continue to center racism, sexism and classism while allowing for shifting emphases. This was par-

ticularly underscored with regard to classism, which was initially considered and discussed in Crenshaw's early texts on intersectionality but received comparatively less attention than sexism and racism. Various researchers emphasized the centrality of classism alongside racism and sexism, thus reinforcing intersectionality's potential as a comprehensive lens for examining power relations and inequality (Ait Belkhir & McNair Barnett, 2001, p. 157ff.). However, scholars also highlighted the fact that there are important differences in how power relations operate across various axes and locations, whether in terms of the connections between sexism and racism and thus solidarity in Black feminism, or whether one focuses on how the different axes of power affect one individual, as a Black woman*. Leslie McCall set out to systematize these intersections while problematizing the very construction and use of corresponding categories per se. McCall's article "The Complexity of Intersectionality" (2005, p. 1771ff.) is still considered the basis for establishing a distinction between intracategorical, intercategorical and acategorical intersectionality. At the latest at the time of this article, it has become increasingly common – and necessary – for researchers to interrogate their own positionality within intersectional inquiry. This ongoing discourse constantly oscillates between the power-critical need to deconstruct and transcend fixed categories, and the necessity of strategically naming and applying them in order to reveal the normalizing and marginalizing effects of categorization itself – ultimately, to overcome them. These developments have expanded the analytical lens not only towards recognizing and challenging inequality and discrimination, but also toward revealing privilege as an often more invisible counterpart in power relations.

At the same time, it was and remains necessary to distinguish intersectionality from other perspectives and approaches that address inequality, privilege and discrimination, such as the theory of multiple discriminations. Intersectionality is not merely the description of the sum of different axes of discrimination and privilege; rather, it captures a specific character, a specific situatedness that results from the interactions and overlaps of these axes. Just as a Black woman* is not simply Black and a woman* in an additive sense, from the intersectional perspective that takes the overlapping layers of power and positionality into account, but is a Black woman*. This perspective has also been applied, for example, to the experiences of older people who are not able-bodied. To adequately analyze such complexities, it is important to always consider and analytically engage with privilege alongside discrimination(s). Consequently, intersectionality is not limited to the intervention against class-based racist sexism or sexist racism through analysis and communication, but it also demands solidarity between the positions of power and powerlessness. Intersectionality brings up the need for *white* women* and their feminisms to also fight against *white* supremacy, and for Black men* to actively oppose all layers of patriarchal heteronormativity. To underscore this and to safeguard such solidarity as the core of intersectionality, it became essential to develop an intersectional method-

ology and a clearly defined theoretical framework to better bridge empiricism and theory. Jennifer C. Nash emphasized a corresponding necessity in 2008 (p. 1ff.). By 2013, a good 20 years after intersectionality was introduced as a concept, and as a prism or analytical lens, it had been consolidated as a distinct theory and field of research. This was marked by a joint article by Crenshaw, McCall and Sumi Cho, which compiled various intersectional approaches and introduced 'intersectionality studies' as a research domain. The article, "Toward a Field of Intersectionality Studies: Theory, Applications, and Praxis" (p. 785ff.), is considered groundbreaking and fundamental in this regard. This also meant countering misinterpretations of intersectionality that narrowed it down, for example, to being primarily or only applicable to Black women*, and resisting notions of equality that claimed to be 'neutral,' 'color-blind' or 'gender-blind' – approaches that, in fact, helped to produce and reinforce intersectional inequalities. In this regard, it has been and continues to be emphasized that intersectionality as a concept and a theory is not just another inequality theory, but a comprehensive approach. On the one hand, this involves highlighting its activist-practical orientation; on the other, it underscores the added value of using intersectionality to determine and demonstrate the complex overlaps of axes of power and specific concretizations on a small and structurally large scale. The importance of intersectionality in the fight for social justice through solidarity has been repeatedly emphasized, including by Anne Sisson Runyan 2018 (p. 10ff.) in an introduction and overview. As a categorical theory that works both intra- and inter-, and to some extent a-categorically, intersectionality has evolved through an ongoing cycle: observing and analyzing the complexities of power-coded social orders; communicating these insights; and designing and questioning modes of intervention aimed at shaping transformation. Ultimately, intersectionality is not only a theory but also a practice – one that is grounded in a dynamic understanding of its theoretical foundation, and enables a deep engagement with the complexity of the matter. At its core, intersectionality emphasizes and provides the insight that social positions, identities and categorizations are not isolated; rather, they are powerfully interconnected. At the same time, they are the structural and systemic evidence of the intersectionality of power and inequality. Intersectionality is a nuanced and comprehensive approach to critical social analysis and related activism, creating a deep understanding of how different forms of identity and oppression intersect to shape the lives of individuals in an increasingly globalized world. This also includes a degree of appropriation, as the concept – originally rooted in Black feminism – has been and continues to be a broad theory that is also applied by *white* people. While this is, of the context of complex analysis, often unavoidable and at times even welcomed, it nevertheless requires critical reflection on these circumstances and a sustained awareness of the origins of the theory and one's own positionality, in order to prevent whitewashing and uncritical appropriation (Arndt et al., 2025, p. 15ff.). Such reflection is essential for any genuine approach to intersectional solidarity aimed at

countering the far right. Before turning to the specifics of intersectional solidarity, however, it is necessary to first outline some basics concepts of solidarity itself.

Solidarity

In general, solidarity is based on a consciousness of shared interests and objectives, closely related to ideas of basic human rights. Solidarity is based on the idea of universality – the belief that all human beings are equal, share fundamental needs, and are inherently vulnerable. Instead of emphasizing everyone as special – albeit without neglecting individuality and intersectional vulnerability in difference – the baseline of solidaric action is acknowledging universal rights and needs (Boehm, 2022). However, unlike human rights, solidarity is not fixed; it is more of a foundational concept that views society as composed of individuals who share certain basic interests. Accordingly, the focus lies in the ties binding society or groups, without neglecting their differences. At the same time, historically – and even today – solidarity is often invoked in ways that overlook these same differences. As already mentioned, for instance – in the feminist fight neglecting issues of racism, or anti-racist struggles that have overlooked sexism. In this sense solidarity can emphasize a specific form of equality, especially in terms of shared needs, along a single axis. In this way, solidarity at times serves the interests of unions or is a basis for the welfare state, stressing shared interests, such as better wages or universal social security, while frequently overlooking other equally important issues and questions (Taylor, 2014). Analytically, this can be viewed in a more critical light, as a reluctance to acknowledge additional hardships or differences within the very group for whom solidarity is claimed, or expected from. A more positive perspective follows the idea of the ability to learn and adapt, such as unions moving beyond advocating for equal pay raises for all, but considering the unique challenges faced by certain groups – such as those doing care work, or those in the lowest paid positions. Such evolution shows that solidarity is an open and flexible concept, yet one that fundamentally relies on the need to recognize others as equals, at least in some essential way. It is also a term that must continually be questioned and redefined (Koltan, 2016, p. 133ff.).

Solidarity and the far right

As a concept, solidarity is often used to define the struggles of one group against another. While this is not the only way the concept can be understood, this is the idea that is frequently propagated – for example, in workers' struggles against employers or in slogans like "*El pueblo unido jamás será vencido*." Because far-right parties and actors tend to oppose redistributive policies, and generally align with economically

right-wing positions, the idea of solidarity is frequently mobilized against them. Along the same lines, trade unions in Germany mobilized against the far-right party 'Alternative für Deutschland' during the federal elections in early 2025. The basic rationale followed is that fascism runs counter to the interests of workers. On a deeper level, it is about questioning the social policies propagated by the far right (International Trade Union Confederation, 2025). This is necessary because the simplistic dichotomy of 'us – the workers' – versus 'them – the far-right-bourgeoisie' – is no longer sufficient. Instead, studies show that the far right drastically changed its approach to social policy: It now promotes a new, right-wing version of solidarity and redistribution – one that redirects benefits away from groups such as refugees or 'migrants' toward *white* workers. In a sense, it is the propagation of a *white* solidarity. And in fact, in many countries, so framed workers increasingly vote for far-right parties. In some cases, these parties take a socially-oriented but exclusionary position of solidarity; at other times / in other places far-right parties and actors champion individuality while positioning so constructed 'workers' interests' more centrally than they did in the past. When one considers countries like the USA or Germany, far-right actors are not propagating for an expansion of the welfare state, even though this position is held by far-right actors and parties elsewhere. Nevertheless, there is a cross-national trend toward a unified call for solidarity that centers, in particular, on so-called 'workers.' This form of solidarity is not strategic in the sense of addressing racism first, for instance, and then tackling sexism, nor is it about avoiding overlooking differences and challenges. Rather, it is an intentionally exclusive solidarity that has been consolidating over the past several years (Lefkofridi & Michel, 2014).

Different kinds of solidarity can be employed against this exclusionary model. And there are several examples that have been mobilized, albeit having their own contradictions and shortcomings as well. One notable example is the feminist resistance to far-right misogynistic policies in Poland since 2016. On the one hand, this movement clearly demonstrates how solidarity can be employed against the far right. But on the other hand, it is another example for an exclusive solidarity in the ways in which it deploys strong patriotic language and national symbolism. While this made it possible to position patriotism against far-right nationalism, it simultaneously limited the scope of solidarity and openness toward international feminist struggles. One major category examined in such studies is 'belonging,' not only in terms of who is included in the constructed category of 'women,' but also in relation to identity and belonging to 'Poland.' This form of feminist solidarity is less exclusive than that propagated by the far right, but it remains exclusive nonetheless (Ramme, 2019, p. 469ff.). In contrast, more localized examples of solidarity often overcome such boundaries. Contrary to the common assumption that local solidarity mainly works to reinforce exclusion, particularly of those constructed as 'migrants,' research shows that, at the local level, solidarity tends to be more inclusive. Numerous examples highlight how local movements have mobilized against struc-

tural and systemic injustices such as rising rents or privatization. These examples illustrate the value of solidarity in the fight for a more just and equal society. As demonstrated, this can enable efforts to counter the far-right's reductive narratives and the exclusive solidarity it propagates (Enacting Citizenship & Solidarity, 2025). A concrete case is neighborhood-based anti-fascist solidarity in Spain (Santamarina, 2021, p. 891ff.). At the same time the risk remains that even solidarity aimed at opposing structural or systemic injustices, such as unaffordable housing, can become exclusive – by overlooking the specific needs of marginalized groups like single parents, or when the focus shifts to more easily targeted 'enemies' rather than confronting 'the system.' Solidarity can take the form of local *white* or male-constructed exclusive alliances opposing the 'migrants' living nearby – this is a pillar of many local far-right policies (Santamarina, 2021, p. 891ff.). Solidarity, even in local and concrete contexts, is never fixed or stable; it must be constantly questioned, reimagined and reconfigured. For this an intersectional perspective on solidarity is key, preventing the drift toward exclusive forms of solidarity and to effectively fight the far right.

Intersectional solidarity

Intersectional solidarity is neither a newly invented concept nor an unfamiliar one. Instead, the idea of a necessarily reframed solidarity – 'intersectional solidarity' – emerged alongside the development of intersectionality as a theoretical approach. Early scholarship used the term to explain the practical implications of intersectionality for social movements and concepts of social justice, emphasizing the need for an intersectional consciousness as the basis for a new, more inclusive kind of solidarity (Tormos-Aponte, 2017, p. 707ff.). Based on these early approaches there are various studies looking at practical applications of an intersectional knowledge and consciousness. Building on intersectional analysis and its modes of communication, such as to actors engaged in social change, the concept of systems of oppression is becoming increasingly complex, highlighting the need for more nuanced, reflective and sophisticated responses. Intersectional solidarity is a key term in this context, also allowing actors to better understand their own complicity in sustaining these systems. To understand both individual and structural involvement, a new kind of literacy and accountability is required – one that does not simply reproduce injustice and discrimination, but instead fosters more inclusive change. One key aspect in this context is the embodiment of unjust structures and embodied practice(s) (Ellison & Langhout, 2020, p. 949ff.). Another is moving beyond simplifications of intersectional encounters, whether at the individual or institutional level – rather, allowing for and stressing the importance of complex perspectives on their interrelations. This makes it possible to overcome forms of intersectional hostility rooted in individualization or the marginalization of small groups. This shift enables a more

comprehensive understanding that fosters an intersectional perspective, which ultimately leads to intersectional solidarity (Kamasak et al., 2019, p. 456ff.). By understanding intersectionality not only as a method or a perspective, but as a transdisciplinary approach that calls for and accompanies action, research has also focused on working out guidelines and sharing best-practice examples. The clear aim is to empower actors working toward social change and justice to enact intersectional solidarity. One focus of such research is on social movements in the USA and beyond, analyzing internal differences related to power asymmetries and hierarchies that can lead to domination and distrust. At the same time, it highlights examples of how such forms of internal intersectional injustice can be addressed and overcome. Starting point is the analysis, followed by the communication, and finally the negotiation of divisions and foci (Einwohner et al., 2021, p. 704ff.). Through similar studies, the importance of an intersectional perspective, and of intersectional solidarity itself, has increasingly come into focus – both for research on social activism and for its practice. Such analyses show, for example, that intersectionally aware activism can reshape intersectional identities and, inter alia, change the face of activist feminism. With greater awareness of intersectional identities and inequalities, movements can become more inclusive and, ultimately, stronger, as research has shown. Beyond, for example, the feminist struggle for 'women's rights,' different layers of vulnerability, inequality, and discrimination can be taken into account. This adds complexity to activism, making it less conducive to simplified messages. This very complexity becomes a central starting point for countering simplistic far-right narratives and their proposed 'solutions' – by responding with intersectional solidarity (Guha, 2019, p. 159ff.).

Other approaches to intersectional solidarity adopt a more a critical perspective on the development of intersectionality, arguing against its appropriation and emphasizing its roots in Black feminism. One of the more recent publications on the topic, the 2025 book "Intersectional Solidarity: Black Women and the Politics of Group Consciousness" by Chaya Y. Crowder argues in this vein. It explores the conditions under which people support issues affecting Black women*, based on the insight that those who experience multiple forms of discrimination, such as Black women*, often engage in solidarity and collective action informed by an intersectional consciousness. While the primary focus is on Black women*, as well as LGBTIQ+-People of Color, the book addresses broader concerns of marginalized subgroups and their demands for intersectional solidarity. In addition to once again linking intersectionality to the major axes of power – racism, sexism and classism – the book also takes a more theoretical approach by developing a tool to measure intersectional solidarity through group consciousness. The empirical focus, here, is on the United States. It aligns with publications on intersectionality that focus primarily on Black women* while also adopting the more recently established concept of intersectional solidarity to further refine and clarify the term and its focus. Although

grounded in empirical research, the book places less emphasis on this aspect compared to the studies previously discussed. It primarily aims to conceptualize and question intersectional solidarity on a theoretical level, while also, on a secondary level, addressing how activism and levels of activist commitment can be adjusted and transformed.

Other approaches also focus on developing theoretical or terminological frameworks to better understand intersectional solidarity. However, they often shift back toward the practical side, aiming to distinguish between different approaches to intersectional solidarity. This research demonstrates that all practices of intersectional solidarity must be distinguished from the notion of an ideal, solidaric alliance across differences, since power dynamics are always at play. This does not render intersectional solidarity an unattainable dream, but rather an aspirational ideal: a guiding principle for any coalition, an ideal to work toward. Such research highlights that multiple approaches to intersectional solidarity already exist in practice, even if they are not always framed as such. At the same time, it underscores the need to analyze, communicate and (re)adjust these approaches – not to rank them as 'better' or 'worse,' but to recognize them all as ongoing efforts that require constant reflection and adaptation. Here, the intersectional approach of inter- and transdisciplinarity is of central importance, as it enables a dialogue between practice and research. Ultimately, intersectional solidarity is also a matter of framing issues in ways that allow for a different distribution of resources and modes of (re)presentation. Following this approach, a transformative form of intersectional solidarity can be achieved, but only through constant and deep engagement with 'others,' especially those who have been othered. This kind of solidarity must be durable, grounded in both individual and collective commitment, and aimed at overcoming all power asymmetries in the end. Only then can it truly be called intersectional solidarity – without dismissing the value of each step taken in that direction, including all the more or less complete efforts toward intersectional solidarity (Ciccia & Roggeband, 2021, p. 181ff.). By following this path, intersectional solidarity can become a powerful counterforce to the rise of the far right.

Intersectional solidarity and the far right

The far right, which also employs approaches of exclusive solidarity, generally follows the logic of *divide-et-impera*. Power is stabilized by creating divisions – offering solidarity and limited power to some, while further weakening others. 'Workers' are supported but only within narrowly constructed notions of 'their' so constructed 'workers needs and interests,' which are defined in opposition to feminist goals and along racist lines. Women* may receive support, but only as long as they conform to certain prescribed ideas and do not challenge the gender-binary, heteropatriar-

chal system. Indeed, the far right may claim to support 'disability rights,' but only in terms of 'special' treatment and segregated support structures. To align oneself with these prescribed lines, is at the same time, to be positioned against those who do not support or follow them. This is the classic move of divide and rule – granting privilege to some, while leaving the doors to the category of privilege theoretically partially open. In practice, rigid boundaries are drawn and 'enemies' are constructed (Henderson, 2024). Donald Trump, for example, portrays himself as the savior of 'the nation' – in defense of *white* privilege – and as the champion of a narrowly defined 'workers' power,' ideally *white*, and certainly male-read (Olorunnipa, 2025). In the end, it is all about playing one group against another – such as the male-read Black worker against feminist interests or leftist calls for systemic change, or the white, female-read individual against Black female-read individuals. If Donald Trump can be seen as a savior of anything it may well be misogyny (or racism). Nonetheless, many female-read individuals voted for him – perhaps because he frames his policies as 'rescuing' white privilege, or because they align with the image of the patriarchal savior (Bate, 2024). Intersectional solidarity recognized and critically analyzes these moves. It understands the need to accept differences, including differences in perception, as a starting point, without imposing hierarchies on them. Poverty cannot be effectively addressed by emphasizing or foregrounding racism and sexism, even though far-right actors such as Donald Trump or Germany's 'Alternative für Deutschland' claim otherwise. Theirs is a simplistic solution based on divide-et-impera. This merely shifts the location of poverty. Combating poverty, for everyone, as a society or community, necessitates an inclusive approach that recognizes the diverse conditions and structural frameworks at play. If fighting, just for example, poverty is not to become a zero-sum game, then intersectionality is essential as a guiding perspective.

Far-right policies have been coined by, inter alia, intersectional racism. The far right has historically motivated, and continues to promote, the kind of segregationist racism that declares Europe and the USA as the rightful 'home' of the constructed 'white Christian race,' while also advocating for a heteronormative family model and perpetuating discrimination against people with disabilities. One of the far right's recurring rhetorical strategies is to frame migration and 'migrants' as threats to the integrity of so constructed white nation-states – whereby, the term 'migrant' eventually serves far-right actors to mean the collective of all Black or Indigenous people, all People of Color, as well as Jews and Muslims. This ideology is often camouflaged in terms like 'ethnopluralism' and spread through forms of populist rhetoric. Underlying this is a strategy of simplification, the exploitation of existing complex challenges to gain political power through divide-and-rule tactics. Such strategies can and must be critically analyzed. The far right's approach – racializing debates, offering simplistic 'solutions' while simultaneously claiming the 'insolvability' of challenges – needs to be exposed and communicated. In response, interventions and

sustained commitment are key, grounded in the idea and practice of intersectional solidarity. This approach is not entirely new. As described, countering the far right through solidarity is a practice spread across Europe and beyond. However, this carries the risk of forming an exclusive and limited solidarity – one that unintentionally mirrors divide-et-impera tactics of the far right and ultimately and plays into their hands. To counter this risk, an intersectional perspective, and a commitment to intersectional solidarity, is key. Individual fights and commitment are important, certainly, but confronting a well-organized and well-connected far right can only succeed through inclusive solidarity.

Countering the rise of the far right with intersectional solidarity

Fostering and fighting for intersectional solidarity is no easy task, not only because solidarity is not a stable condition, but something that must be actively chosen again and again, but also because the far right actively works against it. The power of the far right lies in its ability to divide, splitting societies in ways that prevent inclusive solidarity. Major tools of this strategy are populism and simplification, which ultimately enable even (partial) far-right alliances across national borders. A part of this strategy is to claim that anti-discrimination efforts, such as gender-sensitive language or LGBTIQ+ rights, are themselves divisive, while causing much more harm through their activities and far-right rhetoric (Aktas, 2024, p. 591ff.). The reason for the persistence of this strategy of divide and conquer, actively working to prevent inclusive solidarity, is an awareness of the truth behind the simple message: 'El pueblo unido jamás será vencido.' However, and this was worked out here, the idea of a constructed 'united people' carries the risk of perpetuating discrimination and failing to realize a better world for all. Recognizing this, the well-known chant needs to be rephrased into something like: "Las personas en solidaridad intersecional jamás será vencido" – The people in intersectional solidarity will never be defeated. Yes, this version is more complicated and harder to chant, but it reflects the real complexities of our societies today.

Albeit, the far right is not a monolithic bloc, it nonetheless requires an intersectional perspective that considers the diversity among its actors. This, once again, calls for thorough analysis and nuanced communication. Considering all that has been said here about intersectional solidarity – especially in response to far-right (counter)policies – it is essential to acknowledge that there are internal differences and varying tendencies within the far right. Across Europe and beyond, the far right is heterogeneous of, in in its manifestations, styles and policies. And different far-right actors and parties, therefore, necessitate distinct forms of commitment and intervention. However, acknowledging these differences does not mean that intersectional solidarity, as a central approach of counter-commitment, is only relevant

in a few specific cases or situations. On the contrary, despite the diversity and variations within the far right, the active opposition to concepts such as intersectionality and inclusive solidarity is a common thread that unites them. For several years now, different far-right actors and tendencies have embraced the strategy of divide-et-impera, following examples like that of Donald Trump (Wallisch, 2019). Any meaningful counter-commitment and intervention must adopt the inverse strategy. This means taking up intersectional solidarity as major tool to challenge the rise of the far right, not only in Europe, but globally. Intersectional solidarity enables engagement with the complexities of power, social inequality and the respective privileging of some at the expense of the Othered and marginalized.

Solidarity as a concept, term, and practice must be critically examined, but without intersectional solidarity, resistance against the far right will remain weak. What is needed is an active engagement against stable – and stabilizing – structures and systems that uphold existing power dynamics. Intersectional solidarity is a more complex path than exclusive solidarity. Opting for an inclusive, intersectional solidarity can lead to fatalism given the many barriers, both current and anticipated, , and posed not only by the far right. Yet, intersectional solidarity also makes empowerment possible: for genuine collective action that does not come at the expense of those who are 'othered,' whose interests and needs are too often overlooked in the pursuit of a shared aim. In this positive sense, intersectional solidarity enables mutual learning, without ranking and hierarchizing lived experiences or types of expertise. Understanding that the far right targets the most vulnerable, such as poor people – vivat classism! – or so constructed migrants – vivat racism! – but independent female-read persons, too – vivat sexism! – makes standing in intersectional solidarity, more urgent than ever, echoing the idea and revised and expanded chant "Las personas en solidaridad intersecional jamás será vencido!"

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Culture Wars and the Rise of Postmodern Fascism

Natascha Strobl

Abstract *This paper aims to examine both the contemporary manifestations and potential future trajectories of fascism, with a particular focus on its organizational structures and the tools it employs in its pursuit. Central to this exploration is the concept of the "Culture Wars," which serves as a pivotal unifying weapon within the fascist project. Further, this paper aims to explore the underlying causes and the societal dynamics that contribute to the rise of culture wars, particularly within European contexts. I will trace the historical roots of such conflicts, examine the economic and social conditions that exacerbate them, and discuss potential ways to address the tensions they generate.*

Culture Wars and the Rise of Postmodern Fascism

Before delving into these themes, it is essential to contextualize the emergence and proliferation of these new forms of fascism. To understand their rise, it is important to recognize that right-wing extremism, authoritarian ideologies, and fascist movements are not merely products of crises but rather symptoms of broader socio-political and economic transformations. Over time, these movements may evolve into full-fledged crises in their own right. However, they did not emerge spontaneously; their roots can be traced to earlier historical developments that paved the way for their contemporary proliferation. A crucial event in this regard is the economic and financial crisis of 2008, which acted as a significant catalyst for the political dynamics we observe today.

The 2008 financial collapse represents a sharp societal and political rupture, which marked the onset of a profound shift, particularly among capitalist elites (Crouch, 2020). While capitalists do not form a monolithic or coherent group, and their interests and ideologies vary significantly, this period saw heightened tensions and conflicts within the capitalist class. The crisis exposed underlying fractures and competing interests, particularly among financial capitalists. Prior to the crash, the dominance of financial capital was largely unquestioned, as evidenced by the prominence and wealth of hedge fund managers and bankers.

The 2008 financial crisis marked a profound turning point in global economic and political structures, particularly for the financial capital that had previously dominated the economic landscape. The crisis, precipitated by the very actors responsible for its occurrence, unleashed catastrophic consequences across the world, echoing the events of 1929 in some respects. Central to the causes of the 2008 crash was the dismantling of regulatory frameworks, such as the Glass-Steagall Act and the Bretton Woods system, which had previously served to curb the excesses of financial capital (Crouch, 2020). The neoliberal era, which championed deregulation, played a significant role in enabling the conditions that led to the collapse. In this regard, the failure to maintain adequate regulatory oversight was a key factor in the financial meltdown, exposing the vulnerabilities inherent in a system that had become increasingly unmoored from its regulatory foundations.

The Rise of Tech Capital

In the aftermath of the crash, a new form of capital – "tech capital"[1] – emerged as a dominant force in both the economy and politics. Fueled by rapid technological advancements, tech companies experienced a meteoric rise, positioning themselves at the forefront of global economic power. This rise was not merely economic, but also political, as tech entrepreneurs began to exercise increasing influence over public discourse and policy. One of the most notable figures in this transformation was Peter Thiel, the German-born entrepreneur and co-founder of PayPal and Palantir. Beginning in 2009, just months after the financial collapse, Thiel and his allies began to channel substantial resources into political causes aligned with their economic interests. Notably, Thiel contributed millions of dollars to support the presidential bids of Libertarian Ron Paul in 2008 and 2012, signaling the early political ambitions of the tech elite. This political investment only grew in subsequent years, culminating in Thiel's prominent support for Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign. Thiel's role as a key speaker at the Republican National Convention in 2016 underscored his newfound prominence within the Republican Party and his close ties to Trump and other like-minded figures such as Josh Hawley and J.D. Vance.

The ascent of tech capital, while often overlooked in discussions of the post-2008 political landscape, represents a critical shift in the distribution of economic and political power. Though not the primary cause of the financial crisis, the rise of tech capital was significantly accelerated by the failure of financial capital. As the financial sector's legitimacy faltered in the wake of the crash, the tech industry was able to

1 The term "tech capital" or "Big Tech" refers to the dominating seven most valuable and powerful technology companies, all based in the USA (Levy, 2020).

position itself as a more stable and innovative alternative, leveraging its newfound political influence to further its own interests.

Climate Crisis as a Political Accelerator

In addition to the economic and political ramifications of the 2008 crisis, the global climate crisis has emerged as another major force reshaping contemporary society. However, the climate crisis is not merely a singular, isolated event; rather, it functions as a catalytic agent, accelerating and exacerbating existing social, political, and economic crises. One of the most significant impacts of the climate crisis is its compression of the timeline for addressing other pressing issues. As climate-related disruptions intensify, the urgency of addressing global economic inequality, social justice, and political instability becomes ever more apparent. Moreover, the climate crisis poses an existential threat to democratic systems, as it exacerbates social inequalities and catalyzes political polarization, potentially leading to the erosion of democratic institutions.

The climate crisis is already contributing to a range of social crises, such as energy shortages in Central Europe following the invasion of Ukraine, inflation and rising costs of living, and global healthcare challenges. While these crises are among the most visible and immediate, it is beyond the scope of this paper to explore each of them in detail. However, it is crucial to note that the climate crisis not only exacerbates existing vulnerabilities but also creates new pressures that further destabilize political and social structures around the world.

Democratic Crisis

Another pressing issue is the crisis in democratic representation. This dual crisis manifests in two keyways: First, many citizens in urban centers in Central Europe are effectively excluded from participating in formal democratic processes. This exclusion is often a result of legal and bureaucratic barriers, which prevent individuals – particularly non-citizens – from voting or running for office, despite meeting the age and residency requirements for political participation. A striking example of this disenfranchisement can be found in Vienna, Austria, where, according to the latest statistics, 1,5 million eligible residents are unable to vote in national elections due to citizenship restrictions (Kurier, 2024; ORF Wien, 2025). In summary, the interplay of economic, political, and environmental crises has created a highly volatile and unpredictable global landscape. The financial collapse of 2008, the rise of tech capital, and the intensifying climate crisis all contribute to a moment of profound transformation, one in which existing political structures are being reconfigured in

ways that pose significant challenges to democracy and social stability. The issue of political disenfranchisement is not solely a matter of migration status or individual migration histories but is intricately tied to issues of class and labor. This demographic, which is disproportionately impacted by barriers to citizenship, finds that their interests are rarely represented in electoral politics. As a result, the political system largely neglects the concerns of unskilled workers, further eroding the democratic process. This situation exacerbates democratic deficits, particularly in Central European countries and cities, where the path to citizenship has become increasingly arduous and restrictive in recent decades. In many cases, obtaining citizenship in a Central European nation is now either prohibitively difficult or near impossible, reinforcing social exclusion and political marginalization.

A second crisis of representation pertains to the growing erosion of trust in democratic institutions. Among those who are eligible to vote – those who possess citizenship and meet the age requirements – there is a pervasive lack of confidence in the state and its institutions. In some instances, this mistrust extends to a broader disillusionment with democracy itself. Colin Crouch's concept of "post-democracy," introduced first in 2000 and further developed in the following years, offers a framework for understanding this phenomenon. Crouch contends that the weakening of democratic institutions and practices can be traced to the effects of neoliberalism, which began to dominate political and economic life well before the 2008 financial crisis (Crouch, 2005). Neoliberalism, with its emphasis on individualism and market forces, led to a diminishing role for the state and formal political representation. In this context, the belief that 'only you can help yourself' increasingly took hold in society, leaving little room for meaningful political difference. This ideological shift culminated in the erosion of substantive political choices, with many governments adopting similar policies, primarily oriented around economic imperatives. This Crouch stressed in later publications (2020). A clear example of this trend can be seen in the German Social Democratic Party's (SPD) implementation of the Hartz reforms in the early 2000s, which were driven by neoliberal principles (Biebricher, 2012, p. 141).

A Pandemic of Distrust

While the decline of trust in democratic institutions became more pronounced following the financial crisis, the outbreak of the COVID-19-pandemic in 2020 further deepened this distrust. Although the crisis momentarily heightened public engagement with state institutions, the overall trajectory has not been one of restored confidence. Studies conducted in Germany, where data on public trust is more readily available, illustrate the persistence of this trend (Leibniz-Institut für Bildungsverläufe, 2025). This lack of trust is not confined to Germany alone; it is part of a broader

pattern that affects most Western democracies. Notably, the Scandinavian nations stand in contrast, maintaining higher levels of trust in their political and welfare systems, which remain somewhat insulated from the broader global trends (OECD, 2024).

Importantly, this lack of trust does not affect all institutions uniformly. Some state institutions continue to enjoy relatively high levels of public confidence. For instance, the police and military forces are among the most trusted institutions, suggesting that while citizens may be disillusioned with political elites, they retain a degree of trust in institutions associated with public safety and security (Wolf-Doettinchem, 2025). Similarly, civic organizations, particularly those representing labor, such as trade unions, continue to command significant public support (Bachmayer, 2024). This trend is not limited to Europe but extends to the United States, where unions have witnessed a resurgence in activism in recent years (Holt & Schmid, 2024). Furthermore, the judicial system remains a pillar of public trust, an encouraging sign that certain aspects of the rule of law continue to resonate with the public.

However, the erosion of trust is most acutely felt within institutions directly linked to representative politics. Government bodies, parliaments, political parties, and opposition groups now rank among the least trusted institutions in Western democracies. These institutions are fundamental to the functioning of representative democracy, as they are tasked with making decisions that affect the lives of citizens and with ensuring that citizens' interests are adequately represented. The decline in trust in these institutions presents a significant challenge for democratic processes, as trust is a necessary precondition for political participation. Without trust in the political system, citizens are less likely to engage in the electoral process, undermining the legitimacy of democratic governance and exacerbating the crisis of representation.

The Age of Insecurity and the Loss of Hegemony

The aforementioned crises represent only a subset of the multitude of challenges confronting contemporary society. There are, of course, numerous other crises – some more pressing than others – that permeate our daily lives. These crises, whether economic, political, or environmental, are inextricably linked, and together they paint a picture of a society grappling with profound instability. What has become increasingly evident in recent years is the loss of hegemony, a process that extends far beyond the immediate crises of the past few years. Rather, this erosion of hegemonic consensus has been building gradually over the last two to three decades, if not longer. The dissolution of what was once considered 'normal,' coupled with the disintegration of widely accepted social and political consensus, is emblematic of this broader shift.

A particularly glaring symptom of this loss of hegemony is the rise of the far right within both parliamentary systems and public discourse across the Western hemisphere. The far right's increasing visibility in national parliaments, its growing influence in public debates, and its physical presence on the streets signal a profound transformation in the political landscape. In contrast, the political situation in Western Germany remains somewhat unique, as it has yet to witness a far-right right party securing a majority in a national election or participating in government coalitions.

Social media – a new Socio-Political Arena

At this juncture, it is essential to consider the role of social media in the current political landscape. Social media cannot be understood merely as a digital space that individuals can leave behind with the click of a button. Unlike traditional forms of media, social platforms have become a pervasive form of reality, deeply integrated into the fabric of contemporary political and social life. These digital spaces do not exist in parallel to the 'analogue' reality in which we live; rather, they interact with it in complex ways, influencing and shaping public opinion, political discourse, and social organization. Social media, in this sense, has become a significant site of political reality, one that demands critical attention as an arena for political mobilization and organization.

When understood as a form of political reality, social media can be analyzed as a medium for political organizing and the formation of new kinds of movements. In this context, it is evident that far-right groups and fascist organizations are actively using social media platforms to organize, recruit, and amplify their messages. These digital spaces provide far-right groups with the ability to bypass traditional media filters, build networks of like-minded individuals, and engage in decentralized forms of political activism. The extent to which social media has facilitated the rise of fascist movements cannot be overestimated; it has become an indispensable tool for the coordination of far-right activism, contributing to the increasing normalization of extremist ideologies.

In conclusion, the multiple crises facing contemporary societies – from economic instability to the erosion of political trust – are symptomatic of a broader loss of hegemony. This dissolution of consensus has created fertile ground for the rise of far-right movements, many of which are leveraging new technologies, particularly social media, to further their political aims. As these movements continue to gain traction, both within formal political structures and through informal networks online, it is crucial to understand the role that social media plays in their organization and dissemination of far-right ideologies. Social media, far from being a neutral platform, has become an active agent in the political dynamics of the

present moment, one that must be critically examined if we are to understand the future trajectory of political extremism.

The Fascist Online Mob

The dynamics of political violence in the contemporary context cannot be understood solely through the lens of physical confrontations or street-level activism. As we confront the rise of fascist movements, it is essential to recognize that political violence today manifests in complex and multifaceted ways, particularly within digital spaces. One of the common critiques of contemporary fascism is that it ostensibly lacks the physical violence characteristic of historical fascist movements, especially those of the 1920s and 1930s. This argument suggests that, due to its absence of classic forms of violent action, contemporary political movements cannot be considered fascist (Matthews, 2020). While it is important to exercise caution when drawing comparisons to past political formations, I contend that the absence of physical violence or rather its comparably smaller scale does not preclude the existence of violence in the modern era. In fact, we are witnessing a form of violence that occurs primarily within the realm of social media – an increasingly potent and pervasive form of political violence that, though not physical, is nonetheless profoundly impactful and destructive.

While it is undisputed that physical violence remains the most immediate and visceral form of harm, the psychological warfare waged on social media platforms is increasingly comparable in its intensity and consequences. This phenomenon, though less tangible, carries significant psychological, social, and political repercussions. There have been several recent examples in German-speaking countries – particularly in Germany and Austria – that illustrate the devastating effects of online political violence. One such case is that of Dr. Lisa-Maria Kellermayr, a general practitioner in Austria who, after being targeted by a sustained online harassment campaign, tragically took her own life in July 2022. The catalyst for this campaign was a social media post she had made nearly two years prior, in which she had criticized a protest held by conspiracy theorists in front of a hospital. Despite the correctness of her position, Kellermayr became the target of extreme online vitriol, which ultimately led to her suicide (Connolly, 2022). This case exemplifies how online harassment can escalate to a form of violence that is as real and damaging as physical harm, if not more so in certain contexts.

Similarly, in recent months, another high-profile case has underscored the virulent nature of online political violence. Alexandra Föderl-Schmid, a prominent journalist with 'Süddeutsche Zeitung,' was subjected to a vicious online campaign after being falsely accused of plagiarism. The accusations, which were entirely fabricated, were amplified through social media, leading to significant personal and

professional harm. The main instigator of this campaign was a former head of the online edition of 'Bild,' the biggest German yellow press newspaper, who had been dismissed from his position (Women Press Freedom, 2024). This example highlights how social media platforms can be weaponized to destroy individuals' reputations, influence public perception, and facilitate the spread of disinformation – all key elements of modern political violence.

These examples, though tragic, are not isolated incidents. They are part of a broader pattern of political violence being orchestrated online, often with the intent to intimidate, silence, or discredit those who challenge the prevailing political narrative. In many ways, social media has become a fertile ground for the organization and perpetuation of fascist ideologies and practices. The ability to anonymously harass, threaten, and isolate individuals has allowed these movements to function in a decentralized yet highly coordinated manner. The strategic use of disinformation, targeted harassment, and online surveillance are all part of a broader effort to undermine democratic values and intimidate political opponents.

To fully understand how contemporary fascism operates, it is crucial to recognize the role of social media as a space for political organization and activism. The digital sphere has become an essential terrain for the dissemination of fascist ideologies, the coordination of violent actions, and the creation of online communities that reinforce extremist views. Social media platforms, with their vast reach and ability to facilitate rapid communication, serve as an effective tool for radicalizing individuals, organizing protests or demonstrations, and inciting violence. The increasingly blurred lines between online and offline political engagement mean that the consequences of digital violence are no less significant than those of physical violence. Indeed, the digitalization of political violence represents a significant shift in how fascist movements operate, one that warrants serious attention and analysis.

In conclusion, while the absence of physical violence in contemporary fascism may be seen as a distinguishing feature of its modern form, it is important to recognize that political violence is not confined to the streets. The rise of online harassment, disinformation campaigns, and psychological warfare on social media constitutes a form of violence that is no less real and impactful than traditional forms of physical violence. As fascist movements continue to adapt to the digital age, understanding their organizational strategies and tactics on social media is critical to addressing the political violence they perpetrate. The intersection of social media and political violence is an emerging challenge that requires urgent academic and political attention if we are to adequately respond to the evolving threats posed by contemporary fascism.

The Erosion of Traditional Political Parties and the Rise of Far-Right Movements

Over the past three decades, a significant shift has occurred within the political landscape of the Western hemisphere, particularly with respect to the most established post-war political parties. Both social democratic and conservative/Christian democratic parties, which once provided a stabilizing force in the political and economic systems of many Western nations, have been steadily losing support. This decline is not a novel phenomenon; rather, it represents a long-term trend that has been ongoing for over thirty years. The historical role of these parties, especially in the aftermath of World War II, was to maintain a delicate balance between political and economic systems. On the one hand, the social democratic parties promoted a political framework based on equality – embodied in the welfare state and human rights – and on the other hand, the conservative and Christian democratic parties supported a capitalist economic system founded on inequality, market dynamics and traditional values. Despite the inherent contradictions between these systems, there existed a tacit understanding and mutual recognition between the two camps that allowed for a degree of stability. However, this balance was significantly disrupted with the rise of neoliberalism, which, over time, eroded the foundational principles of both political traditions.

As these traditional political forces lose their influence and popularity, they have been increasingly supplanted by new political movements, most notably those on the far right. The emergence of these movements, particularly in Europe and North America, represents a fundamental shift in the political terrain. The decline of the mainstream parties and the simultaneous rise of far-right factions is emblematic of a broader transformation in the political, social, and economic landscape, one marked by instability and uncertainty. This shift is not merely a matter of political competition but reflects deeper cultural and ideological divisions that have been exacerbated by the crises of the last few decades. It is within this context that we must examine the contemporary forms of fascism, particularly in their organizational and ideological manifestations.

The Root Causes of Contemporary Fascism: Culture Wars as a Tool of Political Agitation

The current form of fascism, as it exists in the Western world today, is still in a relatively loose organizational state. It has not yet coalesced into a unified or formalized structure akin to the fascist movements of the early 20th century. However, the key unifying feature of these contemporary movements is their use of 'culture wars' as a means of political agitation and mobilization. To understand the mechanics of these

movements, it is crucial to first define what is meant by 'culture wars' and how they function within the broader context of contemporary politics.

Culture wars refer to the emotionalized, often exaggerated or perceived, divisions within societies on socio-political or cultural issues. These divisions are typically framed as existential battles over the values and norms that define the social fabric. What makes culture wars particularly effective as a tool of political mobilization is that they do not rely on rational, fact-based debate. Instead, culture wars are built on anecdotes, sensationalized examples, and narratives that appeal to emotion rather than reason. These narratives often hinge on extreme, out-of-context examples of events or actions, such as an isolated incident at a university in the United States, which is then presented as emblematic of a much larger societal threat. The core of these narratives is the creation of a perceived 'truth' that, regardless of its veracity, becomes widely accepted among those who feel threatened or alienated by broader societal changes (Strobl, 2021).

The effectiveness of culture wars lies in their ability to tap into feelings of discomfort and insecurity within society. As people experience increasing anxiety due to economic instability, political upheaval, and social change, they are more vulnerable to the emotional appeals of those who promote divisive, culture-based narratives. The political movements that champion culture wars thrive by channeling this discomfort into targeted forms of political action. They exploit societal fears, often exaggerating or fabricating the consequences of changes in social policy, such as those related to gender rights, racial equality, and environmental protections. In doing so, they construct an 'us versus them' framework that encourages individuals to view these social changes as existential threats to their way of life.

The Psychological Mechanisms of Culture Wars

The primary mechanism through which culture wars operate is the construction of a perceived conspiracy. This involves framing social changes as part of a broader, often nebulous plot aimed at undermining the interests or rights of a specific group. For example, issues such as LGBTQ+ rights are not merely framed as civil rights concerns, but as the result of an intentional effort to disrupt traditional societal structures. The rhetoric surrounding such issues often suggests that these changes are driven by a coordinated effort to redistribute power in a way that disadvantages the 'rightfully' empowered groups. This perception of a conspiracy serves as a powerful motivator for political mobilization, as it positions the group in question as being under attack and thus justifies extreme measures in defense of their perceived interests.

Culture wars also exploit the broader sense of societal loss that many people experience in the contemporary moment. The promises of upward mobility, stable em-

ployment, and social advancement that characterized post-war Western societies have largely unraveled in recent decades. For many, the notion that hard work, education, and dedication will lead to a better future – a promise that once defined the 'American Dream' and similar narratives in Europe – has been revealed as increasingly untrue. As these societal promises fail to materialize, individuals are left with a profound sense of discomfort and disorientation. This discomfort is particularly acute in times of crisis, such as during economic downturns or social upheaval. In such contexts, the political right, particularly the far right, capitalizes on these feelings of unease by framing culture wars as a means of addressing these anxieties. Through divisive narratives about gender, race, and environmental issues, they offer scapegoats for the failures of the broader socio-economic system, directing public anger toward marginalized groups rather than addressing the root causes of societal malaise.

Key Issues in Culture Wars: Gender, Anti-Racism, and Climate Change

The issues most commonly associated with culture wars are those that challenge traditional notions of identity and social order. These include debates over gender rights, anti-racism, pluralism, and environmental sustainability. Each of these issues represents a potential battleground in the ongoing struggle for social and political dominance. For example, debates about LGBTQ+ rights are often framed not as a question of civil rights but as part of a broader agenda to undermine the traditional family structure. Similarly, anti-racist movements are depicted as part of a plot to marginalize 'native' populations in favor of immigrants and 'racial minorities'. Environmental activism, particularly in relation to climate change, is often portrayed as a form of elite-driven control that disregards the needs of working-class communities.

The success of these culture wars is contingent upon the widespread belief in a conspiracy against the status quo, where traditional social hierarchies are under threat. It is within this environment that far-right movements find fertile ground, as they promise to restore order and protect the interests of those who feel disenfranchised by these societal changes. Ultimately, culture wars offer a potent mechanism for fascist movements to gain traction, by framing these issues as existential threats that require urgent and often extreme political responses.

Conclusion

The contemporary form of fascism, though not yet fully organized into a cohesive movement, is intricately tied to the dynamics of culture wars. These ideological bat-

tles, which center on perceived threats to social and cultural norms, serve as a primary tool for political mobilization among far-right groups. By exploiting societal discomfort and framing issues like gender, race, and climate change as existential crises, these movements are able to galvanize support and advance their political agendas. To understand the trajectory of contemporary fascism, it is essential to grasp the role of culture wars in shaping political discourse and organizing movements. The success of culture wars depends not on rational debate, but on emotional manipulation and the construction of perceived threats, which in turn drive political engagement and, ultimately, political violence.

The Dynamics and Transnationalization of Culture Wars: A Contemporary Examination

Culture wars, as a concept, are not a recent development. Rather, they have a long historical trajectory, originating in earlier conflicts over cultural and ideological control. The term itself has roots in the German word "Kulturkampf" ('culture struggle'), which first emerged in the context of the young German Empire during the 1870s. The 'Kulturkampf' described a political struggle between the predominantly Protestant Prussian conservatives, led by Chancellor Otto von Bismarck, and the Catholic Church, as represented by the Zentrum party. In this struggle, the education system played a central role, as it did in later cultural conflicts. Today, education continues to be a pivotal battleground in the so-called culture wars, reflecting the enduring importance of cultural institutions in shaping societal values and political power dynamics.

In contemporary discourse, the far right has adopted a strategic use of Antonio Gramsci's concept of 'hegemony' to further their cultural agenda (Buckel & Fischer-Lescano, 2007). In the post-Cold War period, particularly after the 1990s, a narrative emerged that framed capitalism as the victorious economic system, effectively declaring the "end of history" (Fukuyama, 1992) with the defeat of 'socialism'. This ideological shift led to the widespread assertion that, with the economic questions settled, the primary political struggle would now revolve around cultural issues – questions of rights, identity, and societal values. However, this simplistic framing obscured the ongoing economic tensions that continue to shape society. Economic discomfort, rather than being addressed directly, was reframed and displaced into the cultural sphere. As a result, the cultural conflicts that now dominate political discourse are inextricably linked to broader economic forces, even if these connections are often rendered invisible in mainstream discussions.

The Mechanics of Culture Wars

Culture wars today manifest in various forms, ranging from debates over religious symbols and public holidays to more divisive issues surrounding identity, gender, and immigration. A prominent example of a contemporary culture war can be observed in the annual debates surrounding Christmas in the United States and Europe. In the USA, the conflict between those who say, "Merry Christmas" and those who opt for the more inclusive "Happy Holidays" serves as a symbol of the larger cultural battle between secularism and religiosity. Similarly, in Austria and surrounding Central European countries, debates over the celebration of Saint Nicholas' Day in kindergartens become charged with political significance, often framed as an issue of Muslim children allegedly rejecting the gifts of Saint Nicholas (News.at, 2024). This narrative, despite being largely unfounded, capitalizes on the tensions around immigration and the perception of Islam as a cultural threat. In reality, children of all faiths, including Muslim children, typically enjoy the cultural traditions associated with Saint Nicholas. However, the politics of culture wars thrive on such symbolic battles, magnifying minor cultural practices into existential conflicts.

This recurring focus on holidays and religious symbols illustrates how culture wars function as a form of symbolic politics, where trivial cultural differences are weaponized for political gain. Culture wars exploit perceived threats to national or cultural identity, often overstating or fabricating conflicts in order to rally supporters and discredit perceived adversaries. As such, the stakes in these wars are rarely about the specific issue at hand but are more concerned with the broader political and ideological struggle for dominance in society.

Transnationalization of Culture Wars: Social Media as a Facilitator

What is new about contemporary culture wars is their transnational dimension. Historically, culture wars were largely confined to national boundaries, with each country developing its own specific conflicts based on local cultural, religious, and political contexts. However, the rise of social media has eroded these boundaries, creating a transnational space where culture war issues can rapidly cross borders. Social media platforms, by providing a shared space for discourse, allow political movements, particularly those on the far right, to learn from and reinforce each other's tactics and rhetoric.

A prime example of this transnationalization can be seen in the phenomenon of 'drag queen story hours,' a cultural practice that originated in the United States but quickly gained attention in other countries. In the USA, the practice was initially promoted as a means of encouraging inclusivity and literacy, where drag queens would read stories to children in public libraries. However, as the contro-

versy surrounding this practice grew, it became a focal point for far-right activists, who framed it as a sign of moral decay and the imposition of a liberal agenda on children. The debate over 'drag queen story hours' quickly spread to Europe and beyond, where similar arguments were deployed, and in some cases, such events were banned or protested (ORF Wien, 2023). This example demonstrates how culture wars are not bound by national borders but instead circulate globally, with each conflict feeding into the next and amplifying the divisive rhetoric of cultural and moral conflict.

The Viral Nature of Culture Wars: A Laboratory for Far-Right Agitation

The transnational character of culture wars makes them particularly effective as a tool for political mobilization. Far-right groups have adopted a highly pragmatic approach to culture wars, often treating them as a kind of experimental laboratory for political agitation. Just as a performer might toss multiple balls into the air and see which ones the audience catches, the far right throws various cultural issues into the public sphere, testing which ones resonate most strongly with the public. Topics that provoke the greatest emotional responses – whether through outrage, fear, or moral panic – become the next battleground in the culture war.

In this sense, culture wars operate as a form of political public relations (PR), where the primary goal is not to address substantive issues but to generate a sense of crisis, discomfort, and division. The far right, through the manipulation of social media, can amplify these issues, turning them into viral topics that dominate public discourse. The use of sensationalized language, exaggerated claims, and emotional appeals ensures that these issues remain in the public eye, fueling anger and resentment toward perceived enemies. In this way, the culture war becomes a self-perpetuating cycle, where each new issue feeds into the next, creating a continuous loop of cultural and ideological conflict.

Conclusion

The culture wars, far from being a new phenomenon, represent a long-standing and evolving aspect of political struggle. Emerging from the historical context of the 'Kulturkampf' in the 19th century, contemporary culture wars are characterized by their use of symbolic politics, the displacement of economic anxieties into cultural conflicts, and the transnationalization of divisive issues through social media. As these wars evolve, they become increasingly sophisticated in their tactics, with the far right treating culture wars as a laboratory for political agitation. By manipulating public sentiment through emotional appeals and sensational narratives,

the far right seeks to create a sense of crisis and mobilize support for their agenda. The global circulation of culture war topics further amplifies this effect, creating a transnational network of cultural conflict that transcends national borders. To understand the contemporary rise of far-right movements, it is essential to recognize the central role that culture wars play in shaping political discourse and mobilizing political action in the digital age.

The Business Model of Culture War Exploitation

A crucial shift in the dynamics of modern culture wars is the evolution of these issues from ideological crusades to profit-driven business models. What was once viewed as the province of ideologically driven right-wing movements has increasingly become a commercially viable strategy. In the digital age, culture wars are no longer solely the purview of political extremists but have been co-opted by influencers, media outlets, and political operatives who see financial and political gain in stoking conflict.

Social media, in particular, has played a pivotal role in transforming culture wars into a form of business. Rather than representing pure journalistic inquiry or genuine ideological struggle, many outlets now function as platforms for promoting outrage and division. Influencers and media figures – many of whom possess little journalistic training – profit from the attention that culture war topics generate. These outlets often operate under the guise of reporting, but in reality, they are more akin to political campaign machines that seek to capitalize on public outrage. While it would be an exaggeration to label these efforts as journalism, their effectiveness in shaping public opinion and influencing electoral cycles cannot be overstated. The cycle of outrage is self-sustaining: a topic is raised, amplified by influencers and media outlets, which generates widespread emotional reaction, drawing in both the public and political actors who use it to further their own interests.

The Escalation of Emotions and the Formation of a Political Mob

One of the most concerning aspects of contemporary culture wars is their ability to generate intense, negative emotions – primarily fear, anger, and resentment – which can mobilize individuals into organized, sometimes violent, action. As these negative emotions circulate on social media, they have a profound effect on the wider social fabric. The more emotional the discourse, the more likely it is that individuals will organize around it, leading to the formation of online mobs. These mobs, while not fully organized or directed by any singular entity, often act as a collective force that is driven by outrage rather than rationality.

The transition from an emotional reaction to organized mobilization can escalate further, particularly when the emotional energy generated by culture war topics is harnessed by political figures or media influencers who seek to capitalize on it. As the mob becomes more organized, it can be steered toward specific targets, often leading to acts of political violence or the persecution of marginalized groups. The cycle of outrage, mobilization, and radicalization ultimately feeds into the escalation of social and political conflicts. The dynamics at play in these culture wars resemble a spiral of emotional intensification, in which individuals are continually drawn into deeper levels of anger and alienation, making them more susceptible to extreme political ideologies and more likely to engage in radical forms of activism.

The Feedback Loop: From Outrage to Political Influence

The interplay between online outrage and political influence forms a self-reinforcing cycle that sustains the culture war machine. Once a topic gains traction on social media, it often draws the attention of influencers and media outlets, who see an opportunity to stoke further outrage and profit from it. As the topic circulates, it generates increasing levels of emotional reaction, prompting political actors to intervene and use the issue as a means of consolidating electoral support. This is particularly evident in the way politicians adopt culture war issues into their campaigns, often warning of greater societal consequences if their ideological opponents are allowed to gain power.

The role of influencers and media outlets in this cycle is critical. They are not mere bystanders or passive commentators; they are active participants in the creation and perpetuation of outrage. By continually introducing new issues or amplifying existing ones, these figures ensure that the cycle of division remains intact. The fear of losing public attention or influence drives them to constantly escalate the stakes of the culture wars. In this way, culture war media outlets resemble political campaign machines, consistently stoking conflict to maintain their relevance and financial viability.

As this cycle progresses, the line between media outlets, political actors, and the public becomes increasingly blurred. Politicians, who may initially adopt culture war rhetoric for strategic electoral purposes, often find themselves caught up in the very dynamics they helped create. They become part of the cycle, using increasingly radical rhetoric to maintain their appeal to the base, while also fueling the divisive discourse that sustains their political careers.

Conclusion

Culture wars represent a complex intersection of emotional mobilization, political exploitation, and media manipulation. While these conflicts may begin with genuine cultural concerns, they are increasingly used as tools for political gain and financial profit. The ability of culture wars to unify disparate groups and generate significant emotional responses makes them powerful forces in modern political and social life. However, the very nature of these wars – their reliance on outrage, their potential to mobilize online mobs, and their capacity to escalate into real-world violence – poses serious risks for democratic societies. As such, understanding the dynamics of culture wars is critical for comprehending the rise of far-right movements and the growing polarization in contemporary political landscapes. The challenge, therefore, lies in addressing the underlying causes of cultural division while mitigating the negative emotional and political consequences of these increasingly powerful cultural conflicts.

Conclusion: The Future of Culture Wars

The rise of culture wars is not a passing phenomenon but rather a structural feature of modern political conflict. The intertwining of economic hardship, cultural change, and political instability creates fertile ground for the spread of extreme ideologies, particularly those rooted in xenophobia, nationalism, and reactionary cultural politics. In order to address the tensions generated by these conflicts, we must develop a nuanced vocabulary that acknowledges the complex interrelations between economic, political, and cultural factors. Additionally, it is essential to confront the emotional toll of these conflicts and recognize the impact they have on individuals and societies. Ultimately, the challenge lies in creating a new political and cultural framework that can provide a coherent, inclusive response to the issues driving contemporary culture wars.

Reframing Political Engagement: Strategies for Countering the Rise of Culture Wars

One of the most straightforward, yet challenging strategies for combating the current culture wars is to not engage in them. This approach is particularly difficult, as it requires resisting the urge to react emotionally to the provocative actions and rhetoric of those who seek to escalate societal divisions. Culture warriors are adept at understanding the dynamics of outrage, deliberately targeting groups or individuals in ways that provoke strong emotional responses. These reactions are, in fact,

part of the strategy. Culture warriors thrive on the indignation that their tactics generate, recognizing that the more we engage with these issues, the more we inadvertently strengthen their position. Each instance of emotional reaction sets the stage for the next wave of outrage, creating an ongoing cycle that weakens democratic opposition.

This tactical calculation by right-wing and far-right groups is central to the broader strategy of pushing public opinion toward the extremes. By consistently drawing attention to divisive cultural issues, they manipulate democratic discourse and subtly shift the political center toward more radical positions. To counter this, it is essential to avoid treating these issues as the primary focus of political discourse. Instead, we must deliberately pivot to discussions that transcend the immediate provocations of the far right. When culture warriors make no meaningful contributions to critical societal debates, it becomes an opportunity to engage in topics they ignore. If their platform is silent on an issue, it can serve as a moment to redirect the conversation toward policies or values that foster solidarity and inclusivity, thus undermining the narrow, exclusionary agendas of the far right.

A crucial component of this strategy involves resisting the temptation to make the far right the focal point of media narratives. Mainstream media, particularly traditional outlets, often perpetuate the very dynamics of polarization that culture warriors aim to exploit. By ceasing to position the far right as the central point of discourse, we can begin to reclaim the narrative and encourage a more substantive, nuanced discussion of societal challenges.

The Interrelation of Material Conditions, Social Policy, and Cultural Identity

The far right often exploits feelings of discomfort and frustration by providing simple, scapegoat-driven explanations for broader societal problems. They link this discontent to cultural and identity-based issues – such as the perceived erosion of traditional gender roles or the growing influence of 'minority groups' – presenting these as the root causes of societal instability. In doing so, they divert attention from the more complex and systemic economic issues that underpin these frustrations.

In reality, the issues at the heart of culture wars – questions of social policy, civil rights, and material conditions – are deeply interconnected. Economic inequality, for instance, cannot be fully understood without considering the cultural narratives that shape public discourse about wealth and class. Likewise, struggles for civil rights and gender equality intersect with material conditions such as access to education, healthcare, and employment. To focus on one sphere alone – be it economic, cultural, or political – without acknowledging the others is a mistake that oversimplifies the complexity of contemporary social conflict.

It is therefore essential to recognize the interrelatedness of these issues when addressing the root causes of culture wars. Politicians and social actors must acknowledge the full scope of the problems at hand and avoid reducing them to simplistic ideological struggles. Failing to do so only exacerbates the alienation felt by large segments of society and opens the door for more extreme movements to gain influence.

The Need for a New Vocabulary and Acknowledging Societal Change

In order to effectively address the forces driving contemporary culture wars, a new vocabulary must emerge – one that reflects the shifting realities of our societies. Many of the traditional political and social categories that defined previous generations no longer capture the complexities of contemporary life. For example, the economic dislocations caused by globalization and technological change have created new forms of material insecurity, while ongoing struggles for civil rights, gender equality, and minority protections have fundamentally altered societal dynamics. The traditional narratives of the 1970s and 1980s no longer suffice to address these issues comprehensively.

Politicians, policymakers, and public intellectuals must avoid the trap of dismissing these shifts or telling citizens that nothing has changed. A prime example of this occurred during the COVID-19-pandemic, when politicians downplayed the effects of inflation and supply chain disruptions, framing these as temporary or exaggerated problems. Such dismissals erode public trust, especially when people can feel that something is wrong, even if they cannot articulate it precisely. When the discomfort caused by economic shifts and cultural changes is ignored or minimized, it leads to a deep sense of alienation, further fueling the rise of far-right movements that offer easy explanations and solutions for complex social problems.

As societal changes unfold, especially regarding gender equality and the rights of marginalized groups, the language we use to describe these transformations must be inclusive and reflective of the complexities at play. For example, the ongoing struggles for women's rights – though still essential – have shifted in important ways. Women, who constitute a demographic majority in many societies, have fought for legal equality, but the discourse around women's rights needs to acknowledge the ways in which societal norms around gender are evolving. The question of masculinity, in particular, has become a crucial issue: the old models of male identity – based on dominance, power, and traditional gender roles – are increasingly questioned, but which positive alternatives exists is often unclear.

The contemporary discourse around masculinity is in a state of flux. We no longer need or desire a society where men are the sole providers or where toxic masculinity dominates. Yet, there remains a critical question: What form of mas-

culinity is desirable? This question is rarely addressed directly, but it is essential to the broader discussion of gender relations in contemporary societies.

Addressing the Emotional Toll of Cultural and Political Conflict

The emotional toll of contemporary culture wars cannot be underestimated. The flood of crises – economic, political, and cultural – has overwhelmed many individuals and communities. This constant state of flux, coupled with an underlying sense of instability, drains both individual and collective energy. The sense that 'things are not right' is pervasive, but the lack of clear solutions and the overwhelming scale of the challenges we face creates a sense of helplessness. This feeling of being overwhelmed must be recognized and addressed in any effort to resolve the current political and cultural impasse.

One potential way to cope with the emotional and political exhaustion wrought by culture wars is through humor. As seen in recent elections, particularly in the United States, adopting a posture of mockery and light-heartedness toward the exaggerated claims of culture warriors can serve as a powerful tool for disarming their rhetoric. Humor can provide a counter-narrative to the polarization and divisiveness that defines the culture wars, offering an alternative, more rational perspective on the issues at hand. By framing the culture war topics as absurd or illogical, we can discredit their underlying premises and regain the public's attention for more substantive discussions.

Conclusion: The Far Right and the Rise of Culture Wars as a Unifying Force

In conclusion, the far right is experiencing a significant diversification in terms of its ideological stances, organizational structures, and modes of operation. This diversification manifests itself through varying degrees of transnational coordination and disorganization, with some factions maintaining a more coherent structure while others exhibit a looser, less centralized organization. While comparisons to the Socialist International have been made, these are not entirely appropriate. The far right does not operate in the same manner as past leftwing internationalist movements, as its networks are often fragmented, opportunistic, and fluid.

A key feature of the current far right is its exploitation of widespread societal discomfort – both psychological and material. This discomfort is rooted in tangible issues such as economic insecurity, racial and gender inequality, and cultural alienation. However, the discomfort itself is often instrumentalized and channeled into narratives of grievance and victimhood that are deeply intertwined with real, pervasive forms of racism, antisemitism, misogyny, and other forms of discrimination.

These sentiments serve as foundational elements that fuel the ongoing culture wars, which in turn become a unifying force for various factions of the far right.

What we are witnessing is the emergence of culture wars as a central organizing principle for the far right. These wars are not merely incidental or superficial; they represent a deeper ideological and political shift towards what, in its more extreme manifestations, amounts to a fascist project. This project is unified not only by a shared set of reactionary values but by the strategic use of cultural issues as a tool for galvanizing support and legitimizing increasingly authoritarian and exclusionary policies.

While it would be preferable to conclude on a more optimistic note, the reality of the current political landscape demands a sober assessment. The developments we are witnessing – ranging from the increasing prominence of far-right ideologies in mainstream politics and policies to the instrumentalization of culture wars as a means of social division – represent serious threats to democratic institutions and social cohesion. These phenomena may still be in their nascent stages, but the trajectory suggests a potential escalation into a more dangerous and far-reaching political movement. The extremism we see today, in its various forms, is not merely an anomaly or transient event; it has the potential to evolve into a more formidable and destructive force in the future.

In light of these observations, it is necessary to label this phenomenon for what it is: a fascist project in formation. Whether it is already a fully realized danger or a nascent threat, the trajectory of these movements indicates that their impact on the future political landscape could be profoundly destabilizing. As such, it is imperative that we approach the issue with the seriousness and urgency it demands, acknowledging that the forces currently at play pose significant risks to democratic values and social stability.

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Empathy as a Tool to Fight Racism's Necropolitcs and Facism's Ignorance of Human Rights

Susan Arndt

Racism is 'white supremacy.' *White* people have built structures of domination that constitute racism to ensure that *white* people stay in power. *White* people keep *white* spaces *white*. Racism therefore endows *white* people with privileges – with privileged access to economic resources, for example. Racism dominates and determines economic conditions and legal foundations for inequality. Racism also regulates privileged access to belonging and normality (Arndt, 2021, based on research and argumentations pillared on works of Albert Memmi, Aimé Césaire, Obioma Nnaemeka, Audre Lorde, Sarah Ahmed and African feminist interventions in general).

The fact that *white* people use racism to grant themselves privileges comes at the expense of those who are excluded as 'others.' As a consequence, exclusion, oppression and discrimination against People of Color is generated by racism. But racism does not only create this segregation. An essential core of racism is also to serve *white* people with the narrative that the privileges they enjoy at the expense of those othered are 'right' and 'just,' even in a moral sense. This includes the violence necessary to maintain racism's segregation. In doing so, racism scales being human, in order to declare that the 'white race' is the only 'one' that is 'fully human.' Accordingly, all strands of racism hold that People of Color lack fully fledged humanity. Accordingly, thus the toxic logics of racism, *white* people can treat People of Color differently than white people. Violating one's very own moral claims and legal structures is not to be considered as such, by simply claiming that those who are not 'fully human' are not entitled to be treated in a human way. Thus framed, *white* people's lack of humanity and human decency towards People of Color is not just disguised as 'legitimate,' but as even 'necessary' (Arndt, 2021).

Racist ideologies holds that it is "the white man's burden", as Rudyard Kipling (1899) puts it, to 'missionize' and 'civilize' People of Color, while knowing that, no matter how hard they are trying, People of Color will never be up to being even to the 'white race's' fully fledged superior humanity. This ideologeme was transferred into laws. That laws constitute morality and notions of rightfulness and norm/ality maybe one important factor as to why *white* people have felt right about the terror white supremacy was and is enforcing onto the globe. Laws legitimated the enslave-

ment of at least 18 millions of Africans for over four centuries between the early 16th and mid 18th century (Arndt, 2021). And while the law allowed to punish any person fighting for their lives with death, the throwing overboard of African people was only an illegal case if the insurance company would have been thus betrayed. While pretending to be the only ones capable of 'reason' and 'progress' as well as 'freedom' and 'democracy,' Europe or North America legislated that any endeavor of a colonized or enslaved person or collective to live in a free and self-determined way was to be punished with death penalty – by torture, lashes and otherwise. This was translated into laws with the effect that the majority of *white* people all over Europe or North America as well as in *white* settler regimes considered themselves as 'rightful owners' of a superior morality. Thus spiced, in late 19th century, racism radicalized into holding that the 'white race' had to fight other races so as to be able to 'protect' the alleged superiority of the 'white race.' Eventually, eugenics turned into a legally ordered euthanasia and colonial genocides escalated into the Shoa or Porajmos. When National Socialism was defeated, *white* supremacist segregation did not find an end. France and the United Kingdom kept fighting decolonial resistance, the Jim Crow Era continued to terrorize People of Color and the Apartheid regime was yet to radicalize. Within Europe, anti-Black racism, anticiganism or orientalist racism kept privileging *white* people, thus causing discrimination against People of Color both structurally and discursively, in terms of access to economic resources, education, access to legal rights as well as narrations about norm/ality and belonging (Arndt, 2021).

Years and decades after World War II, step by step, the resistance against racism eventually won a legal turn. The USA, Canada and Europe eventually entrusted themselves into laws that eventually outlawed racism. And while, to date, this has not resulted into a severe undoing of structural racism in terms of economy, law or representation, these very fragile anti-racist interventions are attacked by the return of fascism ever since the early 2000s. Fascist parties all over Europe and the USA have declared themselves as sword and shield of *white* supremacy, while engaging in a war of terror against People of Color both in Europe and North America as well as all across the globe. Yet they are but the tip of the iceberg. Even beyond the direct voters of fascist or far-right parties, the *white* mainstream society has returned to overtly 'shit-talking' about People of Color and countries in the Global South. A recent example is the German Chancelor Friedrich Merz labelling of "Iran" as "Drecksland", "country of dirt" (Völkner, 2025).

Part and parcel of this return to racism is what Achille Mbembe (2019) calls "necropolitics." Necropolitics describes how national and supranational governing bodies cherish the lives of human beings differently, while racism segregates between those whose lives are to be protected and mourned versus those that are less eligible to both. The Black-lives-matter-movement is about this. That Black lives do not matter equally. So, anyone who tries to transfer this slogan into something

like "All Lives Matter" would ignore the fact that *white* supremacy has a history of claiming and doing the exact opposite. In times of the maafa and colonialism, for example, murder and rape were considered to be crimes. At the same time, though, a *white* person murdering or raping a Black person would not have been sentenced. Because the law was not meant to protect Black bodies. These patterns have been very powerful, to present. One example is racial profiling and police brutality towards Black people. But white mainstream narratives keep the underlying discourse alive, too. To give an example: The first season of the TV-series "The Walking Dead" (Darabont et al., 2010), in episode 6, closes with the protagonists failed attempt to find shelter in the Pentagon. Eventually, the only scientist still alive offers all of them a sudden dead. All but two of the women characters decide against it. One of the two characters is pleaded by the others to not give up that easily. Her leaving the Pentagon a second before the lethal explosion is to be read as the season's happy end. This happens while not speaking about the other woman character at all. She does not matter. Throughout the season, she has hardly spoken a word and has not been shown in being of any merit to the group. Sort of motivated by this, her death is not mentioned, and the happy end somewhat suggests that it does not matter, whether she is alive or dead. This woman character named Jacqui is Black, while the one who is confronted with arguments to not give up and thus talked into surviving is the *white* woman Andrea. The person who eventually convinces her to not give up is a *white* man – and at no point in the entire scene does he, Dale Horvath (and yes, he has, unlike the women characters, a surname), talk to or glance at Jacqui (as if he is making the point, "Who, the fuck is Jacqui?").

This is a regular pattern. Blockbusters that narrate about global catastrophes are often way too ready to sacrifice the entire African continent to the meteorite, monster wave or the like in the film's early sequences. And when the happy ending is celebrated with highly emotive music, this catastrophe seemed to have been forgotten as not mattering at all.

Necropolitics is but a tool of racism's ideologeme that the privileged white crowd is 'fully human' while People of Color are not, thus making the latter less eligible to survival and the mourning of death. This same idea is also at work when the general slogan "Das Boot is voll" (The boat is full) is used as a metaphor to not feeling responsible to give asylum to refugeed people. This, however, was not meant to be a worry about these people being under the threat to drown. The danger these people are in was abused into painting migration as a threat to Germany, while claiming that welcoming people fleeing from crisis would put Germany into a crisis instead. This attitude was echoed when, at demonstrations of the far-right movement PEGIDA (PEGIDA is an German acronym for 'Patriotic Europeans against the Islamization of the 'Abendland,' with the latter being an orientalist term for Europe), in the early 2020s in Germany, people shouted "Absaufen! Absaufen!," literally desiring that the people in such boats should drown.

Obviously, racism has been a mode of defaulted humanity and fascism is about the violation of humanity, human rights and being human, too. Throughout all centuries, racism worked as a sword that kills People of Color, while shielding the *white* murderers and their *white* contemporaries from feeling bad about it, holds an important message: Fascism cannot be fought with facts alone. Fascist politics as part of far-right politics rely on racist populism that offer *white* people simplistic solutions for complex problems that are also very much about feeling good about all atrocities that are part and parcel of populist fake solutions of ongoing problems.

To tell German society that the Industrial Revolution of the Global North was built by the resources and labor stolen by colonialism and that the respective century-long economic and demographic draining is responsible for many of the challenges African societies face today will hardly make any difference to most *white* Europeans. They have inhaled racist narrations about their own superiority so deeply, that they truly believe that it was this very superiority that explains why their countries are more rich and secure than others. And that it is the other people's inferiority that is responsible for the crises people suffer under. Rather than taking responsibility for the colonial violation of the world, *white* mainstream society is deeply upset about suggestions that colonialism needs to be remembered and met with reparations, Correspondingly, *white* mainstream societies feel totally disconnected from people being forced into fleeing their homes. They imagine it to be a crisis that some few percent of the people refugeed outside of Europe seek asylum in their very own country, while not being ready to accept that the real crises are happening where people are refugeed – let alone that the violence of European globalization endeavors have had their colonial share in it. Most of the *white* mainstream narratives hold that it is the fault of these people and their countries and governments alone that they are economically disadvantaged or in danger.

So, one thing is to share facts about this history and respective responsibilities. The other one is to avoid the shying away from looking at it. And this is where empathy comes in.

Just as much as racism has been a tool to kill empathy for enslaved Africans or Jews and Romano people killed at Auschwitz, empathy might be a core to undoing racism. To turn *white* people's ignorance about People of Color's being killed, be it in Gaza or Sudan, for example, into making them care is core. Most people know how to care for the people they know, be it family or neighbors, in given scaling, though. Many people also know how to care about people they do not know. Many Germans, for example, declare an ongoing solidarity with the Israelian civilians who have been taken hostage by the Hamas in October 2024. Also, when a missing persons name is all over the news, people do care about their fate and what happens to them. This is the material that is a grain of hope when fighting against racism as killer of empathy and for a return of empathy beyond racism. To make people care about other people, irrespective of whether they know them (personally), is core to

this. And this empathy does not work without or disconnected from knowing. This empathy is about knowledge's affective side. Just as much as racism invests into dehumanizing human beings, it is core to make people see all human beings in their given subjectivity and individual mode of being human. The claim that some human beings are not 'fully human' has been segregating empathy. If we look at contemporary fascism, we can see that its populism is about empathy – namely, empathy for the supporters of fascist parties. They would be the hurt ones, the dispossessed ones, and yet the ones that deserve empathy. Yet if populism wants to raise empathy for those who vote for fascists, it segregates empathy by not caring at all about those who are endangered by fascism. Eventually, any person who supports fascism does this based on knowing that fascism favors racism and its being good for *white* people, while being lethal to People of Color. Thus, why not turning these dynamics into denying any understanding for those who gaslight or support racism, into a willingness to understand racism's power to make *white* people feel good about real evil things. Not the supporters of racism are in need of understanding and empathy, but those who are attacked by them.

This focus on ending segregated empathy is not about suggesting that facts do not matter. It suggests that they need to be felt, too. To invest into the return of non-segregated empathy is about fighting necropolitics and its very base of scaling being human. Necropolitics is about caring for human lives differently and the return to care about all human lives equally is a challenge that will eventually enable empathy as a tool for intersectional solidarity.

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Part II: Mapping and Analysis

How did we get here? Perspectives on the normalization of the far right in France

Safia Dahani

In June 2024, early legislative elections were organized in France, following European elections in which the Macronist political offer was defeated by the far right, mainly represented by the *Rassemblement National* (RN) former *Front National* (FN). The FN-RN won this "second order" (Reif et al., 1997) election, as it had the two previous ones in 2014 and in 2019. The ensuing legislative elections mobilized in an unprecedented way: the campaign had to be fought within a tight deadline (just under three weeks), and a 'republican front' was reactivated, led mainly by a union of the political-left and the ecologists, in order to prevent the far right from coming to power, as the polls predicted it would win a majority of seats in the National Assembly. In this context, the French parliamentary right was also fracturing, and its president, Eric Ciotti, joined the FN-RN, along with some of his supporters, in an electoral alliance. Although the results of the first round contradicted the pollsters' projections, the FN-RN and its new ally, the *Union des Droites pour la République* (UDR), won an unprecedented number of votes: more than ten million ballots were cast in favor of their candidates. They then formed two groups in the National Assembly: 123 deputies under the RN label, and 16 in support from the benches of the radicalized right under the UDR label.

Several explanations are given in the literature to explain the legitimization of the far-right political offer throughout the French Fifth Republic. The main research, particularly at the international level, proposes as a model of explanation the evolution of the far right into a populist right (Mudde, 2004) or radical populist right (Aktas, 2024; Mayer, 2018; Ivaldi et al., 2017). In this research, the far right can no longer really be qualified as such: it necessarily underwent a transformation by 'converting to democracy,' by participating in electoral rituals (elections). Its ideology also evolved on several topics (Bobba & Seddone, 2022; Ostermann & Stahl, 2022), mobilizing the rhetoric of the 'good people' and the 'bad elites' (Mansbridge & Macedo, 2019). In the French case, the role played by Marine Le Pen is supposed to be decisive: she is said to have 'normalized' the political offer of the FN and then the RN especially in the media (Lamour, 2024), relying on her gender (Geva, 2020; Leconte, 2020)

rallying the votes of women and the working classes. In other words, she enabled her party to carry out a kind of 'revolution' that helped to strengthen its electoral base.

This chapter invites to take a step back from this explanatory register. On the one hand, it seems to me that the argument for the necessary 'normalization' of the far-right party through participation in elections has already been discussed and set aside, particularly by historians. Critical works on the notion of populism have also long attested to the weight of this "total-screen concept" (Collovald, 2024) which aims to denounce the 'a priori' popular underpinnings of the far right rather than to account for its ability to capture an electoral conglomerate (Gaxie, 2016), composed of different fractions of social classes from upper to lower, a conglomerate that is not really reflected in the sociology of the party's elites (Dahani, 2023; Delaine, 2023; Birenbaum, 1992), which is largely dominated by well-educated upper classes, following Michel's law (2015 [1925]). On the other hand, recent literature has shown how the idea of a Marinist 'revolution' can represent a kind of decoy, set up by the party itself as part of its strategy of '*dédiabolisation*' (Dézé, 2015). This is a strategy that only engages the audiences who believe in it. Finally, electoral sociology, particularly in the context of localized monographies (Faury, 2024; Challier, 2019) or the reasoned use of surveys, has shown how the political offer reasons in very contrasting ways according to the local areas and social groups studied, contravening the idea of a 'Frontist electoral rise' that would be linear and stable over time (Lehingue, 2003).

Thus, to explain 'how we got there,' I propose instead to reflect in a cross-cutting manner on different processes, which attest that the party itself is not the only nor the main agent of its 'normalization': its organization is relatively inert and resistant to change (1.) as the sociology of its leaders (2.). I therefore invite to look at other areas, especially the transformations of the mediatization of the FN-RN (2.) that has contributed to a kind of '*droitisation*' (Kaciaf & Klaus, 2024) of the public debate, surely allowing the far right to appear more 'normal' or legitimate than it was before. In doing so, we can study this party in its ecosystem (political field), in its repertoires of action (particularly in the media) while mobilizing the hypothesis of continuity (Dobry, 2001): the far right is adapting to new political configurations, like other political organizations in France and beyond. Thus, this does not necessarily mean that it is no longer permissible to think of it as such, the mainstreaming (Mondon, 2024) of the French far right relies mainly on external processes that have little to do with the way they do politics internally.

Methodology

This chapter draws on data from my study of the Front National as part of my Ph.D. dissertation in political science (Dahani, 2022). This research, which used a combination of methods in 'difficult' fieldwork (Boumaza & Campana, 2007), focused on the party's elites. I used an internalist and emic (Avanza, 2018) approach to the political movement, in order to give an account of the everyday life of the party from the inside. From 2014 to 2018, I thus conducted an ethnography of the mobilization of the party and its leadership groups. Since 2014, I have also conducted semi-structured interviews with current and former leaders of the organization. In addition, I have produced an original prosopography of the party's elites since 1972, constructed from archival and interview data. Finally, I conducted a study of media coverage of FN spokespersons, using the archives of the *Institut national de l'audiovisuel* (INA) and the organization's digital archives.

1. All powerful presidents

The first way to account for the multiplicity of processes that have contributed to the current political configuration is to consider the institutionalization (Panbianco 1988; Randall & Svasand, 2002) of the organization. In other words, it is worth asking in what partisan configuration the election of Marine Le Pen as its leader took place during the Tours congress in January 2011. In the literature, this so-called 'populist' party then underwent a kind of metamorphosis that contributed to its repositioning in the partisan competition: it then mobilized against the established parties (both right and left) and proposed to represent a 'third way.' But beyond the redefinition of the strategy of presentation in electoral spaces, it remains difficult to attest to the *aggiornamento* of the organization as such. In other words, this partisan enterprise, led by Jean-Marie Le Pen from 1974 to 2011, did not undergo any particular transformations during Marine Le Pen's presidency (2011–2022). Both the daughter and the father dominated a centralized party in which they represented the main authorities that could delegate the political capital of the organization. The party authorities and the internal administrative and political rules (investitures) were therefore already stabilized and the arrival of Marine Le Pen represented a first continuity.

This organization, which I study as relatively inert (Dahani, 2022), is first and foremost characterized by a particularly stable mode of internal way of functioning throughout its history. On the side of the governing bodies, for example, the functioning between the Executive Bureau, the Political Bureau, the Central Committee, the National Nominating Commission and the Conflicts Commission has been rel-

atively constant from one president to the next. Within the FN-RN, these spaces are supposed to represent places of power (Dézé, 2016) where the leaders meet and allegedly work together. The elements of stability can be found on several levels.

First, in terms of the composition of these governing bodies: unlike other parties that have embraced deliberative, participatory, or platform-based processes (Scarrow, 2014; Gerbaudo, 2022), the FN-RN remains essentially focused on its president when it comes to deciding which leader can sit in which group. Moreover, the Executive Bureau (about ten members, including the vice presidents and treasurers), the Political Bureau (BP, up to 40 members, supposedly representing the party's board of directors), the National Nominating Committee (NCC, supposedly selecting candidates for local and national elections), and the Conflicts Committee (supposedly deliberating on violations of internal regulations by activists and leaders) are personally composed first by Jean-Marie and then Marine Le Pen, who also personally appoint(ed) the organization's vice presidents, treasurers, and general secretaries among other positions. Alongside this prerogative of personal appointment, there is a division of political labor that has remained relatively stable throughout the party's history: interviews and ethnographic data attest to the fact that top-level decisions remain in the hands of the president him- or herself: sometimes the procedures to get a candidacy at an election are then not that clear. Some are auditioned by the National Nominating Committee, others by the Political Bureau, and for others, Marine Le Pen is said to make the decision herself. The cases of Léon and Pascal show the vagueness of the internal procedures during the selection of the candidates for the 2015's regional election. In the first case, Léon, who joined the FN in the early 2010s, is interviewed by the dedicated commission, in front of an audience of FN leaders, and has to explain his candidacy. For Pascal, an activist since the 1980s and the leader of a local federation, things are more complex: while he believes that the president herself should choose the head of the list, he realizes, late and without warning, that it will ultimately be the Political Bureau.

> "The NNC interviewed me [...]. It's not done systematically, it was because there were several candidates for [my region]. And they ask you questions in turn. It started with '[Leon], you are here to take the lead, you will have to introduce yourself and then you will answer a number of accusations.'" [laughs] (Léon, personal archive of interview, translated by the author)

> "A month or two months later I learn that the case is going to be judged in the Political Bureau. [...] That's new because I thought it was Marine and it's the Political Bureau." (Pascal, personal archive of interview, translated by the author)

This is also noteworthy with regard to *exit* procedures: all activists or leaders who have not fulfilled their 'duty of loyalty' to the organization or have not complied with

all the clauses of the internal regulations or the membership charter are not summoned to appear before the members of this body. Sometimes, it is the president who simply and directly administers reprimands or temporary and permanent expulsions from the organization, without necessarily going through a hearing and a collegial decision with the leaders who are usually dedicated to this task. The decision-making process thus appears to be highly centralized around the person who holds the presidency of the organization. Finally, it should be noted that this centralization of decision-making is also evident when one looks at the role of other governing bodies, such as the Political Bureau or the Central Committee. In the case of the Political Bureau, for example, the archives of former leaders and interviews with leaders during Marine Le Pen's first two terms (2011–2018) show that it is more a 'deferential' body, where discussions often lead to decisions that are in line with those of the president. This account of a political bureau meeting dated 2011, for example, shows so-called 'wait-and-see' leaders who wait for the Le Pens to speak and who do not necessarily dare to speak during the meetings:

> "Once the exchanges were over, everyone in the political bureau basically waited… There were two or three people who dared to give their opinions, but in general, the others waited to see what Jean-Marie Le Pen and Marine Le Pen have to say. So, I could see them doing it. People were very much waiting to see what would happen. So, in fact, it was Jean-Marie Le Pen who had spoken that day, I remember, who had said [that he agreed with me]. So, I had won that side of the argument, and Marine had generally been along the same lines." (Dimitri, former member of the PB, personal archive of interview, translated by the author)

As for the Central Committee, which is supposed to represent the 'parliament' of the party, it rarely meets and has no particular internal prerogatives. However, it is the only body in which the members who have paid their dues have the prerogative of making appointments: its members are directly elected by vote at each congress (100 of them), while others (a minority) are directly appointed by the president (20 people).

While these elements are reminiscent of the personal dimension of this political party (Kefford & McDonnell, 2018; Calise, 2002), they attest to a very strong continuity in the logic of centralizing power within the organization. In this respect, the Marinist 'revolution' announced for the 2010s cannot be confirmed. But even more than the personal appointments in the governing bodies, the discretionary power of the presidents, from father to daughter, can also be seen in the management of the political careers of the leaders. Thus, it is within the framework of a particular political recruitment channel that the latter can hope to prosper within the organization.

This network, which manages the upward (from local to national) or reverse (through direct access to the center) careers (Gaxie, 1993) of Frontist leaders, is both

patrimonial and presidential. It can be seen throughout the history of the organization and its weight is important in the acceleration of careers, within the framework of the different electoral configurations in which the FN-RN has developed. It is primarily patrimonial, in the Weberian sense of the term (Weber, 2015), because it is part of a form of sultanic rule of the presidents, who surround themselves with a court (Elias, 1969) and select their relatives according to logics that are not necessarily correlated with questions of political competence or the recruitment of political personnel with specific qualities. The history of the FN-RN, for example, is marked by the recruitment of members of the political bureau and locally (European or regional) elected representatives to the Le Pens' 'entourage:' babysitters, butlers and personal bodyguards. In 1998, for example, the conflict that led to a major split within the party began with the ineligibility of Jean-Marie Le Pen, who chose his wife to head the party's electoral list instead of a party leader. The line then went to the presidency, as personal relationships with the president or his and later her inner circle were an important factor in explaining certain recruitments. Typically, in the case of defectors from the right (Birenbaum, 1992; Dahani, 2023), graduates of 'Grandes écoles,' many of whom have held positions in right-wing parties more established in the French political arena, their recruitment takes place within the framework of personal meetings (lunches, dinners) with the president, who can then offer them different positions, when it is not the respondents themselves who indicate the functions they wish to occupy.

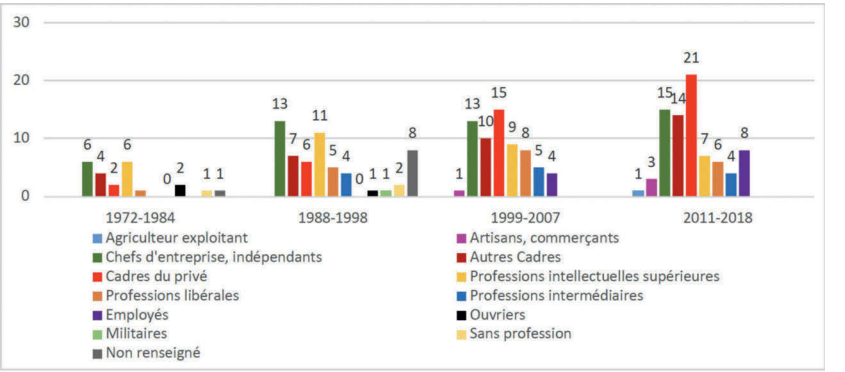
In this way, the institutionalization of the organization of the FN-RN takes place in a form of significant continuity, from father to daughter. From the point of view of the constitution of the governing bodies, the division of political labor or even the management of the partisan recruitment channels, the presidencies under Jean-Marie Le Pen and Marine Le Pen remain almost the same. Finally, it should be noted that during the Lille congress in March 2018, the change of name of the FN, which then became the RN, and of the governing bodies (the Political Bureau became the National Bureau, the Central Committee became the National Council) did not include an update of the party's software or organizational processes.

2. The accentuation of the social iron law

As I mentioned in the introduction, work on populism has put on the agenda the appeal that parties labeled as such can have on different sections of the working class, which is often not much studied as such. However, the FN-RN is no exception when it comes to studying the way in which the iron law of oligarchy operates within partisan enterprises. Thus, the study conducted among the party elites confirms that throughout its long history, the party has been mainly led by different factions of the upper class, especially private sector executives. Similarly, in line with the work

that has established the proximity of the far right to the world of 'business' (Mayer, 1986), this party continues to seek to recruit various 'independent' professions, not necessarily the heads of very large companies, but at least individuals who are the owners of their means of production.

Graphic 1 – Professional positions of the leaders of the FN (1972–2018)



Sources: Research data collected in archives, interviews and observations by the author
Legend: Green: business owners; Dark red: other executives; Red: private sector executives; Dark yellow: higher intellectual profession; Orange: liberal professions; Black: workers; Yellow: no profession; Pink: craftsman, tradesman; Blue: intermediate professions; Violet: employees; Light green: military; Grey: no data

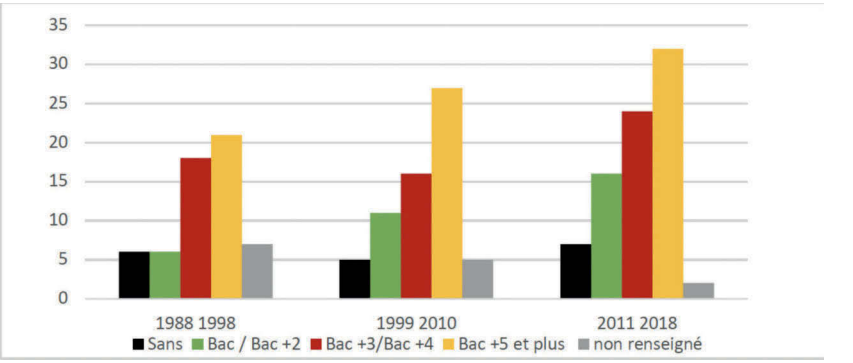
A study of the evolution of the social recruitment of FN leaders (starting with the members of the Political Bureau) over the long history of the organization reveals a number of patterns, helping to demonstrate the relative inertia of recruitment from one president to the next. Firstly, the sociography of the party's executives suggests that they are recruited from the upper classes, who are over-represented in the BP compared to the French population as a whole. The (social) "rate of representation" (Gaxie, 1980, translated by the author) of far-right leaders is therefore low, as it is in other political organizations on the right (Haegel, 2002) and left (Bachelot, 2008). Next, it is important to look in detail at the social class fractions represented in this leadership space. Here, as in other parties, we find particular affinities with certain social sub-spaces. While it is a well-known fact that the political left tends (historically) to recruit public-sector executives and teachers, while the political right is closer to private-sector executives and the liberal professions, the far right finds its main bastions of executive recruitment among at least two fractions of the upper classes: company directors (with self-employed status) and senior private-sector executives. From a diachronic perspective, the evolution of the social

recruitment of FN-RN leaders shows the constant importance of company directors, as well as an increase in the recruitment of private-sector executives, thereby helping to (socially) compartmentalize the leadership group. The trend in recruitment among managers from other sectors (dark red in graphic 1) also deserves attention. Indeed, this category represents the pure professionals of politics (Lehingue, 2019) who live 'of and for' Front National politics over the long term of their professional trajectories: these leaders have held no other professional position than that of full-time elected official or full-time political collaborator. Their entire careers have been spent in the political arena, within the Front National. This category is particularly well represented under Marine Le Pen's mandate (2011–2018) and is increasing over the long history of executive recruitment. All in all, the social recruitment of FN-RN leaders appears to be mainly correlated with certain fractions of the upper classes (independent, private sector, political). This recruitment dynamics, already present under the presidencies of Jean-Marie Le Pen, tend to become more pronounced between 2011 and 2018, during the first presidencies of Marine Le Pen. Under the latter's leadership, the Frontist leadership space is becoming even more socially compartmentalized. Finally, it should be noted that the FN-RN, as is regularly the case for candidates in legislative elections, recruits a small proportion of its leaders from the working classes, but not just any working classes. While the literature generally focuses on the blue-collar vote (Rouban, 2024), the leaders tend to come from the world of white-collar workers, from the private sector. If we follow the hypothesis of a form of homology between representatives and represented (Bourdieu, 1981), this is not so surprising: the recruitment of leaders then tends to partially overlap with the electoral conglomerate that feeds the party's supporters. Overall, the logic behind the social recruitment of FN-RN leaders can be summed up in two points. On the one hand, this party is no exception: the iron law of oligarchy applies here, as in other political organizations. Secondly, the logics studied over the long term reveal certain recruitment tropisms (among the independent upper professions, in the private sector) which became even more structured during the 'Marinist' period. Thus, the 'revolution' announced has not taken place within the management groups either: at most, professionalization has been accentuated, in view of the increase in the share of upper classes and pure professionals presented in the BP contingents between 2011 and 2018.

These elements are corroborated by other data, in particular the university career paths of executives, whose degree levels are also on the rise over the long term of the executive recruitment study. To situate graphic 2, we first need to discuss the literature on the weight of academic backgrounds in the recruitment of political elites in France. Several authors have shown that belonging to the upper classes, generally coupled with a high level of education, increases the chances of access to positions of political responsibility. What is more, academic careers in the so-called schools

of power (Ecole Nationale de l'Administration (ENA), Sciences Po Paris), predispose all the more to access to these positions (Lefebvre & Sawicki, 2006; Garrigou, 2001).

Graphic 2 – Diplomas of the members of the BP (1988–2018)



Sources: Research data collected in archives, interviews and observations by the author
Legend: Dark: without diploma; Green: High School diploma; Red: Bachelor; Yellow master or doctorate; Grey: no data

Graphic 2 shows that the FN-RN is relatively up to standard on this point. Firstly, it can be noted that in the first period studied, under the presidency of Jean-Marie Le Pen, bachelor degree holders are well represented, almost at the same level as leaders with master or doctorate degrees. This contrasts with the levels and types of diplomas in other political organizations: the French political right and left were already recruiting from among the highest university graduates in these years (Boelaert et al., 2017). However, from the 1990s onwards, the cost of joining the Political Bureau, in terms of cultural capital (Gaxie & Godmer, 2007), increased significantly. Under Marine Le Pen, the most highly qualified members of the BP were in the majority. However, this standardization with the political field is only relative. Indeed, the RN still recruits unqualified leaders (most of whom have never had a job other than in politics), or those with relatively few qualifications. This is a distinctive feature of the organization compared to its counterparts in the party arena, and one that does not seem to have been called into question since Marine Le Pen took over. The professionalization at work is particularly evident in the case of the very specific recruitment to the highest positions in the organization. Examples include Florian Philippot, vice-president for strategy and communications in the 2010s (he left the party in 2018), who attended ENA but also a top business school; Laurent Jacobelli, now a member of parliament and spokesman for the party, which he joined in 2017, who also attended a top business school; and the development of the so-called *Ho-*

races circle, a group of senior civil servants who work with Marine Le Pen (writing memos, presence in MPs' offices, elected members of the European Parliament). All in all, in terms of the logics of leadership recruitment, the announced Marinist revolution has not really taken place either: we are mainly seeing a hardening of trends already at work (recruitment among the upper classes, recruitment among the most highly educated fractions, promotions of internal militants in purely professional career paths) in the sense of attempts to bring them into line with the logics that prevail in the rest of the political field, particularly within the most dominant organizations.

Thus, if we confine ourselves to the processes at work within the party itself, it is hard to grasp the logic behind the 'normalization' or 'mainstreaming' of the French far right. The sociology of the party or of the recruitment of its leaders attests to significant forms of continuity over the long history of the institution. We must therefore turn away from the party itself and the party space, and look to fields outside the political arena, in particular the journalistic field.

3. A media anomaly? The mainstreaming of the far right through traditional media

On this point, it has to be said that the hypothesis that French public and media debate is becoming more right-wing has been consolidated by recent studies in France (Kaciaf & Klaus, 2024; Lefébure et al., 2024). More generally, this may echo the increasing media visibility of far-right parties across Europe (Esser et al., 2016; Mazzoleni, 2008). The general idea that unites these studies, with their contrasting scientific backgrounds, is that the traditional media space has welcomed far-right spokespersons through two processes that need to be considered in correlation: the first is an increase in the visibility of far-right spokespersons in terms of invitations, reports and dedicated broadcasts, which increases their media presence; the second is a form of 'normalization' through the depoliticization of framings around the far right. In the French case, to grasp the weight of the journalistic field in the participation in the 'normalization' of the FN-RN, it is first necessary to explain the structure of the space of information production, which has been affected by recent transformations at several levels.

Historically, France's most dominant traditional media (television, daily press) have long excluded Frontist spokespeople from their productions (Le Bohec, 2003). While the party's leaders have always sought media attention, they have tended to favor the militant press and digital media in order to circumvent the barriers to entry in the journalistic field (Dézé, 2011). Jean-Marie Le Pen's invitation to appear on *L'Heure de Vérité* in 1984, for example, marked a turning point: it was his first appearance on this prestigious TV show (Champagne, 1988), in terms of ratings and guests,

mainly leading political executives and leading elected representatives. However, media coverage of the FN in the 1980s and 1990s remains relatively low, especially taking into account the party's electoral scores at that time. In those days, the party president took advantage of his rarely televised appearances to mobilize through scandal, as illustrated by the various 'affairs,' including the 'detail affair.' In 1987, as a guest on a program during the campaign for the forthcoming 1988 presidential elections, he made denialist remarks which were later condemned by the courts. Today, the situation is completely different: the RN president and the organization's main representatives are regular guests on television, just as the main political departments of the major news organizations have organized themselves to provide the best possible coverage of the party's activities.

There are several reasons for this. First, we need to understand the reconfiguration of contemporary journalism. In France, traditional channels now face competition from all-news channels, which broadcast news and political programs throughout the day. As a result, the space for media opportunities has opened up to a 'second media market' (Leroux & Teillet, 2006, translation by the author), with greater scope for invitations to political 'second knives.' Secondly, the dual dependence of the journalistic field on politics and the economy (Champagne, 1995) has become more pronounced, particularly in view of the increased competition between editorial teams, the weight of advertising revenue in newspaper and TV channel budgets, and the concentration of media ownership by business interests (Benson et al., 2024). In doing so, a form of homogenization of traditional media agendas took place, contributing to the increased visibility of far-right spokespersons. Finally, it is important to recall the rules that apply when it comes to media coverage of political parties or 'blocs' in France: audiovisual media, for example, are required to allocate time to each political party or 'bloc' in proportion to their electoral scores and their weight within parliament.

With these structural elements established, it remains to understand how FN-RN leaders were portrayed in the media at the same time as the party was consolidating its electoral support. On this point, two elements emerge from analyses based on television archives on the one hand, and a recent survey of semi-structured interviews with political journalists on the other. On the first point, analyses of television archives confirm that Marine Le Pen remains a media 'anomaly.' Indeed, by focusing first on the media structure of her political capital well before her election as leader of the Front National (2011), the data collected (Dahani, 2022) shows that since 2009, the future party's president has already been one of the media's 'good customers:' she was invited to appear on public television during prime-time political programs (i.e., those with the highest ratings), and was invited to debate with government ministers under President Nicolas Sarkozy (2007–2012). What is more, she was invited to discuss 'issues' that resonated with the party's far-right agenda, such as the growth of halal fast food restaurants in France and the 'issue'

of street prayers. The year 2010 is particularly interesting for understanding the echo chamber that the media had already created for Marine Le Pen: although she had not yet been elected leader of the FN, her press conferences during the internal campaign were broadcasted on television, for example on rolling news channels. Various polls were also already testing her for the 2012 presidential election, for which the candidates had not yet been decided on and the campaign was far from underway. Marine Le Pen represented a 'media anomaly' in these years because she received far too much media coverage and occupied far too dominant a position in the journalistic field given her position in the political arena: she was an employee of the Front National and a locally elected official. Eric Darras' work (2019) extends this finding: by analyzing the time devoted to politicians in television news programs (on TF1 and France 2) broadcast every evening from 8 to 9 p.m., he shows in an article that Marine Le Pen received more media coverage in the 2010s than government ministers or opposition party leaders represented in the National Assembly. Thus, well before 2017, the year of the legislative elections in which the FN won six seats and then just over 80 in the following elections in 2022, Marine Le Pen received more media coverage in these leading news programs (which attract several million viewers) than political leaders whose parties were represented in parliament. In doing so, the traditional media helped to increase the symbolic capital of the FN-RN president: although she occupied only a residual place in the political arena, leading a small party that failed in every election, particularly presidential elections, she was given the same media coverage as more established politicians belonging to dominant political parties.

On the second point, it should also be noted that the coverage of the far right by the French press, particularly the national daily press, has become normalized. While relations between the party's press office and leading political journalists have long been conflictual (Le Bohec 2004), the professionalization of the communications department (Dahani, 2024) and the routinization of journalistic work in newsrooms helped to reconfigure the partner-rival relations between party communicators and journalists. For this again there are multiple explanations and examples. On the one hand, it is worth noting the recruitment of professional political journalists into the entourages of FN-RN leaders: coming from private radio or television, these are actors who have mastered the rules of the media game and political communication. One example that comes to mind is the role played by Marine Le Pen's former press secretary, now a member of parliament, who previously worked as a journalist for a far-right newspaper for several decades. On the other hand, it should also be noted that, from the journalists' point of view, their working conditions with party representatives have become more 'normal.' Journalists interviewed as part of a recent survey conducted[1] attest to a restructuring of press editorial offices: there are

1 Research ongoing with political journalists since 2024.

more journalists covering the party, they have stable, well-paid jobs and are graduates of prestigious journalism schools. Relations with the party's press office have become more peaceful – journalists are now rarely prevented from attending off-the-record meetings or press conferences, and they no longer face the risk of hostile reactions from security services or activists. But also the neutralization of political conflict associated with the far right – the journalists interviewed consider that the RN is no longer the FN, that it is a transformed party, and are now interested in its leaders and elected officials using the same criteria they use to frame and angle articles about other political professionals: in terms of competence, their work in assemblies, their press releases, etc. These are all ways of normalizing the far right, treating them – journalistically – in the same way as others.

Conclusion

Sociological studies offer at least three answers to the difficult question of the conditions that have enabled the 'normalization' (and legitimization) of the French far right through its leading political representative, the Front National, now known as the Rassemblement National. The first is to stop looking solely at the party: internalist and emic approaches certainly help to lift the veil of partisan secrecy and reveal how people 'belong to the party' outside of election season. However, studies using these approaches show that the organization is not the main driver of 'normalization,' given the significant inertia of the party's structure. The second is the importance of taking into account the electoral conglomerate that thinks along the same lines as the ruling conglomerate: the far right thus acts as a link between different class fractions, from the relatively popular (private sector employees, small artisans and shopkeepers) to the very upper classes (heads of large companies, private sector executives).

Finally, the last point concerns the importance of thinking about a party in its ecosystems, in connection with related political fields, such as journalism, which play a major role in neutralizing the stigma associated with the label 'far right' and 'normalizing' the ways in which its spokespersons speak and are portrayed in the media. In this sense, we should also reflect on the shift to the right of other political formations: in France, the radicalization of the so-called republican and parliamentary right, as well as the 'central bloc' that governs around Emmanuel Macron, have also contributed to 'normalizing' the far right by adopting its slogans and key ideas, as in the case of the government's inclusion of 'national preference' (a term borrowed from Jean-Marie Le Pen) on the agenda when proposing immigration laws.

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Britain's far right and the summer 2024 riots: a journalist's account

Daniel Trilling

In late July and early August 2024, the United Kingdom saw racist rioting and demonstrations in 27 towns and cities (House of Commons Library, 2024), mostly in England. In terms of scale, its closest historical parallels in this country probably date back to 1947, which saw attacks on Jewish-owned businesses after two British army sergeants were killed in Mandate Palestine (Trilling, 2012a) – or even 1919, when rioters targeted Black and Asian seamen living in the UK's port cities (Pascoe, 2024). Last year, the immediate trigger was the murder of three young girls in Southport, Merseyside, by a perpetrator the rioters incorrectly believed to be either Muslim or an asylum-seeker. In Southport itself, a mob tried to attack the local mosque (BBC News, 2024a). In Rotherham, Yorkshire, another mob attempted to set fire to a hotel housing asylum-seekers while the residents were still inside (BBC News, 2024b). In Hull, also in Yorkshire, a group of Romanian men driving through the town were set upon in their car (Mistry, 2024). In Belfast, a Syrian supermarket was firebombed (Middle East Eye, 2024) while elsewhere in England rioters fought with police, chanted slogans such as "we want our country back" and assaulted members of the public.

The riots were unusually widespread, and seemed largely spontaneous. But they can also be seen as the culmination of more than a decade of developments in British politics. On the face of it, over the long term, far-right politics in the UK has moved away from violent extremism. The political scientist Cas Mudde (2019) divides the far right into two parts: the extreme right, which rejects democracy (and is therefore more likely to view violence as a legitimate political tool), and the radical right, which is hostile to key aspects of liberal democratic political systems but accepts the basic principles of democracy. For decades after the Second World War, the most prominent far right current in British politics derived from the fascist tradition. Groups like the National Front, which peaked in the 1970s, were founded and led by activists who were inspired by the ideas – and the violence – of Hitler and Mussolini and sought to revive a version of their movements (Macklin, 2019). These groups were rarely more than marginal to British politics; the most successful electorally of this post-war fascist tradition was the British National Party – BNP – which won scores

of seats in local government in England during the 2000s, before disintegrating in 2010 (Trilling, 2012b).

Founded in the early 1980s by John Tyndall, a veteran neo-Nazi, for many years the BNP followed the standard pattern among Britain's post-war fascists (Trilling, 2012b). Its platform centred on a demand for the "repatriation" of non-white British citizens and immigrants, while its campaigning largely involved rallies and marches, accompanied by violence targeting ethnic minorities and the left. (The international neo-Nazi terrorist network Combat 18 began life in 1992 as the stewarding arm of the BNP.) But it only started to win elections when it adopted populism, the political style favoured by today's radical right, which claims to be the authentic representative of the people in contrast to existing, allegedly corrupt governing elites.

From the late 1990s, under the new leadership of Nick Griffin, the BNP concealed its core beliefs and crafted a more moderate, professional public image, taking inspiration from the French Front National (Trilling, 2012b). It found success in small, former industrial towns in England that had lost out economically under neoliberalism, and whose white residents were encouraged to blame immigration for perceived national decline (Trilling, 2012b). The BNP's real contribution was to break a long-standing taboo on the far right's inclusion in mainstream British politics – after the BNP won two seats in the European Parliament in 2009, Griffin was invited to appear on Question Time, the BBC's flagship current affairs programme – and to demonstrate the potential for a radical right movement without the BNP's neo-Nazi baggage.

Since then, far-right populism has been employed to much greater effect by Nigel Farage, who is now one of Britain's most prominent politicians. His various projects – the UK Independence Party, which he led between 2006 and 2016, the Brexit Party, which stood candidates in the 2019 general election, and now Reform UK, which won 5 seats in parliament at election 2024 – have built a much wider coalition of support among Britain's working and middle classes. Like elsewhere in Europe, you can read various economic ills into the growth of far-right populism in the UK. Wages and social mobility have both stalled since the 2008 financial crisis (Social Mobility Commission, 2017), while austerity policies during the 2010s have contributed to a crumbling public realm (Channel 4 News, 2023). This is a breeding ground for the kind of resentment – of immigrants and others believed to be gaining an unfair advantage in society, or of political elites – on which far-right populism thrives. Until 2016, these governments largely tried to manage that resentment by assuring voters that they were sufficiently punishing the 'undeserving poor.' Cuts to the welfare state were promoted as cracking down on "shirkers" unwilling to work for a living (Jowit, 2013). Meanwhile the UK Home Office – the country's interior ministry – rolled out a set of policies, known as the "hostile environment", that were intended to make life so unpleasant for undocumented immigrants that they would

leave of their own accord (Taylor, 2022). The message was further reinforced by a Home Office publicity campaign in 2013, in which advertising vans drove around multicultural areas of London, emblazoned with the message "In the UK illegally? Go home or face arrest".

That did not stave off far-right populism however, which was also buoyed by an evolving media ecosystem that combined sympathetic coverage from the traditional right-wing press with increasingly prominent far-right online news outlets, such as the UK arm of the American far-right website Breitbart (Gais & Wilson, 2022). In 2016 – as the UK neared what social geographer Danny Dorling (2018) describes as "peak inequality" – far-right populism was a major component in the successful campaign for a "Leave" vote in Britain's referendum on membership of the European Union – EU. There is nothing inherently right-wing in deciding to quit a supra-national economic and political bloc, of course. But Leave campaigners such as Farage tied resentment at the remote and often unaccountable workings of the EU to wider resentment of immigration, encouraging a sense of existential national threat. For instance, shortly before election day, Farage unveiled a campaign poster with the slogan "breaking point" superimposed on a photo of refugees from Syria and elsewhere making their way through south-eastern Europe (ITV News, 2016).

According to Farage – who, it should be pointed out, does not see himself as "far-right" (Cowley, 2024) – his brand of radical right politics has been a bulwark against extremism. He eschews explicit biological racism, for instance, which is in keeping with wider public attitudes in the UK: an opinion poll carried out in 2020, for instance, found that 93% of people disagreed with the statement "to be truly British you have to be White" (Ipsos, 2020). Indeed, Britain's radical right itself has a certain degree of ethnic diversity. Nonetheless, radical right politics in the UK prioritises rhetorical attacks on certain categories of immigrants – chiefly, asylum-seekers (Findlay, 2025) – and the stoking of anxieties around cultural difference (Adu, 2024).

Nor has violent extremism disappeared from Britain; indeed, during the referendum campaign a white supremacist shot dead the Labour MP Jo Cox, a supporter of remaining in the EU (Cobain & Taylor, 2016). This was followed a few years later by another plot to murder a Labour MP – foiled this time – by members of a neo-Nazi youth network called 'National Action' (Collins & Mullen, 2019). While the extreme right, unlike the radical right, remains organisationally small and fragmented, its ideas have found a new lease of life online. Violent and misogynist online subcultures have been blamed for a series of other murders in the UK in recent years (Adams, 2025, Carr, 2023), while entrepreneurial individuals have built up large social media followings by posting and amplifying far-right themes, conspiracy theories and disinformation.

The far-right influencer Stephen Yaxley-Lennon, who uses the pseudonym Tommy Robinson, illustrates the shift that has taken place (Trilling, 2018). He

emerged in 2009 as the leader of the English Defence League (EDL), an anti-Muslim street movement organised via football hooligan networks. Since leaving the EDL in 2013, Yaxley-Lennon has had far greater reach as an unaffiliated social media personality, encouraging donations from his supporters and making common cause with other similar grifters. In July 2024, in fact, only a few days before the murders in Southport, Yaxley-Lennon held a rally in central London attended by twenty to thirty thousand people, with up to half a million watching online (Mulhall, 2024). The event drew together a range of conspiratorial themes, with a series of far-right personalities giving speeches attacking immigration, asylum-seekers, trans rights, Net Zero, 'Big Pharma' and vaccines.

At the same time, the centre right has been pulled in the far right's direction. The Conservatives, led by Boris Johnson, won the 2019 general election and broke a political impasse over Brexit by co-opting far-right populist themes. At each inflection point between 2019 and their losing power in 2024, the Conservatives and their media cheerleaders chose to double down on the populist rhetoric, painting their opponents as 'enemies' who threatened the integrity of the nation. The Black Lives Matter protests in 2020 were treated by Conservative MPs as signs of an 'alien' culture that had taken over Britain's cities (Trilling, 2020), while the government introduced prison sentences of up to ten years for defacing a public memorial (Sentencing Council, 2025). When asylum-seekers started using small inflatable boats to cross the Channel – as opposed to stowing away in lorries, as they had largely done previously (Walsh & Cuibus, 2024) – during the Covid lockdown of 2020, the government leant into the moral panic being whipped up by Farage and some right-wing media outlets (Home Office, 2020). The Conservatives (under Johnson and his successors Liz Truss and Rishi Sunak) then spent four years trying and failing to enact a draconian policy that sought to permanently deport refugees who crossed the Channel to Rwanda (Trilling, 2024).

Such moves were accompanied by inflammatory rhetoric. In autumn 2020, after Johnson and his then-Home Secretary Priti Patel mounted a series of rhetorical attacks on "lefty" immigration lawyers (Mason, 2023), a Nazi sympathiser tried to kill the head of immigration law at a prominent firm of solicitors (Casciani, 2024). The Home Secretary from late 2022 onwards, Suella Braverman – who was once admonished by the Board of Deputies of British Jews for using the conspiracy theory-derived term "cultural Marxism" in a speech (Walker, 2019) – was sacked in November 2023 after accusing the police of being too lenient on pro-Palestine protesters, who she smeared as doing "hate marches" (Sky News, 2023). Her comments were widely blamed for subsequent violence, in which far-right counter-protesters attacked the police. The Conservatives' reward for their populist turn was that they destroyed their electoral base, suffering a crushing defeat in the general election of July 2024. They are now in danger of being overtaken by Reform UK (Politico, 2025).

The Southport riots, which took place only a few weeks after that election, were a product of all the different strands in British politics described above, which happened to come together at an opportune moment. In the hours after the Southport murders, an information vacuum about the perpetrator – because of prosecutors' guidelines that advise against releasing information on a suspect before their trial – allowed false rumours to circulate online (Casciani & Holt, 2025). Yaxley-Lennon and the misogynist influencer Andrew Tate were among the prominent social media users who spread misinformation during this period (Cheshire & Doak, 2024), while Farage posted a video asking whether the "truth [about the murders] is being withheld from us" (Dodd et al., 2024). Misinformation was also shared for non-political reasons: one widely-shared post gave the perpetrator a false, islamic-sounding name. Despite initial suggestions this could have been Russian state propaganda intended to inflame tensions, the source was eventually traced to a Pakistan-based click-farming website (Spring, 2024).

As these rumours spread, a veteran neo-Nazi activist from Merseyside called for a protest in Southport, promoting it via a Telegram group that swiftly attracted thousands of followers (Hope not Hate, 2025). Similar online calls for protests elsewhere cropped up, but most did not originate from people with formal political affiliations, according to the British anti-fascist campaign group 'Hope not Hate' (2025) – and neither were most of the rioters. The disturbances largely took place in deprived areas, as riots tend to do, but the resentment on which they rested went further. "Are the left elite to blame for the violence in Southport as they continue to smear and ignore angry communities?" the right-wing television channel GB News – partly owned by Paul Marshall, a multi-millionaire who has acquired a string of right-wing media outlets in recent years (Geoghegan, 2025) – asked in an online poll on 1 August 2024 (Robertson, 2024).

Since the summer of 2024, the riots have received surprisingly little attention in Britain. The violence petered out after around a week, due in part to a swift law-and-order crackdown. Britain's current prime minister, the Labour leader Keir Starmer, is a former director of public prosecutions. His government instructed that prison places be freed up and trials expedited to produce a string of swift convictions (Grammaticas & Mackintosh, 2024). But it remains to be seen what the government, whose strategy for winning power was based on repudiating the socialist politics of the former Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn, will do about the conditions that made the riots possible. According to a recent survey by 'Hope not Hate,' (2025) 40% of British people would now prefer a "strong and decisive leader who has the authority to override or ignore parliament" over a liberal democracy with regular elections and a multi-party system. The more pessimistic people are about their own lives, found the survey, the more likely they are to support Reform UK, to believe multiculturalism is failing and to oppose immigration. These are difficult times, globally and domestically, but if the political left is unable to foster a sense

of optimism about the future, then it is likely to be the far right's turn next. Reform UK are now neck-and-neck in the polls with both Labour and the Conservatives (Politico, 2025).

At the same time, it is important to resist the temptation to believe that last year's violence has a simple economic explanation. It is no accident that much of the rioting took place in parts of the country from which political power and wealth have drained away as Britain has become a more unequal place – and where, as in many other places, vital social institutions that keep communities happy and healthy have been gutted by years of austerity economics (Duncan et al., 2025; House of Lords Library, 2023). But the riots were not a cry of pain from the most deprived. They were perpetrated by people who could only find a sense of belonging by singling out and attacking others on the basis of their ethnicity, and who indulged in the destructive fantasy that their own frustrations would diminish so long as other people could have it worse. If British society is encouraging people to behave that way, then we have to start talking about how to repair the damage. But that needs to come with a wholesale rejection of the racist lies on which the violence thrives.

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‘Criminal foreigners out!’ On the normalization of extreme far-right positions through politically motivated communication on crime

Konrad Moussa Ibrahima Erben

Shift in discourse and normalization of far-right positions

The increasing adoption of far-right narratives in the political center can be analyzed within the framework of the theory of discourse shift. A central concept in this context is the so-called overton window, which describes which political positions are considered acceptable in a certain social context (Mackinac Center for Public Policy, 2019). The window shifts when previously radical positions gradually appear as legitimate contributions to the public debate through repeated reproduction and strategic communication. Far-right extremist actors use targeted mechanisms to shift the discourse by underpinning narratives such as ‘Criminal foreigners out!’ with supposedly factual arguments and selective statistics. In doing so, they use a strategy, that Mudde (2019) describes as something of a hinge: Far-right extremist parties and movements formulate positions that are initially rejected by the center of society, but are gradually de-tabooed through repeated inclusion in the media and political discourse. This process does not happen in isolation, but in interaction with established political actors, who – partly for electoral reasons – take up far-right extremist narratives, weaken them or transform them into supposedly moderate demands (Wodak, 2015). Another central concept in the analysis of far-right populist discourse strategies is the so-called culture war, which the New Right in particular uses to construct a social enemy image. In the context of migration-related crime discourse, this means the targeted juxtaposition of a threatened majority society and a group that is constructed as threatening and associated with crime, violence and insecurity. The recourse to law-and-order narratives reinforces this dichotomization and enables positions critical of migration to be presented as legitimate security interests, while voices critical of anti-immigration policies are delegitimized as naïve or unrealistic (Haller, 2017).

The adoption and dissemination of such narratives by democratic parties and the media contributes to the normalization of previously extreme far-right positions

in the long term. Far-right-populist parties are increasingly relying on discursive connectivity to the political center, especially in the areas of crime and migration, in order to make their issues socially acceptable. This process is reinforced by media logics that contribute to the emotionalization of public debates through sensationalism, selective reporting and polarizing frames (Eberl et al., 2018). The analysis of the shift in discourse shows that far-right positions not only enter the public sphere through explicit political demands, but also through subtle linguistic shifts that legitimize far-right argumentation patterns. Terms such as 'remigration,' 'parallel societies' or 'imported criminality' are examples of linguistic constructions that originated in far-right contexts, but are now also being adopted by conservative and liberal actors (Meyer, 2024).

Crime, politics & far-right extremism

Although crime rates in Germany have been falling for decades and the risk of becoming a victim of crime is continuously decreasing, crime and internal security remain key election issues (Kerner, 1994; Singelnstein & Kunz, 2021). Hardly any campaign, whether at local, state or national level, can do without constantly outbidding apocalyptic tales about how crime is becoming more and more widespread and how the respective campaigners intend to counter this with law-and-order policies (Singelnstein & Kunz, 2021). The basis for this is usually the police crime statistics (Polizeiliche Kriminalstatistik; PKS). The fact that these are hardly meaningful for the actual occurrence of crime and, due to their distortions, often even suggest false circumstances (Heinz, 2024; Singelnstein & Kunz, 2021) is basic criminological knowledge that will only be discussed by way of example in this article. Much more important here is the contribution that the presentation of the PKS for 2023 has made to the shift in discourse. The tenor of the Federal Minister of the Interior at the press conference for the presentation, as well as the parliamentary debate in the Bundestag, the federal parliament, and the resonance in many media reports, was unanimous: there has been a sharp increase in non-German suspects. The conclusion drawn from this is that migration has led to more crime in Germany (Heinz, 2024).

The narrative of 'criminal foreigners' is not new, crime and immigration are often linked. In particular those who are perceived as foreign are generally assumed to have a greater tendency to commit a crime. Especially racialized people thus become a projection surface for ascriptions of criminality. Far-right extremist political actors in particular have recognized the racist logic behind this as a way to give their narratives a veneer of respectability and make themselves socially acceptable. This works above all because the underlying biologistic and cultural manifestations of racism are widespread and can be found deep in the political center of society (Zick

& Mokros, 2023) thus creating points of contact far beyond the (supposed) fringes of far-right extremist parts of society (Singelnstein & Kunz, 2021).

In research right-wing extremism is defined as follows:

> "Attitude patterns whose unifying characteristic is ideas of inequality. In the political sphere, these are expressed in an affinity for dictatorial forms of government, chauvinistic attitudes and a trivialization or justification of National Socialism. In the social sphere, they are characterized by anti-Semitic, xenophobic and social Darwinist attitudes." (Decker & Brähler, 2006, p. 20; own translation)

Enmity of foreigners in the form of xenophobia works by valorizing the self-group ('Germans') against the devaluation of the foreign group ('foreigners'). This dynamic is a long-standing component of German consciousness that can be found in the history of both the Federal Republic of Germany and the German Democratic Republic. Despite constant migration to both German states, which was desired by state and society, there was never any real recognition of Germany as a post-migrant and multicultural society, so that a pronounced separation of 'Germans' and 'migrants' can still be seen in both the state and society today. The slogan 'Foreigners out!' is therefore a traditional component of far-right extremist demands, but in different variations it also enjoys a high level of approval, at least in some areas, which is continuing to rise and has recently even reached a majority of people in Germany (Decker et al., 2024). Xenophobia has thus developed into a kind of gateway drug that enables extreme far-right parties to mobilize their own supporters and also develop appeal outside closed far-right milieus (Decker et al., 2024).

Narratives of the extreme far right often revolve around a threat to the constructed self-group from outside or inside. When it comes to crime and migration, it is assumed that migrants are particularly prone to crime and violence and thus become an invasive threat that despises the German state, its society and its laws. Based on this, an apocalyptic picture is painted, according to which the German people constructed in this way are threatened with extinction due to 'asylum abuse' and the 'import of crime' (Rippl & Seipel, 2022; Schulze, 2021). In the social media strategies of extreme far-right parties, for example, migrant men in particular are portrayed as a threat to women, children and general safety, and this type of scaremongering and threat projection succeeds in gaining reach far beyond the immediate supporters (Rippl & Seipel, 2022). The modern veneer of such campaigns should not obscure the fact that they are classic strategies of the (post)fascist extreme far right. Christoph Butterwege writes in this context:

> "The thrust (...) is aimed at a nationalist or racist treatment (...). (...) If foreigners are not attacked across the board, they are (...) divided into those who live in accordance with the law and those who are criminals. The campaign strategy is very

simple: foreigners are equated with criminals (multicultural society = multicriminal society)". (Butterwegge, 2002, p. 55f; own translation)

Recording crime in Germany & current developments regarding foreign suspects

In the vast majority of cases, the basis for media reporting and political discourse on crime in Germany is the PKS. It has been published annually by the Federal Criminal Police Office (Bundeskriminalamt) since 1953 and is usually accompanied by a great deal of media and political attention. It records (with a few exceptions) the crimes known to the police and 'solved' by them. The PKS is a so-called output statistic, because it only contains the final processed crimes. This means that the cases are only included in the statistic once the police investigations have been completed and the files have been handed over to the public prosecutor's office. The PKS thus only depicts the reported crime, that's known to the police. In addition to reported crime, there is also the so-called dark figure of crime, that includes crimes that do not come to the attention of the police. How large the respective reported and dark figures are depends, for example, on how likely people are to report to the police or what priorities the police set in the prosecution of crimes (Bundeskriminalamt, 2024b). In principle, however, it can be said that there is no clear relationship between the reported and dark figure areas of crime and the PKS therefore has little to no significance for assessing the actual state of crime (Heinz, 2024).

The presentation of the most recent PKS in 2024 regarding the 2023 reporting period drew particular attention to so-called 'foreigner crime.'[1] For example, 41.1% of suspects were foreign nationals, while they make up only 14.6% of the population. The number of non-German children and adolescents suspected of violent crime also increased by 28.4%. Overall, there were also 17.8% more foreign suspects, an increase that was still at 13.5% even when adjusted for immigration law violations, i.e. offenses that can only be committed by non-Germans (Bundeskriminalamt, 2024b).

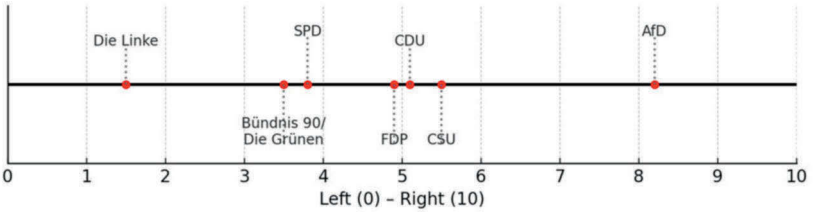
Political reactions to the 2023 PKS and its relationship to far-right extremism

For a better understanding of the political classification of the following reactions, a brief overview of the political scale of the Federal Republic of Germany should first be presented here. As part of a representative survey conducted in 2020, the SINUS

1 The PKS defines the status of 'foreigner' by a lack of German citizenship.

Institute showed how people in Germany would classify the parties represented in the Bundestag at that time on a left (0)-right (10) scale:

Perception of political parties on a left-right scale (own representation based on: SINUS, 2020). The respondents rated the parties with the values 1.5 (Die Linke)[2], 3.5 (Bündnis 90/Die Grünen)[3], 3.8 (SPD)[4], 4.9 (FDP)[5], 5.1 (CDU)[6], 5.5 (CSU)[7] and 8.2 (AfD)[8] (SINUS, 2020).



At the press conference to present the PKS 2023, the Social Democratic Federal Minister of the Interior and Homeland, Nancy Faeser (SPD, 3.8 on the left-right scale), was quoted as follows with regard to the high proportion of 'foreigner crime' in the PKS: *"Anyone who doesn't play by the rules has to go. (…) [One must] talk [about the topic] without shyness and without ressentiment. (…) Increasing migration has led to more crimes." (quote in Lemkemeyer, 2024; own translation)*

Her cabinet colleague, the Green Party's Cem Özdemir (Bündnis 90/Die Grünen, 3.5 on the left-right scale), Federal Minister of Food and Agriculture, made the following comments on a short message platform: *"The crime statistics figures should give us pause for thought. Anyone who comes to Germany to seek protection and commits a crime*

2 Left-wing socialist party, formed from the merger of the successor party to the ruling communist party of former East Germany and West German left-wing groups (Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2025e).

3 Green-progressive party, emerged from East German civil rights activists and West German environmental activists (Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2025b).

4 Social Democratic Party, which emerged from the 19th century workers' movement and is the oldest party still in existence in Germany (Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2025g).

5 Liberal party with a focus on individual freedom, market economy principles, less state and more personal responsibility for people (Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2025f).

6 Conservative, Christian-social party (Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2025c).

7 Bavarian sister party of the CDU with similar conservative values. Increased emphasis on regional identity and Bavarian traditions (Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2025d).

8 Right-wing populist and, at least in part, far-right extremist party. Its radical and populist positions include national conservatism, anti-migration and euro-criticism (Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2025a).

here cannot expect leniency. They have to leave our country again. This cannot be trivialized as a social problem." (Özedmir, 2024; own translation)

Conservative member of the Bundestag Andrea Lindholz (CDU, 5.1 on the left-right scale) said in a special parliamentary session on the occasion of the PKS 2023: *"Germany has been getting less safe for two years now, and this is mainly due to the sharp rise in foreigner crime." (Deutscher Bundestag, 2024; own translation)*

Her Liberal colleague Konstantin Kuhle (FDP, 4.9 on the left-right scale) also sounded a similar note in the session: *"[There is] a tendency towards violence in certain circles, especially among young men with a migration background." (Deutscher Bundestag, 2024; own translation)*

Although these politicians cover the democratic spectrum, at least from moderate-left to conservative, what they have in common is that they all take up and reproduce the far-right narrative 'Criminal foreigners out!' Before going into this further, however, it is first necessary to examine the extent to which the PKS 2023 actually allows the conclusions drawn here.

Empirical findings on so-called foreigner crime

Contrary to Cem Özdemir's steep thesis that crime cannot be trivialized as a social problem, crime is first and foremost just that, a social phenomenon (Singelnstein & Kunz, 2021). In order to understand the phenomenon of crime, it must be reiterated that it takes place in two areas, the reported crime and the dark figure of crime. The reported area of crime includes all offenses that come to the attention of the investigating authorities. Accordingly, the PKS covers that area almost completely for Germany. On the other hand, there is the dark figure, which includes all crimes that have occurred but of which the investigating authorities never become aware. There is no relational relationship between those two areas. This means that developments that can be observed in the reported area of crime do not necessarily also take place in the dark figure area and that characteristics that occur in the reported area (e.g. nationality, age, gender, type of offense, location, etc.) can in no way be regarded as representative of the dark figure or crime as a whole (Heinz, 2024). In order to shed light – in the truest sense of the word – on the darkness, there are a number of research undertakings that are used to brighten up the dark figure and through which, at least in part, statements and assumptions can be made about the actual occurrence of crime.

If we now try to approach so-called foreigner crime in this way, it must first be said that the Federal Criminal Police Office itself also points out that no statements can be made about the actual incidence of crime from the PKS and its situation reports (Bundeskriminalamt, 2024a). The federal police also points out that 24% of foreign suspects alone come from so-called migration-related offenses, i.e. offenses that German citizens cannot commit at all (Bundeskriminalamt, 2024b). In

addition, the German criminologist Wolfgang Heinz comes to the conclusion, based on the PKS, that crime committed by foreign nationals has decreased over the long term since 1994 at roughly the same rate or even slightly more than crime committed by German nationals (Heinz, 2024).

In the area of the dark figure a number of studies provide indications of the extent to which people without German citizenship or those with a 'history of migration' actually show criminal behavior in comparison to German citizens or those without a 'history of migration.' Heinz (2024) has conducted a comprehensive analysis of the media and political discourse surrounding the PKS 2023. Among other things, he points out that it is almost impossible to make statements about the scope, structure and development of crime as a whole, as, apart from the less informative PKS, even dark figure research can only shed light on sections of the actual crime occurrence and make assessments based on this (Heinz, 2024).

In his analysis, Heinz points out a number of factors that indicate that the PKS is by no means a true reflection of the reality of crime, but rather a distortion. With regard to findings from criminological research on non-German suspects, the following seems particularly relevant:

1. **Reporting behavior:** The PKS primarily provides information on the willingness of the population to report crime. Studies on the reporting rate show, on the one hand, that a large proportion of all crimes are not targeted by law enforcement authorities as a result of original police work, but through reports from the public and, above all, that the reporting rate varies greatly depending on the offense and the individual characteristics of those involved (Heinz, 2024).[9] For example, regular, representative studies carried out by the Criminological Research Institute of Lower Saxony among the federal states 9th grade students show that migrants are up to twice as likely to be reported in the event of a violent crime than Germans 'without a history of migration' for the same offense (Bergmann et al., 2017; Bergmann et al., 2019; Dreißigacker et al., 2023; Krieg et al., 2020). This is consistent with other research findings on the willingness to report crimes committed by foreigners, which indicate that there is an increased motivation to involve the investigating authorities if the perpetrator is perceived as foreign (Atanisev et al., 2019; Singelnstein & Kunz, 2021).

9 In addition, because the PKS essentially only provides information on the criminal offenses that have become known and have been processed by the police, it does not provide any information on actual convictions. It is thus based on the PKS not possible to determine whether a suspect actually committed the offense.

2. **Police behavior:** Not every report is actually recorded by the police, and the assumption that the police would act in accordance with the principle of legality[10] and really investigate every suspected crime with equal intensity can be considered empirically refuted (Heinz, 2024). At the same time, there are at least indications that police action in Germany can also be biased and that people who are perceived or racialized as non-German, for example, are more likely to end up in the PKS than those who are not (Heinz, 2024; Singelnstein & Derin, 2022; Singelnstein & Kunz, 2021). For example, people who are perceived as foreign on the basis of external characteristics state that they are checked by the police twice as often as those who appear to be local in their appearance (Müller & Wittlif, 2023; Singelnstein & Kunz, 2021).
3. **Technically induced overestimation of frequency figures:** Crime is, among other ways, presented in the PKS in the form of so-called frequency figures. For this the number of offenses is set in relation to the resident population. If people without German citizenship and without official registration status (e.g. because they are tourists, cross-border commuters, business travelers or have only recently migrated to Germany) commit a crime and this is recorded in the PKS, the number of crimes increases, but not that of the resident population. This results in distortion effects, but no statement can be made about the exact amount.[11] However, it can be assumed that this effect is particularly pronounced in phases of increasing migration to Germany (e.g. due to the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine).
4. **Differences in the group compositions Germans and Non-Germans:** A comparison of the crime rate between Germans and non-Germans would only make sense if both groups were comparable in terms of their socio-demographic characteristics and criminogenic factors. In reality, however, this is not the case. For example, the two groups differ considerably in their age and gender structure. This is particularly significant because the proportion of young men in the non-German population is significantly higher and young men (regardless of their origin, age or nationality, for example) are at a significantly higher risk of crime. It is also significant that non-Germans are more likely to live in large cities, are more likely to belong to lower income and education groups and are more likely

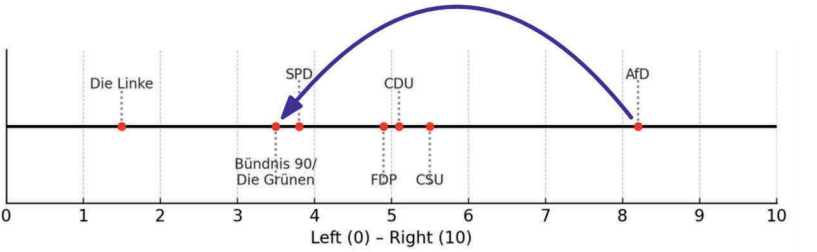
10 The principle of legality (Legalitätsprinzip; also referred to as the obligation to prosecute) obliges criminal prosecution authorities in Germany, in accordance with Section 152 (2) of the Code of Criminal Procedure (Strafprozessordnung), to investigate and bring charges if there is sufficient suspicion of a crime. It serves the equal treatment of all citizens and the enforcement of the state's right to prosecute. Restrictions result from the opportunity principle, for example in the case of minor offenses (Sections 153 et seq. of the German Code of Criminal Procedure).

11 However, Heinz (2024) estimates that in some years up to 40% of the non-German suspects are non-residency-registration-required persons.

to be unemployed. All of these factors contribute to the risk of crime, regardless of ethnicity or nationality, as they do to the risk of being prosecuted by the police if the law is broken (Heinz, 2024).

Explicit dark figure research provides more information on how crime is distributed, for example, along the line of 'migration background.' Studies from various German federal states regularly come to the conclusion that there are hardly any differences in self-reported delinquency between young people with and without a 'migration background' (Heinz, 2019).[12] In addition, there are indications from smaller studies, at least for the subgroup of migrant workers, that they behave more law-abidingly than comparable natives (Geißler, 2008).

Shift of the narrative 'Criminal foreigners out!' on the left-right scale of political parties (own representation based on: SINUS, 2020).



The bottom line of a scientific analysis of so-called foreigner crime is, firstly, that it is not possible to make serious statements about it on the basis of the PKS and, secondly, that, at least for the areas illuminated by dark figure research, it can be assumed that nationality, 'migration background' or ethnic attribution do not play a significant role in whether someone behaves criminally or not. The fact that the political reactions to the PKS in 2024 are nevertheless moving in a similar direction across the entire political spectrum makes it particularly clear how the narrative 'Criminal foreigners out!' has moved out of the far-right political spectrum. While it would traditionally be expected from a party like the AfD (8.2 on the left-right

12 In addition, taking into account control variables such as gender, residential environment, level of education, experience of parental violence or a delinquent peer group, higher crime rates among young people with a 'migration background' in certain fields proved not to be specific to the 'migration background,' but rather to those socio-economic and demographic factors (Heinz, 2019; Krieg et al., 2020).

scale), it now extends all the way to Bündnis 90/Die Grünen, which is perceived as more moderate on the left of the political spectrum (3.5 on the left-right scale).[13]

Conclusion

The slogan 'Criminal foreigners out!,' which was traditionally associated with the extreme far-right spectrum, is now also being adopted – in a weakened or implicit form – by political parties from the center to the left. This development is closely linked to the political and media staging of crime statistics. The PKS in particular serves as the basis for arguments critical of migration, although their informative value is considerably limited due to methodological distortions and structural selectivity. Although crime is not a phenomenon of origin but a social phenomenon, migration-related crime narratives can be observed more and more frequently in political debates, especially in reactions to the 2023 PKS. This creates the impression that migration is a primary driver of crime, contrary to conclusive research findings on that topic.

The political reaction to the 2023 PKS makes it clear that crime discourses critical of migration are no longer only instrumentalized by far-right extremist actors. Rather, politicians from the democratic spectrum are also reproducing narratives – sometimes probably consciously, sometimes seemingly without reflection – that directly link crime and migration. It can be seen that even parties with a moderate left to liberal political position formulate demands for tougher measures against non-German criminals and thus adopt far-right extremist argumentation patterns. This discursive convergence of democratic parties with extreme far-right positions should not only be understood as a strategic election campaign tactic but also indicates a far-reaching transformation of political communication patterns. This process harbors far-reaching social risks. The adoption and dissemination of far-right narratives by political and media actors contributes to the creeping normalization of positions that were previously rejected as extreme. This not only leads to a shift in the boundaries of what can be said, but also legitimizes racist and authoritarian political approaches in the long term. The public discourse on crime and migration is increasingly characterized by truncated and emotionalized representations that can deepen social divisions and undermine democratic principles.

13 Fittingly, the newly elected party leader Felix Banaszak, who is considered to belong to the left wing of the Greens, was also quoted in a television interview: "*Maximum severity is needed here [violent crimes by foreigners]. (…) And I am absolutely clear on this: anyone who forfeits the right here, who abuses the right that is given to them. Then they have also forfeited it. (…) People who commit brutal acts of violence, kill people and all that have no place in this country in the long term.*" *(quote in ZDF, 2024; own translation)*

Against this backdrop, there is an urgent need for crime discourses to be based more on empirical scientific evidence. An evidence-based crime policy must move away from populist simplifications and instead focus on a differentiated analysis of the actual causes and structures of crime. This includes the consideration of socio-economic factors, the reflection of institutional selection mechanisms and the critical analysis of media and political narratives. Only a well-founded examination of the complex connections between crime, social inequality and social patterns of perception can prevent security policy debates from being instrumentalized to legitimize discriminatory and exclusionary policies. Furthermore, a critical reflection of political responsibility is necessary in this discourse. The willingness of democratic parties to use narratives critical of migration should not be seen merely as a pragmatic adaptation to public moods, but as a potentially momentous normalization of far-right positions. Political communication on crime and migration therefore requires a high degree of sensitivity and differentiation in order to prevent far-right ideologies from being gradually transferred into the social mainstream through discursive connectivity.

In summary, it can be seen that the discursive linking of crime and migration has become a central instrument of political debate that has an impact far beyond far-right extremist milieus. The reproduction of anti-migration crime narratives by democratic actors contributes to establishing social enemy stereotypes and emotionalizing security policy debates. Evidence-based crime research and differentiated political and media reporting are therefore essential in order to counteract the further normalization of far-right extremist positions and enable an objective, fact-based debate on crime and its causes.

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Deutschland Solidarisch Gestalten – Shaping Germany in Solidarity[1]

Mario Faust-Scalisi

The group 'Deutschland Solidarisch Gestalten' – 'Shaping Germany in Solidarity' – is made up of academics, activists and artists who work in memorial sites, NGOs or educational institutions. It emerged from academic work on Germany's most far-right party, the 'Alternative für Deutschland' – 'Alternative for Germany' (AfD), and their use of lies as a political tool. What started as a seminar and working group soon connected with other actors, grounded in the understanding that academia is not outside of society, as a supposedly 'objective' observer, but an active part of it. The authors came from academia, activism, and the arts, representing a range of age groups, professions, genders, and racialized positions.

While the seminar on the AfD and its use of lies began in April 2024, it took only a few months to connect with civil society actors, educators and other academics and to meet in a workshop format. The aim was clearly to inform and, through this work, engage in public education. Accordingly, the work focused first on identifying the main arguments that constitute the AfD's rhetoric and then, in a second step, to counter them with facts. In doing so, we drew on and mobilized diverse areas of expertise. Our main aim was to equip people who wish to confront AfD voters with substantiated arguments; but we also kept in mind the possibility of addressing sympathizers of the far-right party directly. This goal was encapsulated in the collective umbrella term 'Shaping Germany in Solidarity' – 'Deutschland solidarisch gestalten' (DSG). We were eager to reclaim the concept of 'Germany,' while emphasizing both the potential of transformation – 'shaping' – and the necessity of solidary interactions. For this purpose, some actors involved had to move beyond the terminologies they would usually use.

The inaugural workshop was an inspiring experience for everyone involved. We quickly realized that we might not agree on many details, such as the root causes of the rise of the far right or whether to emphasize migration's economic benefits for

1 All content reproduced here is based on the work in collective authorship. But Mario Faust-Scalisi is solely responsible for the presentation and linguistic version here.

Germany. Despite all our differences, the co-working process was productive, inasmuch as we were able to agree to disagree in order to pursue our overarching goal. As a result, within just a few weeks, the first version of our brochure was ready. For the next step – outreach – we began presenting the brochure in small workshops and events across southeastern Germany. We also launched a website to make the brochure publicly accessible (Deutschland Solidarisch Gestalten, 2025b). Shortly after, we set up a social media account (Instagram, 2025). However, we lacked the resources to keep both platforms updated or to expand our reach through more connections and, therefore, more views and likes. Being aware of our limited resources and capacities, the idea was instead to publish the already completed brochure as a kind of light book, using networks and channels familiar to most of those involved. However, this also proved difficult. The original goal – to collaborate with a publicly funded educational institution – did not work out. To make this possible, we would have had to demonstrate that the publication was 'neutral,' essentially treating the far-right party like any other democratic party. Since the brochure was designed to challenge the AfD, it did not meet the criteria of 'neutrality' required by those overseeing releases publicly funded in public education in major German outlets. The group around DSG decided not to pursue this route, if it meant sacrificing sharpness and political intervention. Instead, we began searching for a publisher willing to publish the book – and we succeeded in the autumn of 2024. In as much as goal was to inform the public about the true aims of the far-right AfD by citing directly from their official programs, some publishing houses declined our request, unwilling to reproduce AfD content. Eventually, however, Unrast Verlag, agreed to publish the approximately 100-page book under the title "What the AfD claims and how we talk about it in society," just ahead of Germany's federal election in early 2025 (Deutschland Solidarisch Gestalten, 2025a).

This book is intended as a critical intervention grounded in analysis, a commitment expressed through communication. In the following, the main perspectives and encounters will be summarized and brought into dialogue with the central, unifying theme of the book.

The book begins with an introduction outlining its primary purpose: to critically examine the claims made by the AfD and to oppose them. This approach makes it possible to clarify what the AfD actually stands for. In essence, the book demonstrates that the AfD seeks to establish an autocratic state with a legally codified agenda of discrimination. It thereby reveals that the AfD is fundamentally a far-right party, and at least in part, a fascist one. The AfD promotes an agenda with sexism and racism at its core. In doing so, it becomes clear that the AfD represents a massive threat and is part of the broader pan-European resurgence of fascism and the far right. The party is actively contributing to a shift in Germany, and other European societies, aimed at undermining anti-discrimination measures. In this sense, the AfD is not a conservative force. On the contrary, the party is not interested

in preserving the status quo but in regressing by decades, if not centuries. The alleged conservatism of far-right political forces is, in fact, disrupting the still-recent progress toward more reflective and anti-discriminatory politics. This phenomenon is not new and can be described as a backlash: a targeted, structural attack by far-right forces against emancipatory movements and achievements. The aim is clear – to reassert *white*, ad heterosexual norms and exclusionary practices, making them loud, visible, and socially acceptable again.

This must be exposed and explained as the true aim of the AfD and other far-right forces. To do so, the lies behind the AfD's rhetoric and claims must be clearly outlined and countered with well-founded facts. These facts are not only academic in nature but also grounded in the experiences and expertise of academic, activist and artistic actors of different age groups, professions and genders. Black people, People of Color and *white* people have all contributed to this project. The objective, as the name self-given name suggests – 'Shaping Germany in Solidarity' – is to help shape a more solidaric Germany, beginning with the mobilization of the research and lived experiences of the contributing authors. A key foundation for this effort, and a major ingredient for an intersectional solidarity, is to take seriously the threat posed by the AfD to BIJPoC that is Black people, Indigenous people, Jews and People of Color, as well as to queer people or those with chronic illnesses or disabilities. This includes respecting and adopting the self-perceptions and naming practices of those 'othered' by the AfD and similar actors. Doing so avoids reproducing discrimination through language and instead acknowledges exclusion as a process of being constructed as the 'other.'

The work of DSG and this book is grounded in the understanding that, while arguing based on facts is an important skill, you need to be willing to talk to one another and truly listen to trigger a shift in society in the sense of (re)shaping it. Empathy plays a key role in this process. To evoke constructive dialogue and positive engagement, we consistently began with the question: "What does the world you want to live in look like?" Bringing about social change requires both factual knowledge and an awareness of, as well as the willingness to confront the far right. It involves knowing how to argue with these facts and a willingness to use them in dialogue. This calls for a culture of debate but one of mindful, appreciative and empathetic communication. The publication itself, and the way it is presented, is part of this broader effort. Taking people's concerns seriously and explaining the aims of the far right without immediately judging potential voters is essential. For some, it is important that the achievements of anti-discrimination work and the related legislation are taken seriously, as they hope that this will lead to improvements in their own lives and those of others. Others, however, are provoked by precisely these developments and dismiss them as 'wokeness.' In this rapid judgement, anything labeled as 'woke' is automatically rejected, without the need for substantive engagement or debate (Gabler, 2024).

A frequently cited example of this is the use of gender-just language, which aims to represent all genders equally. However, many of the innovations introduced into the German language for this purpose have been faced strong resistance from large parts of society and even from some federal governments. For those in favor, gender-inclusive language affirms that their identities are recognized and respected. Others, however, perceive it as a threatening change. In fact, gender-inclusive language has been officially banned in schools and universities in some federal states in Germany (GEW, 2024). In this publication, we aim to pursue anti-discriminatory work while also acknowledging existing resentments rather than ignoring them. Maintaining dialogue, even when it is controversial, is important. That is why this publication exists: because the far right profits from societal divisions and knows how to instrumentalize them for their own purposes.

Against this, the AfD is committed to polarizing issues, particularly those that are open to and deserving of public debate. However, the party often appears uninterested in balanced, nuanced and fact-based discussions. This resistance to a fair exchange aligns with a far-right strategy of deliberately polarizing discourse, based on a constructed 'us versus them' logic. On the flip side, this gives the AfD the floor to present seemingly simple answers to complex questions and challenges. DSG aims to counter this. Guided by the insight that something changes whenever we speak, this publication serves both as an invitation and an intervention. Those who listen are influenced by what they hear – and in turn, shape those who are being listened to. Speaking and listening to one another, learning and unlearning, striving to understand and be understood – this is what it takes to be part of a continually evolving society.

However, this needs the recognition and acceptance that societies like Germany's are complex. The processes and interrelationships that make up our world are intricate. Accordingly, specific skills are required to understand these complexities. Nonetheless, we often need to simplify them in everyday life. This tension is best illustrated with an example: We all know what an apple is. If asked about its color, most people would probably say an apple is green, yellow or red. Strictly speaking, however, every apple has its own unique coloration. An apple that appears predominantly red may also have yellow or green spots. Nevertheless, we would not focus on such subtleties at the fruit counter – we'd simply ask for a red apple.' In everyday life, and especially in language, it is often extremely helpful to simplify complex relationships. This enables us to make decisions and act. Most people can deal with this function of language constructively. They are also capable of applying it to other areas, like medicine or climate change. At times, we must trust the expertise of those who understand given complexities, while relying on their ability to boil it down to simpler terms. Trust is needed here. Most people are aware of their abilities and limits, knowing and accepting that they have some or no expertise in certain matters. For this reason, in every social interaction, it is important to be

able to correctly assess one's own skills. We, for example, learn to trust that others know when apples are ripe for picking and can be sold at the fruit counter. This trust helps us enormously in everyday life. We trust physicians to know more about the human body than most patients do. And physicians, in turn, trust their colleagues when they seek advice or new findings at conferences and meetings. At the same time, each person carries knowledge about their own experiences of pain and thus imparts knowledge to physicians in treatment situations. Part of the overall picture is that knowledge and facts are not fixed but are constantly being renegotiated and further researched. These complexities and processes, these important skills, are often deliberately overridden by the political strategies and rhetoric of the far right. Parties and actors like the AfD intentionally reduce complexities to simplistic 'truths' designed to serve their own agendas. In doing so, they propose solutions that contradict expert opinions. The DSG group actively works to counter this through its efforts and in this publication.

Following this introduction outlining the aims of the book as well as the major topics and concerns, DSG discusses key themes and areas of German far-right policies, claims and assumptions across ten chapters. The first chapter reflects on the initial thoughts that lead to the founding of DSG – specifically, the role that lies play for the AfD and their form of populism. Unlike the chapters focused on issues like sexism or ableism, this chapter is less topic-centered and adopts a more overarching and partly meta-perspective. It shows how, in the so constructed battle for votes and recognition, far-right parties are trying to position themselves in opposition to democratic institutions by relying on populism as a core political strategy. A basic idea of populism is that messages are communicated in a way that the majority of the population can easily see and understand. When framed positively, what is said appears simple and, often because of this, becomes convincing to many. Strictly speaking, however, this involves manipulation: complex issues are greatly simplified, significantly distorted or deliberately misrepresented. This is the true nature of populism. Marginal problems are repeatedly exaggerated. Issues that are already being debated in society are taken up and either oversimplified solutions are presented – with the far-right party portrayed as the only one capable of guaranteeing them – or the issue is framed as entirely unsolvable. There is no genuine interest in solving these challenges; rather, the problems are merely addressed to instrumentalize them. After all, problems and conflicts are the very lifeblood on which far-right populism thrives. It feeds on dissatisfaction, outrage and hatred – emotions that in turn foster division and insecurity. The widely articulated desire for security is exploited to incite fear. This includes, among other tactics, the delegitimization of politicians from governing parties, intellectuals and journalists by discrediting them as belonging to 'the establishment' – a group portrayed as acting against the interests of the so-called 'normal population.'

To discuss this further, the focus is on the use of fear to gain votes. Not only in Germany, but in many countries, people long for security and associate it with stability. But change does not necessarily mean greater insecurity – consider, for instance, reactions to the introduction of seatbelts or airbags. Nevertheless, many people experience change as a source of uncertainty that frightens them. One reason is that change often means having to learn new skills, which can be particularly stressful, especially for older people. As a result, many perceive change not only as a loss of security, but also as a scary prospect. Fear of the future, especially when combined with financial uncertainty, can make people more susceptible to false promises. The AfD knows how to make political capital out this. It counters change – both programmatically and rhetorically – with so-called 'consistency,' in line with conservative politics. However, the AfD does not aim to be traditionally conservative. It does not seek to preserve the status quo; rather, it wants to turn back time – ultimately, to a time before democracy. To support this agenda, fear is fostered, and often first constructed and spread by far-right actors. Strictly speaking, the AfD is a 'fear movement' (Biess, 2019, p. 143), because it systematically fuels and stages threats to serve its own purposes. A major fear it exploits is the fear of injustice: the fear of being left behind, of losing out compared to others, or of not receiving enough recognition (Eckert, 2020). However, such stems from a subjective egoistic perspective and neglects the fact that a fair distribution must include not only one's own needs, but also the needs of others. Parties like the AfD exploit this fear of scarcity and when people feel forgotten, or neglected, fear can easily turn into anger. This is precisely what the AfD seeks to provoke. It is vital to recognize that emotions and politics cannot be separated (Helfritzsch, 2022). The core target of agitation over so-called 'new' injustices are so constructed 'migrants,' an unprecise term that primarily refers to BIJPoC. This rhetoric follows a long tradition of racism in Germany, especially the fear of migration, as popularized by the social democrat Thilo Sarrazin (2010). The underlying narrative portrays BIJPoC as taking advantage of the German welfare state and threatening the German 'Volk,' often by depicting them as 'criminals.' The focus is especially on Black and Muslim male-read persons, who are additionally stereotyped as 'rapists.' The 'solution' presented by the AfD – an 'end to migration' – is a lie, ignoring the complex realities behind migration procedures and, rather than providing a 'solution,' introduces even greater challenges.

This is exemplary of the AfD's style of working with lies while claiming to be the only 'honest' party. Ideally politicians are expected to make truthful statements and act based on facts, to be trustworthy. The AfD and other far-right actors claim they alone speak the truth, while all others are lying. However, these claims are riddled with contradictions – such as accusing all other parties of monopolizing power, while itself promoting an autocratic state where it would be the only ruling party. The same holds true for their stance on 'freedom of speech': they denounce the 'established press' as the 'lying press' ('Lügenpresse'), while simultaneously advocating

for censorship, as in the case of gender-sensitive or anti-racist language. The close links to Trumpism are evident here (Bittner, 2024). The paradox lies in the fact that the AfD undermines trust in politics and at the same time increases the credibility of its own falsehoods. Strictly speaking, the AfD deliberately uses lies as a political strategy. In many interviews AfD politicians contradict themselves within minutes. In one example from 2023, Alexander Wiesner, an AfD member of the Saxony state parliament, made conflicting statements in the span of a 5-minute interview on 'Sachsen-Fernsehen': he claimed that women do not earn less than men (Sachsen-Fernsehen, 2023, 1:00-1:04), but also stated that it is good that women earn less than men (ibid., 4:47-4:52). In fact, the gender pay gap in Saxony was 8% (Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend, 2023). However, the far-right rhetoric of the AfD does not merely consist of contradictions; its politicians also fabricate figures, statistics and facts. For example, during a televised debate on 'Welt-TV' on April 11, 2024, Björn Höcke falsely claimed that 110 billion euros are spent on development aid and asylum policy. In reality, expenditure on public development aid only amounts to around 34 billion euros (Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2024), and between 17 and 27 billion euros for asylum policy (Statista, 2024a). These lies are key to justify policies that promise simplistic solutions but fall apart on closer scrutiny. To rectify its demand to leave the European Union, the AfD must claim that Brexit was a 'success,' contrary to all available statistics. Similarly, fabricated numbers and misrepresentations are needed to sustain the narrative of 'criminal migrants.' Without these lies, the AfD and its political agenda would not be viable.

Social media plays a major role in promoting these claims, serving as both a central outlet and communication platform. The AfD remains dominant on these platforms, although other parties are slowly gaining ground (Hillje, 2024). There are clear reasons for this, as DSG has emphasized through extensive and diverse research on the topic. Social media platforms are especially effective for establishing quick and easy connections. One key factor is that polarizing posts tend to enjoy a longer lifespan on average and are favored by platform algorithms. The AfD has learned to exploit these algorithms to its advantage. With populist statements linked to current trends and often presented in emotional videos, the AfD is able to generate enormous numbers of views, which in turn lead to higher interaction rates and help amplify its reach (Steinwachs, 2024). In addition, social media platforms are the perfect place to reach a young audience. This does not always occur through direct or overtly political messages. Instead, seemingly harmless content – such as memes, lifestyle or fitness videos – is used to convey discriminatory or populist ideologies, gradually introducing viewers to fascist ideas, attitudes, claims and lies. In many cases, it is not just the official AfD accounts that are involved, but also AfD-affiliated individuals, influencers, groups and magazines. And this has an effect, as more young voters for the AfD can be linked to these developments without directly

claiming responsibility. It is no coincidence that student representatives in several federal states are increasingly reporting far-right incidents at schools and warning against them. Further, comment functions on posts by 'established' media are used extensively to spread hatred, prejudice and lies – less by the party itself, but rather by sympathizers who use the same slogans, messages and falsehoods promoted by official AfD posts. Many highly active commentators can be linked to well-organized groups tied to the AfD and the 'Identitarians.' As a result, the impression of the average opinion of the population is distorted to the right, which can lead to a false weighting in politics and the media (Eckert & Gensing, 2019). Since posts on social media platforms do not require reliable sources, they provide an ideal framework for spreading lies. In addition, artificial intelligence (AI) can be used to manipulate information, further blurring the boundaries between reality and lies and making it increasingly difficult for audiences to categorize statements accurately (Bieß & Pawelek, 2020). This weak point is exploited by the AfD, using lies as their main asset.

Taking these findings into account, DSR stresses the need to check news multiple times, to research sources, and to ask who is spreading the news and what potential benefits might be behind it. However, this requires media literacy, which is neither widespread nor sufficiently taught. A first step towards fostering such literacy is the publication of DSR itself offering arguments for a different way of dealing with the questions the AfD raises and popularizes. These arguments do not claim to be exhaustive, but they can provide food for thought. The aim is to prevent unproductive arguments and strengthen a culture of debate. This has to be a debate that is respectful, open-ended, and based on arguments, with a willingness to trust and listen to one another. Democracy thrives on dialogue, on the exchange of ideas, values and perspectives. For this, it is important how we talk to and treat each other. Every conversation offers an opportunity to get to know the other person better, to understand what moves their heart and what worries are on their mind. Contrary to the claims and constructions of the AfD, conversations are not a competition to be right, but an opportunity for interpersonal exchange. It is therefore important to remain honest, to avoid generalizations, and to take other people seriously.

A second chapter then presents the history, roots, and origins of the current threat of fascism and the far right. It delves into the history of racism and colonialization as major pillars underlying contemporary racism, which itself is a central pillar of far-right actors and parties such as the German AfD. In doing so, the 'positive' narrative of 'civilization' eagerly promoted by the AfD is countered, revealing the cruelty, harsh economic realities, and exploitative aims behind historical colonialism and contemporary neocolonialism. However, the presentation and analysis do not stop there; instead, links are drawn between colonial racism, National Socialism, and the current far right, not only in Germany but elsewhere as well. Following the question of whether all this is merely a thing of the past, the chapter

clearly rejects this notion, showing how the AfD today deliberately links its claims and rhetoric to historical racism, fascism and National Socialism. It examines the AfD's construction of itself as positioned against National Socialism, for example, by absurdly claiming that Adolf Hitler was a 'communist' and that National Socialism was 'left-wing,' while portraying the AfD as 'conservative-right' (Metzger & Schneider, 2025). These counter-factual narratives are deconstructed in this chapter and it is shown how the true roots and origins of the AfD and their thoughts and claims can be seen in their asylum policies and narratives.

This then allows for the discussion to move in the next chapter to one of the major fields of AfD rhetoric, which forms the basis for its claims against 'migrants.' These claims are actually rooted in racism but are presented as 'rational' and 'fact-based.' The AfD portrays People of Color as a major source of insecurity for Germany. However, as shown in the chapter, it is racialized people who no longer feel safe. According to German law, there can be no distinctions between people in Germany and beyond; as human beings, all have inviolable dignity. Contrary to this fact, the AfD claims to make politics for 'citizens' first, without even clarifying who is meant by 'citizens.' This ambiguity is linked to statements by AfD politicians who deny 'true citizenship' to those they construct as 'migrants.' Taking this rhetoric seriously, the AfD has no aim of protecting every person living in Germany, but only those who fit their ideal of being 'German' – that is, predominantly white Germans. To better understand the policies they advocate, it is important to bear in mind the impact of the AfD's policies: the so-called protection of German citizens not only leads to disadvantages for others, but in the most extreme cases can even result in their death. It can be shown that the AfD does not treat all human lives equally but instead prioritizes those it considers more worthy of protection. This, once again is grounded in history. The specific racism of the far-right AfD brings together spatial, religious and physical concepts, with 'Islam' serving as a central point of reference. In both the rhetoric and policies of the AfD, 'Islam' is often equated with Islamism. Perceived Muslim men and so-called 'clan criminality' are portrayed as threats to white Germans. Within this context, the AfD claims that they alone can take effective action. Once again, these claims are built on lies and misleading associations. Most people involved in organized crime hold German citizenship (Bundeskriminalamt, 2023). Furthermore, most terrorist attacks carried out in Germany cannot be traced to any particular ideology. And when they can, they are usually motivated by extreme right-wing ideology (Tuschhoff, 2016). These facts are often ignored or concealed. The AfD distorts reality and misrepresents the threat situation. This is analyzed and demonstrated by examining quotes from AfD programs in detail, contrasting their claims with the factual situation in Germany. This in the end allows for the deconstruction of AfD's major claim of 'criminal migrants.'

This is followed by a chapter on the sexism of the AfD and another on the AfD and ableism. Both chapters clearly demonstrate that the AfD is a sexist and ableist

party, and show how deeply sexism and ableism are rooted in its far-right policies and rhetoric. Claims suggesting otherwise critically examined and revealed to be mere rhetoric, not reflected in the actual programs and aims of the AfD. It is clearly outlined that the AfD's programs and the world view they present are deeply misogynistic and directed against gender equality (Lang, 2017, p. 61 ff.). Instead, time and again, the "traditional family" (AfD, 2016, p. 09, translation by the author) is emphasized as a core value. Even though this may sound harmless it leads to expectations regarding a 'normalcy' that is to be achieved – or 'preserved,' as the AfD would claim – at all costs. In the end, this justifies misogynynistic, anti-LGBTIQ+, and ableist policies, combined with outright racism, because it is 'white Germans' who are expected to have more children. All of this is aimed at preventing Germany from 'abolishing itself' (Sarrazin, 2010) and creating 'Germany – but normal' (AfD, 2021) – as the AfD rhetoric goes. Once again, these aims are hidden behind seemingly 'positive' messages. Yes, families are to be supported, and so are those with severe disabilities – but only under certain conditions: the latter are to be separated from the rest in 'special' schools, while the former are supported only if they are heteronormative white German families. Regarding the AfD's ableism, the issue of inclusion in schools is of particular concern and is therefore discussed in depth in the relevant chapter. With the simple rhetorical twist of declaring 'inclusion' an 'ideology' and portraying 'special' schools as the best solution for all, brutal ableism is justified and camouflaged at the same time. An example of this is the far-right AfD's opposition to plain language, quotas or specific support measures. The desired so-called 'normalcy' is nothing more than a pseudo-Darwinist struggle, framed as 'personal responsibility,' and used to attack state support or communitarian ideas. Here, as with anti-racism or other measures against discrimination, the narrative is simply reversed – quotas for those who are discriminated are portrayed as discriminatory themselves, and special supportive treatment is labelled 'unfair,' as if it provides an undue advantage in competition. Explaining these rhetorical tricks helps to expose how deeply sexism and ableism are embedded in the aims of the AfD.

Another major concern of the AfD is 'social justice' in terms of economic justice, not least because the constructed category of 'workers' represents a particularly valuable voter group for the party and is a major pillar of its electoral success. The AfD likes to present itself as a party that is close to the people, that fights for those left behind by society or by the so-called 'established parties.' However, despite this rhetoric, the policies it pursues would actually work against a large proportion of its own voters and further widen the gap between rich and poor (Fratzscher, 2023). Elon Musk's increasing support for the AfD underlines the party's neoliberal orientation. But it also shows that even though many of the AfD's voters are poor, the forces behind the party and its success are quite different. In fact, extremely wealthy individuals and think tanks are driving the rise of the far right. This is evident, for example, in the policy field of education. Like other far-rights parties and groups,

the AfD is in favor of the merit principle' in schools and universities (AfD, 2016, p. 11). According to this principle, not everyone should have the same opportunities or even start life from the same starting line. Considering that many people are already disadvantaged through no fault of their own before they even begin school, the AfD policies would cement and worsen these inequalities rather than solve or reduce them. If the AfD had its way, social inequality would only worsen. The AfD does not support the promotion of children and young people who are disadvantaged. Instead, it seeks to bolster an elite that is *white*, male-read and able-bodied. Part of this approach – which aligns with the AfD's ableist positioning – is the replacement of support structures in schools with early screening processes. However, these screenings are not intended to support those in need, but rather to sort them out. Research shows that, without appropriate countermeasures, parents' levels of education and wealth are decisive factors in their children's educational trajectories. Many AfD voters would be adversely affected by these measures and would struggle even more as a result. Beyond being unjust, such policies are also economically unreasonable. In 2022, around 19% of 20- to 34-year-olds did not have a formal vocational qualification, which equates to 2.86 million young people (BIBB, 2024) – roughly the combined population of Cologne and Hamburg. At the same time, there is an enormous shortage of skilled workers. Early supportive education could counteract this shortage, protect people from economic risks and poverty, and enable social integration and stronger communities. However, none of this aligns with the aims of the AfD. Instead, its educational ideal is one of discipline and order – an approach focused on forming and sorting individuals. This is not only contrary to the needs of modern societies but also against the very interests of its own voters. Yet again, this is camouflaged by lies and rhetorical reversals of logic. These dynamics are explored in greater detail in the chapter on the AfD as a neoliberal party, despite its claims of being the 'true' workers' party.

But it is not only a challenge to clarify and outline the true aims of the AfD; the counter-narratives against the AfD are to be taken into perspective. Probably the most significant of these is the narrative framing of the AfD as an 'East-German-phenomenon,' which tends to explain away its roots and challenges in those parts of Germany that were part of the Federal Republic of Germany. To address this, DSG critically examined the relationship between the AfD and Eastern Germans. First, factual data was considered: in local, state and federal elections, the AfD is voted for across all generations. There is a marked difference between men and women, with men tending to support the AfD more. It is also clear that the AfD is more popular in rural areas than in cities. As far as the federal states are concerned, the farther south and east the ballot boxes are located, the higher the outcomes for the AfD in general. The AfD was, and still is, more popular in Eastern Germany than in Western Germany. Eastern Germany is a focal point of the AfD's presence and, in particular, of far-right radicalization in Germany. The reasons for this are complex, as outlined

in the respective chapter. Part of it is that many East Germans still feel like 'second-class citizens.' The disappointment of the transformation years goes hand in hand with a general disenchantment with politics. This has led some East Germans to vote for the AfD as an anti-Western and anti-establishment party. In addition, the AfD advocates for an authoritarian state constitution. According to the assumption that the AfD is an 'East German phenomenon,' the majority of East Germans would consider this model more suitable than democracy for addressing upcoming challenges (EFBI, 2023). However, this has to be linked to the experience of the GDR as a dictatorship, as well as to the long history of West German racism and far-right developments. The discussion in the DSG clearly shows that considering the AfD an 'East German phenomenon' is no better than simply accepting the rhetorical claims of the AfD itself. This is a dangerous simplification and, in large parts, counterfactual. The AfD is powerfully facilitated by far-right actors from West Germany, a fact neglected by the narrative of it being solely an 'East-German-phenomenon.' Such simplifications explain away the real danger of the AfD, ultimately allowing the far right to gain more influence and power. All this is shown and discussed in the chapter on East Germany and the AfD.

Lines from this flawed narrative must also be drawn to another strong but equally false narrative of the AfD being a 'democratic' party or one that has been 'democratically confirmed.' This narrative follows a similar pattern of simplification as explaining away the AfD as an 'East German phenomenon.' DSG shows and stresses that the AfD plans to establish a state that corresponds to its fascist worldview. It seeks an autocracy, a 'strong state' in which a few rule over the majority and central democratic laws are abolished. To allow for this seemingly 'democratically elected' 'wish of the majority' discrimination against minorities is legitimized, along with the persecution of all those constructed as 'political enemies.' For this the desired 'strong state' needs to be a police state based on state violence and repression. This is not a hidden plan but one that is openly presented by far-right publicists and politicians such as Maximilian Krah (2023). It is based on collaborations with other fascists, especially within German speaking countries. A major actor in this planned 'regime change' through 'democratic election' is the Austrian fascist Martin Sellner. These actors outline how to 'overtake,' and 'reconquer,' especially through a 'cultural war' and by gaining influence, for example, in universities (Sellner, 2023). Their clear goal is to establish a different state, justified by 'observations' that the current state reacts 'too slowly' due to the many rules and controls constraining decisions. Instead, the state they envision needs to act and decide authoritatively and autonomously. This clearly includes limiting the rights of those who oppose this 'new state.' The endgame is to abandon what is inscribed in every liberal concept of freedom as a lesson of history: the principle of equality. The liberal state also treats those who reject it according to the same criteria as everyone else (as long as constitutional principles are respected) and, as a rule, also supports the interests

of so-called minorities. The AfD exploits this by working against the liberal state while being protected and supported by it at the same time. However, this is not something the AfD intends to maintain once it has power itself. The autocratic state planned by the AfD is committed only to its own fascist norms and would rigorously turn against anyone who does not conform. This applies to BIJPoC as well as non-binary and trans people, but also to 'political enemies.' Far-right actors call for nothing less than a police state that takes preventive action and suppresses dissenters and minorities. At the same time, they advocate coming to power legally. But this is not democratic; a party aiming to abolish democracy cannot have a 'democratic vote' to do so, since democracy is much more than a majority of votes. Reducing democracy to the majority vote is a dangerous tendency that explains away the true dangers posed by the AfD. In this context, it is the task of democracy to prevent the AfD and other far-right actors from gaining the power to abolish the very system that enables them to partake in power sharing. For the AfD, democracy is merely a tool to gain power. Therefore, it is misleading to continue calling their votes and their party 'democratic' when they work against democracy itself. All of this is explained in detail in the respective chapter by DSR, to enable an understanding of what power in the hands of the AfD would mean. This also serves to counter those who argue that the AfD would deconstruct itself once it gains power. Such an experiment is much too risky for democracy to survive.

These chapters finally allow some conclusions to be drawn. They focus on two major points: that the AfD is a party of the far right and that the AfD seeks to turn back time to fascism. For the first point, the insights and explanations of the chapters are brought together. It is clearly stated that although the AfD may be democratically elected, that alone does not make it democratic. The AfD presents itself as a right-wing party that represents conservative values. To allow for this self-positioning, it claims that all other parties represented in the Bundestag are 'left-wing,' including the CDU/CSU. However, this is incorrect. The CDU/CSU, especially amidst the general shift to the right in the 'center of society,' is clearly conservative and center-right, not at all 'left.' Accordingly, the AfD is neither conservative nor simply right-wing. As shown, the AfD does not seek to preserve a status quo. Rather, it represents a worldview based on racism and seeks a return to the past. This makes the AfD a far-right and, at least in part, fascist party. Precisely because of this, important parts of the AfD are classified by the 'Verfassungsschutz' as 'confirmed right-wing extremist,' while others are at least considered 'suspected right-wing extremists' (Statista, 2024b) in the moment of writing the collectively authored book. This means that there is no longer merely a suspicion that significant parts of the AfD are extreme and far-right, but that this is now taken to be certain. It is clearly emphasized that just as the NSDAP was not a democratic party simply because it won a relative majority democratically in 1932, the AfD is not a democratic party just because it is electable. To further underscore this point, it is shown that many AfD politi-

cians had far-right biographies prior to joining the AfD party. For example, it has been proven that from 2021 to 2025, the AfD parliamentary group employed over 100 people from the far-right milieu, including so-called 'neo-Nazis' (Tagesschau, 2024). Top politicians such as Maximilian Krah and Björn Höcke ignore German war crimes and deliberately use National Socialist language and symbols. The democratic parties in Germany have so far shied away from pursuing the juridical process of banning the AfD as being unconstitutional. Moreover, the hurdles involved are very high, and there is a fear that a failed attempt could potentially result in even more harm done. Meanwhile, the AfD does its best to present itself as 'only right-wing.' However, those who vote for the AfD are not simply voting for a 'right-wing' or 'conservative' party. In reality, anyone who votes for the AfD is supporting a police state that relies on racism and sexism, a neoliberal project that persecutes those who think differently. Considering all of this, it is entirely justified to call the AfD a far-right or even fascist party. Nonetheless, in German political discourse, other descriptions still prevail, such as labelling the AfD a 'populist party' – a term that obscures its very essence. The AfD is not merely a 'populist party,' but a far-right, and at least partially, fascist party that employs populism as a rhetorical strategy. It seeks to abolish democracy and establish an autocratic state. All of this is outlined and emphasized in the publication, which aims to show potential voters exactly what they are voting for.

All of this is finally brought together to show more clearly and with nuance the historical lines of the AfD and its policies, and how the AfD embodies the danger of history repeating itself. Past and present fascist and far-right politics have relied on populism for manipulation and emotionalization, on fear and hatred, as well as lies and simplifications. Far-right actors in Germany glorify violence as 'necessary mean' for transforming society into an autocratic system and bringing it inline. In such a structure, only an elite of leaders would be able to live self-determined and free lives. Dehumanization is not just a reality of the past. It can once again become a guiding principle at any time. And this is what the AfD stands for.

But even though this is a warning, the book, as well as the work of DSG, do not stand only for warning and showing dangers. In line with the chosen title of shaping Germany in solidarity, the aim is to offer something against this danger and warning – to end the book with hope and possibility, and to guide the collective's work towards a positive message of solidarity and potential. For this, it is key to understand the need to resist from the very beginning. A diverse democracy is hard work, but it is worth it – for everyone. Germany benefits from exchange with other parts of the world. Isolationism, on the other hand, as propagated by the far-right AfD, is not only morally wrong but also the opposite of taking responsibility. What's more, isolation is simply impossible today, not least because of the colonial past, which paradoxically created its own ghost by globally linking everything together. Anyone who wishes for all borders to be closed again, or who longs to return to the apparent

greatness of the colonial era and therefore strengthens far-right parties, must not only ask themselves what suffering this has caused, is causing, and would cause for other people, but also what it could mean for themselves. Even white Germans who have yet not felt threatened by the AfD's future scenarios should take a closer look. Efforts to bring people into line and homogenize them are always directed against members of their own group if they are identified as 'enemies.' Politicians, activists and other people who speak out and engage publicly against the far right or racism have been persecuted with increasing aggression, hatred, and agitation for years, and are increasingly also victims of acts of violence. Whether a person is subjected to this violence politically or ideologically does not depend on their self-designation or self-perception, but on the attributions made by the far right, by the AfD, and its radical supporters. This must be clearly kept in mind when writing or speaking about the AfD and German far right. Yes, there is hope in a solidaric confrontation, but there is also great danger.

We are currently standing at a historical crossroads, and everything seems to be repeating itself. In 2023, an EU survey revealed that Germany is currently the most racist country in the EU in terms of anti-Black racism (Tagesschau 2023). Anti-Semitism is also on the rise and anti-Semitic incidents are increasing significantly (Bundesverband RIAS, 2024). However, the rigorous prosecution of anti-Semitism in Germany should be part of a consistent assumption of responsibility for the past, present and future. 'Never again' also means leaving no space for any form of racism. But the opposite is currently happening. The same applies to anti-Muslim racism, which most of the *white* population not only tolerates but even openly and loudly supports. Anyone who actively and visibly protests against all these forms of racism is defamed. However, it is not only racism in its various forms that is becoming increasingly acceptable, but also sexism, for example. Instead of taking the protection of the legally recognized third gender seriously, the state governments in Saxony, Hesse and Bavaria have banned gender-inclusive language. The same applies to the exclusion of people with disabilities, which is once again becoming more widespread. In this situation, the middle of society must decide: does it want to follow the AfD to the far right, or to actually and effectively fight fascism? The future of the AfD will be decided in the so-called – and also statistically defined – center of society. It is not only about those voting in favor of the AfD, but mainly about those who are not voting for the AfD and who are not often enough actively standing against the party and far-right activists.

That is why the book and the work of DSG are an appeal to all those who have settled into their comfort zones, merely pointing their index finger at the AfD as if that were enough. 'Resist the beginnings' does not work from a rocking chair. And the future does not simply happen. The future is shaped. Nothing just occurs; everything is made. And that is a reassuring thought. Those who want to shape the future

will have more than just a say in where the AfD and its influence are headed. This is the appeal of DSG.

DSG and its work stand both as a solicitation and an example of commitment against the far right – originating in academia and reaching far beyond those active in the collective as a call to action. This call to action is not only the concluding message of the published book but is also emblematic and symbolic of the cooperation itself: there are many of us standing against the aims of the far right. We are the majority. Together, we can build real firewalls and dig trenches to drain the brown swamp – not only in upcoming elections but within society itself, in Germany and beyond. DSG intends to be an active player and facilitator in this urgent endeavor.

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Vox in Spain: Ideological Struggles and the Iberosphere Strategy

Guillermo Fernández-Vázquez

1. Introduction

The rise of Vox in the Spanish political landscape represents a significant case study within the broader context of the European radical and far right. While the party shares common features with other far-right movements – such as nationalism, anti-immigration rhetoric, and a strong emphasis on law and order – it also displays distinct ideological and strategic traits. Vox's discourse is deeply rooted in Spanish national identity and presents the party as a defender of traditional values against progressive and separatist forces. This particular blend of populism and nationalism has enabled Vox to carve out a space for itself both within Spain's right-wing political ecosystem and on the international stage.

Despite its electoral limitations compared to other European far-right parties, Vox has achieved notable international influence beyond Spain's borders. The party has actively sought to consolidate ties with like-minded political actors across Europe and the Americas, taking advantage of events such as CPAC (Conservative Political Action Conference) – where Vox's leader delivered a widely discussed speech in the 2025 edition – creating platforms like the 'Madrid Forum,' and sponsoring initiatives such as the so-called "Iberosphere Summits." Moreover, the recent appointment of Santiago Abascal as president of the European parliamentary group 'The Patriots' – instead of more prominent figures such as Viktor Orbán, Marine Le Pen, or even Matteo Salvini[1] – highlights Vox's growing political and strategic rel-

1 It is important to note that within the European parliamentary group 'The Patriots,' the parties that achieved the best results in the June 2024 European elections were France's 'Rassemblement National' – which contributed 30 MEPs – Hungary's 'Fidesz' with 12, and Italy's 'Lega' with 8 seats. The Spanish party ranks fifth: behind Austria's FPÖ in terms of number of representatives, and behind the Dutch PVV in percentage of the vote (Patriots.eu. (n.d.). *Parties.* Retrieved April 20, 2025, from https://patriots.eu/parties/). From this perspective, it would have seemed more logical for one of the leaders of these parties to assume the presidency of the group rather than Santiago Abascal.

evance on the international scene. One of the central hypotheses of this chapter is that Vox's international projection stems from its emerging role as a bridge or point of connection among different poles of the global far right.

Beyond its international influence, Vox is notable for promoting a form of nativism that slightly diverges from the canonical definition proposed by Cas Mudde (2017). The Spanish party expands the boundaries of the native in-group to include populations from the country's former colonies. Thus, while maintaining a firmly nativist and fiercely anti-Muslim vision of the Spanish nation, Santiago Abascal's party embraces a form of "Ethnic Hispanism" that recognizes Colombians, Venezuelans, Argentinians, Cubans, and Mexicans as potential compatriots (Sanahuja & López Burian, 2022).

This proposal of an "expanded nativism" is built upon the development of a new concept: the 'Iberosphere.' Inspired by the term 'Anglosphere,' this neologism aspires to establish a geopolitical and cultural community that encompasses all Spanish-speaking nations in Latin America, while also including Brazil. In this regard, the 'Iberosphere'-project has both a political-strategic dimension and a broader geopolitical one. The former is tied to the desire to unify conservative political parties and movements across Latin America in order to counteract the ideological and legislative agenda of progressive governments and institutions in the region (Fernández-Vázquez, 2024). The latter aims to reinforce the political and economic presence of Spain and the United States in the area, in response to the growing influence of China. This notion of a transatlantic right-wing alliance, framed through narratives of cultural and historical ties – and marked by a clear geopolitical orientation – represents a departure from the traditional narratives of the European far right, which have primarily focused on national sovereignty and intra-European alliances (Forti, 2024).

Nonetheless, despite the relative consolidation of the 'Iberosphere'-project, several open questions remain. First, it is unclear what role the former African and Asian colonies of the Spanish and Portuguese crowns are meant to play in this initiative. Second, the involvement of Portugal in the project remains uncertain, particularly regarding the level of commitment of the Portuguese far right represented by Chega. Third, more research is needed on how this concept has been received by the emerging right-wing movements in Latin America. Specifically, it is important to examine to what extent these new parties and leaders embrace the notion of the 'Iberosphere' and how they interpret it.

Finally, the emergence of new summits and meeting spaces, along with growing coordination among far-right forces on both sides of the Atlantic, calls for closer examination of how these parties and movements operate beyond their national contexts. In this regard, it is analytically crucial to map the circulation of ideas as well as the interactions among political formations – particularly those that systematically participate in specific forums. The calendar of far-right summits and events has

become so extensive and dense that an average leader of any European party could easily spend half the year traveling from one event to another. No other ideological family currently exhibits a comparable level of transnational activity.

The chapter is structured as follows. First, it reviews the main theoretical explanations that may account for the parliamentary breakthrough of Spain's far right in 2019 – rather than during the height of the economic crisis or the refugee crisis. Second, it delves into the explicitly metapolitical character that the party has embraced from its inception. This reflective stance is relatively novel within the European far right and makes it possible to connect conceptual creations such as the so-called 'Iberosphere' with ideological outcomes such as 'Ethnic Hispanism.'

2. Understanding Vox's Parliamentary Breakthrough

The history of Vox has been recounted on numerous occasions. For this reason, it is worth highlighting three key details that help situate the party in its proper context. First, like Germany's 'Alternative für Deutschland,' Vox was founded in 2013 (Porto-Artal, 2024). Second, its origin resembles that of parties such as Chega in Portugal, AfD in Germany, or Fratelli d'Italia in Italy: Vox emerged as a right-wing splinter from the main Christian democratic party (Lerín, 2022). Third, the Spanish formation belongs to the group of far-right parties that arose during the 2010s, alongside others like 'Reconquête' in France, *Chega* in Portugal, or 'Alianța pentru Unirea Românilor' in Romania (Ferreira, 2019). These three features position Vox as a "normal" party within the European far-right family, albeit one that appeared relatively late. Led by Santiago Abascal, Vox remains a relative newcomer to this ideological constellation, though it already occupies a prominent position on the international stage.

Vox's emergence in the Spanish political landscape, however, presents some specific features. Most notably, its electoral success is not directly linked to the effects of the 2008 financial crisis or the eurozone crisis. In this sense, it is difficult to explain the party's rise through the lens of so-called 'grievance theories,' which emphasize 'economic insecurity' (Norris & Inglehart, 2019) resulting from processes of economic modernization (Betz, 1994). From this perspective, Vox cannot be considered the party of the 'losers of globalization' (Rydgren, 2007). In fact, various academic studies have shown that, at the time of its entry into Parliament in 2019, its electorate did not come from the most disadvantaged sectors of society, but primarily from the middle and upper-middle classes (Rama et al., 2021).

In the case of Spain, the political formations that initially capitalized on the social unrest triggered by the 2008 economic crisis were 'Podemos' and, later, 'Ciudadanos.' It can therefore be argued that the 'losers of austerity' and those affected by the policies implemented in Spain following the eurozone crisis did not turn to

populist far-right options such as Vox, but rather to new populist left-wing parties and, to a lesser extent, to other actors characterized by a discourse of democratic renewal and reform (Fernández-Albertos, 2015). Indeed, until the general election of April 2019, Vox had never surpassed 1% of the vote in any nationwide contest (Rodríguez-Teruel, 2021). In short, although it was formally established in December 2013, Vox remained a marginal force throughout both the most acute years of the economic crisis and the subsequent crisis of the two-party system and the broader transformation of Spain's party landscape. The rise of Vox is also difficult to explain through the lens of 'cultural threat' theories (Ignazi, 1992). Spain's gradual transformation into a multiethnic society dates back to the turn of the century, yet neither at that time nor during the subsequent economic crisis did this phenomenon appear to play a decisive role in voting behavior (Uribe-Etxebarria et al., 2012). Moreover, between 2013 and 2019, Spain did not experience major conflicts or public controversies related to immigration or multiculturalism (Cervi, 2020). As a result, it can be argued that the emergence of the party led by Santiago Abascal was not a reaction to the gradual changes associated with the increasing multiculturalism of Spanish society (Rydgren, 2007).

Nonetheless, although Vox's rise does not follow the usual pattern proposed by culturally driven explanations – mainly focused on multiethnic conflict – it can indeed be linked to issues of collective identity. In particular, the party's sudden success appears closely connected to the perceived threat to Spanish national unity triggered by the resurgence of Catalan separatism in late 2017 (Rama et al., 2021). In this sense, it is by no means coincidental that the party led by Santiago Abascal gained momentum immediately after the illegal independence referendum held in Catalonia (García Agustín & Cossarini, 2025). At that point, large segments of Spanish society began to perceive a real threat to the integrity of the state – understood as a direct challenge to national identity.

Although Vox was not founded as a nationalist party – emerging instead as a right-wing splinter from the 'Partido Popular' focused on moral conservatism, fiscal liberalism, and punitive criminal justice – its breakthrough came when it managed to position itself as the defender of national survival in the face of Spain's potential disintegration. For this reason, when analyzing the party's political discourse since 2019, what has drawn the most attention in academic research is its pronounced nationalistic component, evident both in its rhetoric and in its policy platform (Aladro & Requeijo, 2020; Barrio et al., 2021). More than populist or authoritarian, Vox presents itself primarily as a Spanish nationalist party (Ferreira, 2019). Or, as its leader Santiago Abascal once put it, not so much a conventional political party as "an instrument for the defense of Spain" (Abascal, 2015, p. 77).

In short, Vox's entry into the Spanish Parliament does not fit the explanatory frameworks of economic grievance theories, nor can it be understood as a revolt of globalization's 'losers.' While its breakthrough cannot be directly attributed to

cultural threat theories either, there is an indirect connection to that line of explanation. Vox did not emerge in response to ethnic or multicultural tensions within Spanish society, but rather as a reaction to the contested nature of Spain's plurinational statehood. Put differently, the party led by Santiago Abascal is best understood as a political product of territorial conflict and the secessionist dynamics that have shaped recent Spanish politics.

From this core ideological foundation – rooted in a deeply nationalist and centralist worldview – Vox broadens its political agenda and develops its thematic priorities. As the next section will show, the party places considerable emphasis on what it calls the 'battle of ideas,' presenting itself as something more than a conventional political organization. In the words of its leader, it conceives of itself as a "metapolitical artifact" (Sánchez-Dragó, 2019, p. 113).

3. Vox as a Vehicle of Metapolitics

Despite the emphasis that Vox's strategists and leaders place on its metapolitical dimension, academic research has so far paid little attention to this facet of the Spanish far right. Most published studies have focused on the ideological features of its program and the sociological profile of its electorate, while giving significantly less consideration to strategic issues. In particular, little has been done to explore how Vox conceives of itself in terms of its political function and its role within the broader ideological ecosystem of the far right. This gap can be explained, in part, by the opacity that characterizes this political family and the structural distrust it tends to exhibit toward journalists and academics, whom it often regards as ideological adversaries.

Vox is the Spanish political party that invests most heavily in what is often referred to as the 'culture war,' drawing on Antonio Gramsci's classic formulation (Gramsci, 2018). According to the party's official financial disclosures, the organization led by Santiago Abascal allocates €2.6 million annually to its main think tank: 'Fundación Disenso' [Disenso Foundation]. Of that amount, €1.2 million goes toward salaries, while the remaining €1.4 million covers expenses such as rent and external professional services (Ejerique, 2024). This investment is more than double what Spain's two major parties – the Partido Socialista Obrero Español and the Partido Popular – spend on their own ideological foundations, highlighting the central importance the far right in Spain places on the so-called 'battle of ideas' (Europa Press, 2024).

In a country where, following the democratic transition, political culture was deeply shaped by institutionalism – and where consensus held an almost 'sacred' status throughout the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s – it is particularly striking that Vox has positioned itself, from the very beginning, as a party that sees democracy not

as a space for agreement, but fundamentally as a field of conflict and confrontation (Abascal, 2015, p. 38). Within this logic, Spain's far right defines its role as one of 'breaking the progressive consensus' (Sánchez Dragó, 2019, p. 173), insisting on the importance of holding firm to its principles, even when those principles are unpopular or represent a minority view. For the party's leadership, this approach serves to anchor the ideological stance of the right as a point of resistance to what they see as the pressures of a 'dominant consensus' (Abascal, 2015, p. 61). In particular, Vox presents itself as a corrective to the perceived tendency of center-right parties – such as the Partido Popular or Ciudadanos – to conform to 'political correctness.' In this context, the assessment Santiago Abascal offered in 2015 of the liberal party Ciudadanos is especially revealing:

> "Ciudadanos is vagueness turned into a political party. It's a friendly, inoffensive force that drifts toward the extreme center. We've chosen a completely different path: we want to be sharp-edged, to stand for clear values, and to have leaders who take sides and make bold commitments" (Abascal, 2015, p. 33).[2]

To describe its political and intellectual role, Vox often turns to two vivid metaphors. The first draws from 'sogatira,' a traditional tug-of-war game popular in the Basque Country, where two teams pull on opposite ends of a rope, each trying to drag the other onto their side. It's a contest of strength and endurance – whoever manages to pull their opponents into their territory wins. Vox sees itself as that kind of force: firmly positioned on the far right, it aims to shift the entire field of politics, gradually pulling both its right-wing allies and left-wing opponents closer to its starting point (Quintana Paz, 2025, p. 92ff.).

This image is closely tied to another concept embraced by Spain's far right: the so-called 'Overton window.' As one senior member of Vox's communications team puts it, the party sees this tug-of-war as part of a broader effort to redefine what is politically acceptable in public discourse: "Our mission as a patriotic force is to move the Overton window – to make things possible today that were unthinkable ten years ago, and to push so that what now seems unthinkable starts to feel imaginable, even plausible, within the next five years" (A. Ávila, personal communication, 14. May 2024). This focus on *metapolitical* work is so central to Vox's strategy that some party members say it would be worthwhile even if another party or candidate were to ultimately capitalize on its efforts: "What truly matters – and this is something many of us in Vox, and especially at the Disenso Foundation, keep in mind – is that our ideas spread and eventually become mainstream. That matters far more than winning elections" (A. Ávila, personal communication, 14. May 2024).

2 All quotes from Spanish into English have been translated by the author.

The second image draws on an episode from Spain's colonial history in the Philippines: the last stand of a small military unit of forty soldiers in the town of Baler. This group held their position for more than six months – even after Spain had lost the war and handed control of the archipelago over to the United States of America. Spain's far right views this episode as a quintessential symbol of resistance, national pride, and unwavering loyalty. For Vox, 'the heroes of the Philippines' embody a powerful moral example and offer a lesson of deep symbolic value: in politics, the will to endure is essential (Abascal, 2015, p. 51). It is no coincidence that Vox leader Santiago Abascal often invokes this spirit of defiance, adopting as a political motto a phrase attributed to Camilo José Cela — a Spanish Nobel Prize-winning author —: "he who resists, wins" (Sánchez-Dragó, 2019, p. 100).

Vox applies this spirit of resistance and irreducibility to its everyday political strategy. "What sets us apart from the Partido Popular and the rest of the Spanish right is that we never back down – we never see a battle as lost. We always put principles and ideology first. That goes for the fight against historical memory laws, against so-called feminism, and in defense of the right to life" (Abascal, 2015, p. 43). Vox treats intransigence not only as a moral and political virtue, but also as a deliberate strategy. As one member of its communications team puts it: "Back in 2019, taking on the 2030 Agenda or the so-called NGOs that promote immigration might have seemed reckless. Now it doesn't – people reward consistency and conviction" (I. Sevilla, personal communication, 11. March 2022). That same advisor offers a broader reading of the political moment: "People want values, and they want strength. We're no longer in the era of the Transition, when compromise and consensus were prized. Today, what people respond to is confrontation and firmness" (I. Sevilla, personal communication, 11. March 2022).

Ultimately, Vox sees itself not just as a political party, but first and foremost as a metapolitical actor – that is, a political platform that places ideological struggle at the heart of its mission. This approach is not accidental; it reflects a deliberate and sustained strategic choice. For this reason, the party allocates a notably large share of its resources – far more than other political parties – to funding its main think tank, the Disenso Foundation. This substantial investment helps explain, at least in part, the party's growing international profile and, in particular, its 'Latin American venture,' which will be explored in the next section.

4. Iberosphere as a Strategic Asset

The 'Iberosphere' is a neologism coined by Vox, modeled on the term 'Anglosphere.' The party introduced the concept in late 2019 to refer to a geopolitical and cultural space where it aims to extend its strategic influence. This imagined sphere includes Spain, the Spanish-speaking countries of Latin America, and, to a lesser extent,

Brazil and Portugal. Notably, the discursive construction of the 'Iberosphere' omits other regions that were also part of the Spanish colonial empire, such as Equatorial Guinea, the former Spanish Sahara, and former Asian territories like the Philippines. Likewise, former Portuguese colonies in Africa or Asia do not appear to be included in this framework. (Fernández-Vázquez, 2023)

Historically, Vox associates the concept of the 'Iberosphere' with the former Spanish Empire, emphasizing its 'cultural and civilizational heritage.' In Vox's discourse, the term 'Iberosphere' is used interchangeably with 'Hispanidad' (Hispanity) and 'Hispanic Empire.' This linguistic fluidity aims to modernize imperial terminology and symbolically rehabilitate Spain's colonial history by removing negative connotations. In this context, Vox uses the term 'Iberosphere' as a 'conceptual weapon' against critics of Spain's history, particularly those who propagate the 'Leyenda Negra' (Black Legend), a critical narrative that emphasizes the violence of the Spanish conquest and colonial domination in the Americas (Ballester Rodríguez, 2021). To counter this narrative, Vox promotes cultural materials that offer a more favorable interpretation of Spain's imperial legacy and its role in the Americas (González Cuevas, 2019).

For example, Vox has publicly supported documentaries such as 'España, la primera globalización' and 'Hispanoamérica: canto de vida y esperanza,' both directed by José Luis López Linares. The party has also promoted the book 'Imperiofobia' by Elvira Roca Barea on its social media platforms and has encouraged Spanish filmmakers to create films or series about Admiral Blas de Lezo, one of the most renowned military figures of the Spanish Empire.[3]

Theoretically, the concept of the 'Iberosphere' draws from the writings of Spanish philosopher Gustavo Bueno, particularly his book "España frente a Europa" [Spain versus Europe] (Bueno, 2019). Bueno argues that the "Iberosphere" is both a geographical and symbolic space representing Spain's "greatest creation" – the "fruit of Hispanidad" (Bueno, 1999, p. 378) – and a vocational mission: a "historical duty" and the embodiment of the "Hispanic ideal" (Bueno, 2019, p. 380), Accordingly, the 'Iberosphere' also serves as a caution against two potential 'risks' for Spain: the federalist vision of the European Union and the country's possible opening to Africa and the Maghreb. In opposition to these temptations, the 'Iberosphere'-project seeks to reorient Spain's influence back toward the Atlantic, focusing either on the United States of America or Latin America.

From a strategic standpoint, Eduardo Fernández Luiña, Director of Studies at Vox's Disenso Foundation, describes the 'Iberosphere' as "an area of economic, cultural, and political influence" (E. Fernández-Luiña, personal communication, 11.

3 From this perspective, the perceived enemies of the 'Iberosphere' include both the indigenist narratives championed by political parties in countries such as Bolivia, Peru, and Ecuador, as well as a significant portion of modern historiography.

March 2022), both for Spain as a nation and for Vox as a political actor. Notably, Spain is the third-largest investor in Latin America, after the United States of America and China. According to Fernández Luiña, the 'Iberosphere'-project envisions greater "economic coordination for a market of more than 800 million people," a renewed emphasis on the cultural ties that bind these countries, and stronger "political cooperation" to defend "democracy, the rule of law, and individual freedoms" throughout the region (E. Fernández-Luiña, personal communication, 11. March 2022). In this sense, the 'Iberosphere' serves as a conceptual framework designed for strategic use in political, economic, and cultural domains.

The most immediate political outcome of the 'Iberosphere'-project has been the establishment of a network of international events designed to bring together and coordinate a range of political actors who share a common vision and a conservative agenda for Latin America. These gatherings, known as 'Iberosphere Summits,' are organized in two formats. The first, broader in scope, brings together political parties, movements, and civil society organizations from across the Ibero-American space, along with European allies of Vox such as Poland's Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (PiS) and Hungary's Fidesz. To date, four general summits have taken place: the first was held virtually in 2021 due to the pandemic; the second in Madrid in 2022; the third, also in Madrid, in 2023; and the most recent one, again in Madrid, in June 2025 (Benito, 2025).

The second format follows a regional logic and involves political parties, social movements, civil society organizations, and public figures representing various strands of Latin American conservatism. Four regional summits have been held thus far: the first in Bogotá (Colombia) in February 2022; the second in Lima (Peru) in March 2023; the third in Buenos Aires (Argentina) in September 2024; and the fourth in Asunción (Paraguay) in June 2025.

From an ideological standpoint, the 'Iberosphere'-project is structured around the identification of two levels of political antagonisms. Within this framework, participants in the 'Iberosphere Summits' share a common perspective that defines two types of strategic adversaries. The first, at the regional level, comprises progressive Latin American parties and leaders associated with the São Paulo Forum and the Puebla Group. Vox frequently describes these actors as "enemies of democracy, freedom, and Western values" (Abascal, 2022). Among the political parties targeted are Brazil's Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT), Partido Comunista de Cuba (PCC), Venezuela's Partido Socialista Unificado de Venezuela (PSUV) and Bolivia's Movimiento Al Socialismo (MAS), as well as Argentina's Partido Justicialista (PJ), Chile's Frente Amplio (FA), Mexico's Movimiento de Regeneración Nacional (MORENA), and the current ruling party in Colombia – Pacto Histórico. Likewise, discourse emerging from this space regularly criticizes former progressive leaders in the region – such as Rafael Correa (Ecuador), Evo Morales (Bolivia), Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (Argentina), and Dilma Rousseff (Brazil) – portraying them

as emblematic of a political model that Vox and its allies regard as authoritarian and fundamentally at odds with democratic values (Oxford Analytica, 2022).

The 'Iberosphere'-project thus materializes as a call to "patriots and democrats on both sides of the Atlantic" (Tersch, 2022) to join forces in the fight against so characterized left-wing governments and progressive think tanks in the region. This call is subsequently operationalized through a series of alliances and a calendar of meetings aimed at energizing and expanding this strategic alliance.

The 'Iberosphere'-project serves a dual political function for Vox. On the one hand, it operates as a 'calling card' for the party within the Latin American conservative sphere (Tersch, 2022). On the other, it functions as an initiative launched from Spain to mobilize the European far right in defense of "freedoms in Ibero-America," (Tersch, 2022) by offering support and coordination to opposition groups in countries such as Mexico, Chile, Colombia, Brazil, and Venezuela. The significance of the 'Iberosphere Summits' lies not so much in the ideological homogeneity of the participating parties, movements, and organizations, but rather in the existence of a shared framework of antagonisms and a convergence around a set of strategic objectives (Fernández-Vázquez, 2024).

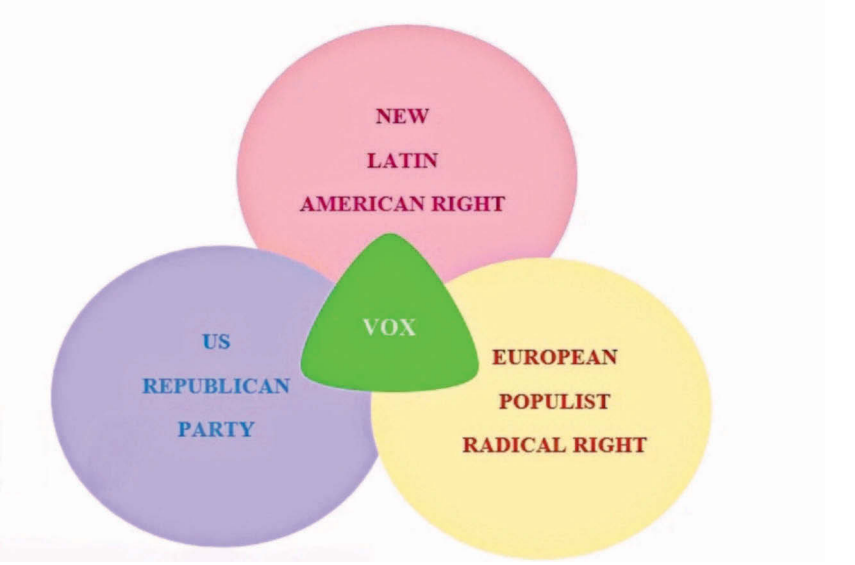
The second level of political antagonism identified in the 'Iberosphere'-project positions China as its primary geopolitical adversary. In this context, the 'Iberosphere' is framed as "the response of the Iberian heritage world to China's growing influence and assertiveness in the Latin American region" (E. Fernández-Luiña, personal communication, 11. March 2022). The project acknowledges the emergence of a multipolar world order and the intensification of the rivalry between the United States of America and China, openly aligning itself with the so-called 'Western bloc.' "In a world of blocs," Fernández-Luiña asserts, "the Iberosphere has the opportunity to play a meaningful role alongside the Anglosphere and, so to speak, the Western bloc" (E. Fernández-Luiña, personal communication, 11. March 2022). As a result, the 'Iberosphere' reflects an explicit commitment by various political, social, and economic actors to align with the Atlanticist axis in a region increasingly shaped by geopolitical competition with China.

It is, therefore, unsurprising that the 'Iberosphere'-project gained significant momentum following Vox's participation in the CPAC in February 2020. During this visit, Vox leaders had the opportunity to engage with key figures from the U.S. Republican Party, as well as with Luis Almagro, then-president of the Organization of American States. Although the term had been introduced in September 2019, its usage remained intermittent and hesitant until the CPAC event.[4] Since that

4 Until February 2020, Vox was hesitant to adopt the term 'Iberosphere.'An illustrative example is Santiago Abascal's speech at the party's annual event, 'Vistalegre II: Plus Ultra,' held in Madrid on October 6, 2019: "We must look to our roots and historical ties (…) [.] We Spaniards are in a privileged position: we have the great sphere of Hispanidad, the Hispano-sphere,

critical juncture – and particularly in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic – Vox has not only consistently employed the term but has also intensified efforts to consolidate and expand the project. These efforts include the establishment of the 'Madrid Forum' and the organization of the so-called 'Iberosphere Summits' (Benito, 2021). Closely linked to these initiatives is the Madrid Charter, a manifesto promoted by Vox to denounce alleged threats from leftist movements in Latin America and to build a transnational alliance of right-wing actors. Significantly, since 2020, the number of Vox-led tours in Latin America has increased, paralleling the rise in participants at the Madrid Forum and signatories of the Madrid Charter (Ruiz, 2025).

Figure 1: Vox as a Communication Hub Among Western Far-Right Blocs[5]



Through the 'Iberosphere'-project, the Spanish far right aims to position itself as a bridge or communication hub among various organizations that share both political hostility toward the 'global left' and geopolitical alignment with the 'Atlanticist

which connects us through language and culture with millions of people around the world who are our brothers. The Iberosphere, if you will, which also unites us with our Portuguese brothers. This is our strength, and they must be our allies. We must stand shoulder to shoulder with them to defend our identity, our culture, our historical legacy, and to earn respect in the world" (Europa Press, 2019).

5 Figure prepared by the article's author, Guillermo Fernández-Vázquez.

bloc.' This central role places Vox at the intersection of three groups of Western political actors. First, Santiago Abascal's party functions as a key intermediary between the emerging Latin American right and the U.S.-based Make America Great Again (MAGA)-movement. Second, Vox serves as a link between the European far right and the new Latin American right.[6] In both cases, Vox's role is not only to connect these actors, but also to actively foster and energize relationships among different sectors of the Western far right.

Finally, the 'Iberosphere'-project also serves a tactical purpose. As Isidoro Sevilla puts it, its goal is "to develop a network of contacts and international relations with conservative forces throughout Spanish America" (I. Sevilla, personal communication, 11, March 2022). According to this member of Vox's communications team, its strategic value lies in the ability to "build a powerful network of contacts, even before [Vox] has become a governing force" (I. Sevilla, personal communication, 11. March 2022). In this regard, the initiative seeks to outpace the Partido Popular (PP) – the main party of Spain's conventional right – in the field of international relations. Ultimately, the aim is to overturn PP's traditional hegemony in this domain and ensure that "conservative parties across the two American hemispheres look to us [Vox] before they look to the PP" (J.-M. Sayago, personal communication, 7. May 2022). The immediate goal of Santiago Abascal's party, then, is to position itself as the main interlocutor in Spain for leaders such as Javier Milei (Argentina), José Antonio Kast (Chile), Jair Bolsonaro (Brazil), and María Corina Machado (Venezuela). In this sense, the 'Iberosphere'-project can also be understood as a maneuver to sideline the traditional right in the realm of international relations with the Spanish-speaking world.

5. Ethnic Hispanism as a distinctive feature

A theoretical engagement with the concept of the 'Iberosphere' introduces a second dimension in which Vox partially departs from the typical profile of 'Populist Radical Right Parties' (PRRPs) (Mudde, 2007). In particular, the 'Iberosphere'-project creates space to soften or reconfigure Vox's nativist stance. Cas Mudde defines nativism as "an ideology that holds that states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group – the nation – and that non-native elements – people and ideas – are

6 Vox's involvement in this second stream of communication has been significantly facilitated by the party's participation in the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) group in European Parliament. Within this framework, Santiago Abascal's party has taken a leading role in the "Eurolat" section, which is specifically tasked with managing and strengthening relations with Latin America (Morel, 2024).

existentially threatening to the nation-state" (Mudde, 2007, p. 22). He further notes that nativism forms the ideological backbone of PRRPs.

Vox's initial stance is rooted in a nativist worldview, according to which the Spanish nation belongs by right or 'blood' – *ius sanguinis* – to a specific group: the natives, understood as 'authentic' or 'true-born' Spaniards. This nativist outlook is evident in numerous statements across Vox's discourse, including slogans such as "In Spain, Spaniards come first" and "Spain first" (Abascal 2019), which clearly echo Donald Trump's America First-motto. The party's rhetoric and electoral programs consistently reinforce this message, frequently asserting that "Spaniards will always come first in Spain." (Abascal, 2018) These expressions of nativism are closely interwoven with a broader, explicitly anti-immigration agenda.

Despite its generally restrictive discourse on immigration, Vox introduces a notable 'exception clause' tied to its 'Iberosphere'-project. According to this clause, migrants from countries that form part of the 'Iberosphere' would receive preferential treatment, making them not only "accepted" but even "welcomed" (Tersch, 2022) in the former imperial metropole. This preferential stance rests on three main arguments. The first is pragmatic: given Spain's ongoing "severe demographic crisis," the party argues that immigration from "brother nations in Ibero-America" (Abascal, 2022, minute 5:33 to minute 6:03) – countries with which Spain shares language, values, and culture – offers a potential remedy. In this vein, the policy document '100 Medidas Para la España Viva' declares that, if Vox were to govern, it would prioritize in its immigration policy "those nationalities that share a language and cultural ties with Spain" (Vox, 2019, p. 06). The same document also outlines a plan to organize and promote migration flows from countries within the 'Iberosphere' (Vox, 2019, p. 24).

The second argument is political in nature and asserts that the inhabitants of the 'Iberosphere' are historically connected to the native group. As a result, according to Vox, the citizens of the 'Iberosphere' can be regarded as cultural "brothers." This is not merely rhetorical – it is also strategic. The leader of Vox has deliberately used the term "compatriots" (Abascal, 2020, minute 15:30 to minute 16:25) in successive rallies – emphasizing its full political significance – to refer to Mexican, Colombian, Venezuelan, or Argentine immigrants living in Spain or the United States of America. According to Santiago Abascal, the peoples of the 'Iberosphere' share a special closeness with Spain's native population. Specifically, the citizens of the 'Iberosphere' – e.g. Argentinians, Colombians, Peruvians, Cubans, Brazilians, or Mexicans, among others – form an auxiliary belt that both surrounds and complements the native core.

Figure 2: Ethnic Hispanism[7]

This logic of privileging citizens of the 'Iberosphere' may be termed "Ethnic Hispanism" (Fernández-Vázquez, 2024, p. 721), or 'Hispanismo Étnico' in the original Spanish. It can be understood as a form of 'expanded nativism' that, while preserving its exclusionary stance toward immigration from Africa and Asia, redefines the boundaries of the native group to include citizens from the so-called 'Iberosphere' (Sanahuja & López Burian, 2022). In this way, 'Ethnic Hispanism' extends the notion of the ethnic nation to encompass individuals from most of Spain's former colonies, as well as Brazil. The logo of a media outlet aligned with Vox – 'La Gaceta de la Iberosfera' – captures this idea with striking visual clarity (Figure 3).

The third argument is tactical in nature and has so far received little attention in academic analyses. According to Spain's far right, citizens of the 'Iberosphere' can play an indirect role in reinforcing national unity. More specifically, Vox claims that Spanish-speaking migrants from the 'Iberosphere' help promote the use of Spanish in autonomous communities where other official languages are spoken. The presence of Argentinians, Mexicans, Colombians, or Venezuelans in regions such as Catalonia or the Basque Country, the argument goes, strengthens the 'Hispanic' and 'Spanish' character of those territories, helping to reduce separatist tensions. As one member of Vox's communications team put it bluntly: "Chilean, Brazilian, Venezuelan, or Paraguayan citizens living in Barcelona, Bilbao, or Tarragona are generally not inclined to accept being forced to learn a language other than Spanish – let alone support secessionist political projects." (A. Ávila, personal communication, 14. May 2024) This presumed reluctance among 'Iberosphere' migrants to embrace Catalan, Basque, or Galician nationalism is seen by Vox as an indirect tool for fostering national cohesion. Ultimately, the party led by Santiago Abascal views the Spanish-speaking population in these regions as a potential counterbalance to the centrifugal pressures facing the Spanish state.

In comparative terms, there are no clear parallels to this form of 'expanded nativism' within the ideological repertoire of other parties belonging to this political

7 Figure 2 was prepared by the author himself, Guillermo Fernández-Vázquez.

family. Far-right forces in countries with significant colonial histories – such as France, the United Kingdom, or Belgium – do not articulate any 'exception to the nativist rule' that affords preferential treatment to citizens of their former colonies. Nor do they propose preference clauses or symbolic mechanisms of incorporation that would include these populations within the boundaries of the national group as 'potential compatriots.' In this sense, the 'Ethnic Hispanism' advanced by Vox represents a distinctive case in the European landscape: an ideologically specific development within the Spanish far right, rooted in its effort to reframe the imperial legacy in positive terms and mobilize it as a contemporary political resource (Fernández-Vázquez, 2023).

Figure 3: Branding of La Gaceta de la Iberosfera (2025)

As a point of contrast, the case of Portugal's far right, represented by Chega, is particularly telling. Although Portugal falls within both the conceptual and geographic scope of the 'Iberosphere'-project, the party led by André Ventura makes only passing reference to the term and shows little interest in leveraging it for political purposes. Its involvement in the so-called 'Iberosphere Summits' has likewise been minimal, both in the main gatherings and in their regional iterations. This detachment stands in stark contrast to the active engagement of Brazil's Partido Liberal in the 'Iberosphere' strategy and in initiatives promoted by the 'Madrid Forum' (Golstein, 2024). Especially noteworthy is the prominent role played by Eduardo Bolsonaro – son of former president Jair Bolsonaro – who has emerged as one of the key figures driving these summits and related events (Bertaccini, 2024).

Lastly, it is important to highlight that, while the 'Iberosphere'-project has been translated into a concrete political agenda and a network of recurring events, the same is not true of 'Ethnic Hispanism.' This formulation of expanded nativism has yet to be reflected in any specific piece of legislation. Beyond rhetorical statements found in public speeches or electoral platforms, Vox has not proposed or supported any legal initiatives aimed at easing immigration from countries within the so-called 'Iberosphere'. In fact, it is telling that the party has not only avoided advancing such measures, but has consistently opposed, in parliamentary debates, any attempt to regularize migrant populations – regardless of whether they come from Hispanic countries or elsewhere.

6. Conclusions

Vox offers a particularly insightful case for studying the rise of the new far right in Europe – and, more broadly, for understanding how these movements are reshaping their ideological and geopolitical strategies in the 21st century. This chapter has argued that Vox's emergence cannot be fully accounted for by classic theories of economic grievance or cultural threat. Instead, it reflects dynamics more specifically linked to territorial conflict within the Spanish state. It has also highlighted the *metapolitical* character of Vox's project, along with its distinctive international strategy: the 'Iberosphere.' Taken together, these two dimensions – ideological confrontation and transnational outreach – are the key vectors of innovation that set Santiago Abascal's party apart within the broader family of Populist Radical Right Parties (PRRPs).

To begin with, it is important to highlight that Vox's entry into the Spanish parliament in 2019 was not a direct response to the effects of the 2008 financial crisis or to the impact of globalization on the most vulnerable sectors of Spanish society. Unlike in other European countries, where far-right parties capitalized on economic discontent, Vox's rise cannot be understood as an expression of the 'losers of globalization.' In fact, its initial electorate came largely from the middle and upper-middle classes, and the party's consolidation took place in a context marked by the resurgence of territorial conflict following the illegal independence referendum in Catalonia in 2017. From this perspective, Vox emerges as a political product of the crisis of the Spanish state model and the challenge to national unity, rather than a response to economic insecurity or the multicultural transformation of society.

This interpretive framework helps explain the strong nationalist component that has defined Vox's discourse since its rise. Rather than a populist or authoritarian party – as it is often labeled – Vox presents itself primarily as a Spanish nationalist force. Santiago Abascal himself has described the party as "an instrument for the defense of Spain" (Abascal, 2015, p. 77), rather than a conventional political formation.

This identity-based, defensive conception of politics is key to understanding both Vox's rhetorics and its programmatic priorities. In this sense, Vox's entry into parliament is not driven by a material cleavage, but by a predominantly symbolic one: the defense of the nation against a perceived existential threat.

From this ideological position, Vox has pursued a strategy that goes beyond conventional electoral logic. As this article has shown, the party sees itself as a *metapolitical* actor, committed to a long-term cultural battle. In a political system like Spain's – historically defined by institutionalism and a deep-rooted culture of consensus – it is especially striking that an emerging force openly identifies as a 'combative minority' and deliberately distances itself from the values of compromise and moderation. Rather than treating democracy as a space for negotiation, Vox frames it as an arena for ideological confrontation. This vision has led the party to devote significant financial and symbolic resources to the 'culture war,' largely through its flagship think tank, the Disenso Foundation.

Two symbolic images lie at the core of Vox's metapolitical strategy, capturing how the party sees itself: the Basque sogatira (tug-of-war) and the military garrison at Baler in the Philippines. The first reflects a desire to pull the ideological center of gravity – to destabilize the political mainstream by shifting the limits of acceptable discourse (the famous 'Overton window') toward more conservative or reactionary ground. The second invokes a spirit of resistance, even in the face of isolation or defeat, serving as a moral and political compass for the party's base. Together, these metaphors shape an ethos of sustained ideological struggle, where perseverance and resolve are core virtues. This orientation sheds light on why Vox prioritizes discourse production, the crafting of new political language, and cultural intervention as essential to its broader project.

The construction of the 'Iberosphere' fits squarely within Vox's *metapolitical* and identity-driven strategy – a project that weaves together geopolitical, cultural, and ideological threads. Coined by the party in 2019, the term refers to an imagined community that includes Spain, Spanish-speaking Latin American countries, and, to a lesser extent, Brazil and Portugal. With this concept, Vox aims to build a transatlantic network of conservative alliances, pursuing a dual goal: to push back against the 'left's' influence in Latin America and to counter China's expanding footprint in the region. This strategy has taken concrete form through a series of events – known as 'Iberosphere Summits' – designed not only to strengthen ties with like-minded parties and movements across Latin America, but also to link them with other far-right actors in Europe, particularly in Eastern Europe.

The 'Iberosphere'-project brings with it a partial rethinking of the concept of nativism – a defining feature of far-right parties, according to much of the academic literature. In Vox's case, this takes a distinctive form: while the party maintains a hardline, exclusionary stance toward African and Muslim migrants, it introduces an 'exception clause' for citizens of the 'Iberosphere.' This exception rests on three main

arguments. The first is demographic: the need to offset Spain's population decline with migrants considered 'culturally compatible.' The second is political: a supposed historical and civilizational affinity with Hispanic American nations. The third is tactical: the idea that Spanish-speaking migrants could help reinforce the use of Spanish and strengthen national unity in regions with strong separatist movements, such as Catalonia or the Basque Country. This form of expanded nativism can be described as 'Ethnic Hispanism,' and it has no clear counterpart among other far-right parties in Europe.

That said, it is worth noting that this idea of expanded nativism has not, at least to date, been reflected in concrete public policies or legislative efforts aimed at supporting migrants from the 'Iberosphere.' On the contrary, Vox has consistently rejected government proposals to regularize undocumented immigrants – many of whom come from Latin American countries – or to loosen the requirements for legal residency. This reveals a clear gap between the party's rhetorics and its actual behavior in parliament.

In sum, the case of Vox highlights several key elements that deserve closer attention in the study of the new far right. On the one hand, it shows that the rise of these forces cannot be explained solely by economic or cultural factors but must also be understood in relation to territorial and identity-based conflicts. On the other hand, it illustrates that these parties do not operate exclusively within the electoral arena but also pursue long-term *metapolitical* strategies. Finally, the case of Vox demonstrates that far-right movements are experimenting with new forms of international projection – blending geopolitics, history, and ideology – as seen in the ambitious, if still evolving, 'Iberosphere'-project. Taken together, these dimensions make Vox both a distinctive and revealing example of the ongoing ideological reconfiguration of the radical right in today's political landscape.

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8 These in-depth interviews are part of the fieldwork conducted within the framework of the European project FIERCE (*Feminist Movements Revitalizing Democracy in Europe*), funded by the European Commission. The project's overall aim is to analyze the antifeminist response to the rise of feminist movements in various European countries, with particular attention to its political and democratic implications.

Radical Echoes through Antagonistic Symbiosis: How Far-Right Extremism and Political Islamists[1] Shape Global Polarization

Arash Beidollahkhani

Abstract *This study explores the intricate and interdependent relationship between far-right extremism in Europe and political Islamist movements with anti-Western perspectives in the Islamic world, highlighting how both entities construct antagonistic narratives to sustain their exclusionary and anti-democratic agendas. A defining feature of far-right extremism in Europe is its alignment around anti-Muslim and anti-Islam rhetoric, which has significantly contributed to the rise of anti-migrant and Islamophobic sentiment across the continent – emerging as the primary hallmark of far-right ideology. Similarly, political Islamist movements are characterized by their anti-Western and anti-democratic perspectives, further entrenching this cycle of mutual antagonism. Using a rigorous methodological framework, this research employs semiotic and discourse analysis to examine key themes in 50 speeches delivered by leaders of European far-right parties and figures from political Islamist movements across the Islamic world, including prominent actors such as Hezbollah, Iran, and Turkey. Analytical tools, including NVivo and Atlas.ti for qualitative coding and LIWC for sentiment analysis, were employed to map interwoven narratives of identity, migration, and security. The findings reveal that European far-right leaders unite around framing Muslim migrants as existential threats to national identity, economic stability, and cultural cohesion, intensifying social divisions and securitizing migration. Conversely, political Islamist actors exploit Western Islamophobia and migration anxieties, attributing regional poverty, authoritarian rhetoric and*

1 'Political Islamists' refers to individuals who view Islam not just as a religion, but as a comprehensive political ideology capable of shaping and governing political life and power. This includes both radical extremist groups and those who hold power in various parts of the Islamic world, where political systems are often influenced or governed by Islamic principles. These individuals or groups may advocate for political systems rooted in Islam and, in some cases, may incorporate Islamic perspectives into global politics. Additionally, in this paper, the term 'political Islamists' is used to refer to all individuals or groups who identify as 'Islamists,' including those in power and those within various Islamic movements, particularly those who espouse anti-Western perspectives.

instability to Western interventions, sanctions, and perceived cultural aggression. Both movements rely on reciprocal narratives of fear and victimization, amplifying their political legitimacy while systematically undermining democratic values. By exposing the mutual reinforcement of these ideologies, the paper provides a nuanced understanding of how their interdependence exacerbates global democratic decline and destabilizes governance systems.

Introduction

The interplay between far-right extremism in Europe and political Islamist movements in the Islamic world represents one of the most significant and understudied drivers of global democratic decline and societal polarization. The term "movement" is used to describe both far-right and political Islamist groups because they transcend the boundaries of individual political parties or state actors, instead embodying broader ideological forces that mobilize support, shape public discourse, and influence social and political landscapes. Far-right parties in Europe, and political Islamist entities all operate within frameworks that extend beyond electoral politics. They utilize mass mobilization, cultural narratives, and ideological rhetoric to foster collective identities, influence national policies, and challenge established political structures. This shared reliance on narrative-driven political engagement, which is not confined to specific political offices or legislative efforts, positions them as movements that shape both political action and public sentiment.

While these two entities position themselves as ideological adversaries, they share a symbiotic reliance on fear-based narratives, particularly concerning migration, identity, and security (Abbas, 2020a). Far-right parties in Europe, such as Germany's Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) and France's NR, coalesce around the discourse of defending national and cultural identity, with anti-Muslim and anti-Islam rhetoric emerging as a core signifier of their political strategies (Bartlett & Birdwell, 2013). Similarly, political Islamist movements, including Hezbollah, Iranian leadership, and Turkey's government,[2] employ anti-Western and anti-democratic narratives as foundational elements of their ideological frameworks (Abbas, 2020b). These reciprocal antagonisms do not merely reflect cultural or ideological conflicts but actively co-produce political environments of exclusion, authoritarianism, and destabilization (Grzesiak-Feldman & Irzycka, 2009).

2 While Turkey's government under President Erdogan may not be an Islamist movement in the same sense as Hezbollah or Iran, it has increasingly adopted anti-Western, authoritarian, and nationalist rhetoric. This shift has aligned Turkey's political discourse with anti-Western sentiments, thus positioning it within the broader context of political Islamism, particularly in relation to its strained relationship with Western liberal democracies.

The rise of far-right extremism in Europe is intrinsically linked to the politicization of migration. Migration, particularly from Muslim-majority countries, is not simply framed as a demographic or economic challenge but as an existential threat to the coherence of 'European identity.' This securitization of migration has been extensively documented in recent literature as a strategy that not only legitimizes exclusionary policies but also undermines democratic norms by promoting majoritarianism over pluralism (Akkerman, De Lange & Rooduijn, 2016; Rovira Kaltwasser & Taggart, 2024). At the same time, political Islamists leverage Western Islamophobia, exemplified by far-right hostility, to fortify their narratives of resistance and victimhood. This feedback loop creates a dynamic that can be viewed as 'antagonistic symbiosis,' where the actions and rhetoric of one movement intensify and amplify those of the other, perpetuating a cycle of mutual reinforcement (Kundnani, 2015).

Moreover, recent scholarship highlights the role of economic anxieties in shaping these narratives (Mazzoleni & Ivaldi, 2022). European far-right leaders blame migrants for rising unemployment, housing shortages, and the overburdening of welfare systems, turning economic grievances into potent political tools (Abbas, 2017; Muis & Immerzeel, 2017; Mondon & Winter, 2020). Conversely, political Islamist movements point to Western-imposed economic sanctions, resource extraction, and globalization as sources of poverty and inequality in the Islamic world, thereby framing their anti-Western stance as a defense of sovereignty and justice (Browers, 2021; Wickham, 2013). This dual use of economic rhetoric underscores the deeply interwoven nature of these movements, as both utilize economic fears to justify exclusionary and authoritarian agendas.

This paper argues that far-right extremism and political Islamist movements, while seemingly at odds, are co-dependent forces that thrive on global crises of migration, identity, and governance. By employing semiotic and discourse analysis, the study explores how these actors construct mutually reinforcing narratives that deepen societal divisions and erode democratic values. This introduction not only situates the study within the broader academic discourses on authoritarianism and populism but also extends them by highlighting the mutual amplification of these ideologies in a globalized context.

The Intersecting Forces of Far-Right Extremism and Political Islamism: A Critical Examination of Anti-Democratic Narratives

The growing prominence of far-right extremism in Europe and political Islamism across the Islamic world is not merely a clash of ideologies, but a convergence of anti-democratic forces that leverage fear, identity, and migration to advance exclusionary and authoritarian agendas (Ebner, 2017). Both movements share a deep suspicion of liberal democracy, but their antagonism towards democratic principles manifests in

unique ways. The far right in Europe, rooted in nationalist, anti-migrant rhetoric, frames Islam and Muslim migration as existential threats to the European identity and socio-political order (Kundnani, 2015). At the same time, political Islamists – viewing Islam as a political ideology – reject the Western democratic model, positioning it as inherently corrupt and imperialist (Barnett, Maher & Winter, 2021). This rejection extends to all forms of secularism, including the advancement of women's rights and other democratic freedoms, which they equate with Western moral decay (Beidollahkhani, 2024; Pertwee, 2020).

These Islamist groups, central to this research, maintain a predominantly anti-Western outlook, particularly in regions where they hold political power or influence. This includes states such as Iran, Afghanistan, Turkey, and Pakistan, where Islamist movements significantly shape policymaking. Additionally, their ideological influence extends to Western countries, such as the United Kingdom and Germany, and to North Africa, particularly Egypt. Radical fundamentalist organizations like the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria or Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) and Al-Qaeda further exemplify this ideological reach, reinforcing anti-Western and anti-democratic narratives across multiple regions.

One of the most critical yet under-explored aspects of this dynamic is how Islamist movements, particularly those rooted in authoritarian ideologies, suppress domestic democratic movements by branding them as 'Western-influenced.' In doing so, they not only marginalize reformist voices but also justify their own repressive policies as necessary to protect Islamic identity from 'Western' encroachment (Marinov & Stockemer,2020). The suppression of women's rights, the rejection of democratic pluralism, and the curtailment of civil liberties are framed as part of a broader resistance to the Western liberal order, presenting authoritarianism as a necessary shield against external and internal threats.

In parallel, far-right movements in Europe exploit Islamophobia to perpetuate exclusionary policies, positioning Islam and its followers as incompatible with 'European values' (Oztig, 2023). The shared focus on immigration, identity, and security, however, creates a dangerous overlap in their rhetoric, as both sides demonize 'the other' to reinforce a false dichotomy of 'civilization' versus 'barbarism.' This creates an environment in which democratic principles are systematically undermined, as both movements capitalize on global crises – migration, cultural clashes, and the perceived failure of liberal democracy – to fuel their political objectives.

The consequences of this antagonistic relationship are far-reaching. As these ideologies gain traction, they disrupt political stability, challenge democratic norms, and exacerbate social fragmentation. This study seeks to unpack these intertwined forces, exploring how the far right in Europe and political Islamists in the Islamic world co-create narratives that not only justify their authoritarian actions but also undermine the very fabric of democratic governance.

Theorizing the Framework of Antagonistic Symbiosis

The interaction between European far-right extremism and political Islamist anti-Western movements can be conceptualized through a framework of 'antagonistic symbiosis,' a term that encapsulates the reciprocal yet oppositional dynamics between these ideologies. Drawing on theories of 'reciprocal radicalization' and 'narrative construction,' this framework posits that these movements, while ideologically adversarial, rely on each other to sustain their narratives, political legitimacy, and mobilization strategies.

Reciprocal radicalization, as outlined by Eatwell (2006) and further developed in counterterrorism studies, demonstrates how opposing ideological groups escalate their rhetoric in response to perceived threats from one another. This mutual reinforcement results in a feedback loop, where the radicalization of one group provokes a corresponding intensification in the other (Eatwell, 2006; Hansen, 2000). Both, far-right extremists and political Islamists, leverage this dynamic, using fear and victimhood to justify exclusionary policies and authoritarian governance. Far-right actors frame Muslim migrants as existential threats to cultural and national identity, while political Islamists portray Western influence as a neocolonial force undermining Islamic values and sovereignty (Bonnett, 2004). This interplay sustains a continuous cycle of radicalization, with each side amplifying the other's narratives of existential danger.

Narrative construction theory (Bruner,1991), particularly through the lens of securitization, further elucidates how these movements transform societal issues into security threats, legitimizing extraordinary measures. According to Wæver (1993), securitization occurs when political actors successfully frame an issue as an existential threat requiring emergency responses, often bypassing democratic norms. Both, far-right and Islamist groups, engage in this process by constructing migration and cultural identity as security concerns, framing their respective 'others' as dangers to societal stability. The far right employs this strategy by characterizing Muslim migrants as a 'cultural invasion,' threatening the coherence of 'European identity' and justifying restrictive immigration policies (Shehaj, Shin & Inglehart, 2021). Conversely, political Islamists use Western interventions and perceived cultural aggression as narratives of resistance, portraying their authoritarian measures as necessary to safeguard Islamic identity and sovereignty.

The concept of antagonistic symbiosis emerges from this dynamic interdependence (Eves, 2024). These movements, though ideologically opposed, are co-dependent forces in the political ecosystem, each thriving on the narratives constructed by the other. Their mutual reinforcement not only perpetuates cycles of radicalization but also systematically undermines democratic values by normalizing exclusionary and authoritarian discourses. This relationship transcends simple opposition, evolving into a complex interdependence where each side's rhetoric and actions validate

and intensify the other's stance, fostering polarization and eroding pluralistic governance.

The paper conceptualizes the interaction through antagonistic symbiosis, providing an innovative theoretical perspective that bridges political sociology, security studies, and discourse analysis. This framework moves beyond traditional dichotomies of ideological conflict, revealing a deeper, structural interrelation that sustains and amplifies both far-right and Islamist extremism. Understanding this symbiosis is crucial for developing effective counter-narratives and policy strategies aimed at mitigating radicalization and preserving democratic institutions in an increasingly polarized global landscape.

Methodology

This research adopts a semiotic and discourse analysis framework to investigate the mutual reinforcement between far-right extremism in Europe and political Islamism in the Islamic world. The goal is to examine how each movement constructs its narratives of fear and exclusion, specifically focusing on the themes of migration, identity, and security. The analysis focuses on key themes identified within a corpus of 100 speeches (50 from each group), delivered by political leaders and prominent figures, spanning the period from 2010 to 2024.

These speeches were selected for their ideological significance and the political weight of the statements made, focusing on movements that have gained prominence in shaping national and international narratives. For far-right groups, this includes parties such as the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), the Rassemblement National (France), Vox (Spain), and Lega (Italy). Their public statements were scrutinized for recurrent themes of nationalism, anti-democratic rhetoric, and Islamophobia, with particular attention given to how these groups use migration, cultural identity, and security concerns to fuel their political agendas. For political Islamists, the research also analyzes 50 speeches from figures recognized for their anti-Western stances, particularly leaders from Islamist movements and governments that openly reject Western liberalism and democratic principles. These include political figures from Iran (e.g. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei), Turkey (e.g. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan), Pakistan (e.g. Imran Khan), and Afghanistan (e.g. Taliban leadership), along with groups such as Hezbollah, Hamas, and ISIS.

As indicated in table 1, leadership and groups within far-right and Islamist movements were selected based on their ideological perspectives and key themes, which primarily focus on antagonistic discourses toward each other. The table organizes these leaders and movements according to their rhetorical positions and thematic emphases, highlighting the critical issues presented in their public

speeches, including their views on identity, migration, nationalism, and their critiques of Western political and cultural frameworks.

These leaders and organizations are noted for their aggressive anti-Western rhetoric, which positions 'the West' as a destabilizing force and frames Islam as a political ideology that offers resistance to 'Western imperialism' and 'secularism.' This collection of speeches reflects the ideologies of these groups, focusing on themes of cultural preservation, political sovereignty, and religious governance – rejection of secularism, gender equality, and liberal democracy. Through the examination of these speeches, the study highlights the shared use of fear-driven narratives by both far-right parties and Islamist groups.

For translation of speeches from various languages I utilized advanced AI translation tools to ensure accuracy and consistency across a wide range of languages, including English, German, French, Danish, Spanish, Italian, Arabic, Persian, and Turkish. The primary AI tools used for both text and voice translation were Google Translate, DeepL, Microsoft Translator, Amazon Translate, and iTranslate. These tools were selected for their high-quality output, reliability, and ability to handle complex linguistic nuances, ensuring the content was accurately represented across multiple languages.

Table 1: Mapping Key Ideological Themes and Leadership in Far-Right and Islamist Movements

Source Groups	Countries/Organizations	Examples of Leaders/Speakers	Key Focus Areas/Themes in Speeches
Far-Right Parties	Germany (AfD), France (RN), Spain (Vox), Sweden (Sverigedemokraterna), Denmark (Dansk Folkeparti), UK (British National Party – BNP), Netherlands (Partij voor de Vrijheid), Italy (Lega), Austria (Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs, FPÖ), Hungary (Fidesz), Poland (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS), Finland (Perussuomalaiset)	Alice Weidel (AfD), Marine Le Pen (RN), Santiago Abascal (Vox), Jimmie Åkesson (Sweden Democrats), Viktor Orbán (Fidesz), Jarosław Kaczyński (PiS), Riikka Purra (Perussuomalaiset)	Migration as a threat, cultural identity preservation, anti-Islam rhetoric, nationalist sentiment, Anti-EU sentiment (Euroscepticism)

Source Groups	Countries/Organizations	Examples of Leaders/Speakers	Key Focus Areas/Themes in Speeches
Political Islamist Groups	Iran, Turkey, ISIS, Hezbollah, Hamas, Taliban, Al-Qaeda, Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Algeria and Sudan, Saudi clerics, Muslim Brotherhood and Alazahr figures and famous scholars in Egypt, Pakistanis and Indian Muslims groups leaders and their politics leaders	Ayatollah Ali Khamenei (Iran), Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (Turkey), Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (ISIS), Hassan Nasrallah (Hezbollah), Ismail Haniyeh (Hamas), Hibatullah Akhundzada (Taliban), Ayman al-Zawahiri (Al-Qaeda), Yusuf al-Qaradawi, (Muslim Brotherhood, Qatar, Egypt), Omar al-Bashir (Sudan), Saudi clerics (e.g., Abdulaziz al-Sheikh, Salman al-Ouda) Abu Hamza al-Masri, Pakistani and Indian Islamists figures. Al Azhar clerics	Western hostility to Islam, resistance narratives, anti-democracy rhetoric, safeguarding of Islamic identity

Qualitative Coding and Thematic Analysis

The core of the study's analytical approach involved qualitative coding using NVivo and Atlas.ti to systematically identify recurring themes, keywords, and rhetorical structures. This process categorized the data into the study's primary focus areas: migration, identity, nationalism, religion, democracy, security, and economics. Once these themes were coded, a thematic analysis was conducted to uncover the deeper connections between them, emphasizing how both movements utilize these narratives to legitimize exclusionary policies and authoritarian governance. These themes were drawn from a wide range of speeches, allowing for a nuanced exploration of how far-right and political Islamist groups construct narratives surrounding these issues. Each theme highlights the underlying ideologies that drive both movements and their use of these issues to justify exclusionary and anti-democratic rhetoric.

To complement the qualitative analysis, keyword frequency analysis was used to quantify the repetition of significant terms across the speeches. Keywords such as "threat," "freedom," "resistance," and "invasion" were analyzed to measure their prominence and explore the strategic focus of each movement. This method revealed how far-right and Islamist groups emphasize different aspects of the same issues, such as migration being framed as a security risk by far-right actors and as a consequence of imperialism by Islamist figures. Moreover, LIWC (Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count) software was employed to analyze the emotional tone of the narra-

tives. Sentiment analysis captured the prevalence of emotions such as fear, anger, pride, and victimhood in the speeches. For example, fear and anger were dominant in far-right discussions on migration and security, while pride and victimhood were prevalent in Islamist speeches addressing identity and anti-Western rhetoric.

The study also employed intertextual analysis to compare how far-right and Islamist groups construct overlapping or opposing narratives within each thematic area. This approach uncovered shared strategies, such as the use of fear-driven rhetoric to mobilize support and justify authoritarian measures. Comparative analysis was also critical for exploring the ideological differences in framing, such as how far-right actors focus on preserving "cultural heritage," while Islamists frame their narratives around resisting "Western aggression."

All methods were applied holistically to ensure that the findings were both nuanced and comprehensive. Qualitative coding provided the foundation for identifying patterns, while keyword frequency and sentiment analyses added depth to the understanding of rhetorical strategies. Thematic and intertextual analyses further connected these insights, revealing the interplay between far-right and Islamist narratives. Table 2 illustrates how the ideological narratives of far-right and Islamist movements, despite their differing historical and political contexts, share strikingly similar antagonistic perspectives. These movements converge around themes such as identity, migration, and anti-democratic rhetoric. Both employ these narratives to challenge and subvert democratic values, thus undermining the foundations of democratic governance. The table provides a clear illustration of how these ideological forces, though divergent in origin, align in their pursuit of exclusionary and anti-liberal agendas.

Table 2: Comparative Thematic Analysis of Far-Right and Political Islamist Rhetoric

Themes	**Far-Right Narratives (Europe)**	**Political Islamist Narratives**	**Methodology applied**
Migration	Portrayed Muslim migrants as threats to cultural homogeneity and national security. Narratives of "invasion" and "burden."	Depicted Western nations as aggressors fostering instability and forced migration in the region.	Identified keywords like "threat," "crisis," and "displacement." Sentiment Analysis: Fear in far-right; victimhood in Islamist rhetoric

Themes	Far-Right Narratives (Europe)	Political Islamist Narratives	Methodology applied
Identity	Emphasis on "European heritage" and 'cultural preservation' against 'Islamic influence.'	Highlighting resistance to "Western cultural imperialism" to preserve 'Islamic identity.'	Terms like "heritage," "authenticity," and "resistance" dominate both narratives. Sentiment Analysis: Pride observed across identity-related rhetoric.
Nationalism and Sovereignty	Advocacy for sovereignty and rejection of globalization. Islam portrayed as incompatible with 'Western unity.'	Promoted pan-Islamic unity or anti-Western nationalism against 'neocolonialism.'	Explored nationalism or pa- Islamism as resistance (anti-migration vs. anti-West). Frequency Analysis: Key terms include "sovereignty," "unity," and "colonialism."
Religion	Cast Islam as a monolithic, oppressive religion threatening secular Europe.	Painted Western secularism as inherently hostile to Islamic values and traditions.	Religion used as a justification for governance. LIWC Analysis: Emotional tones vary – fear (far-right) and pride (Islamists).
Democracy	Undermined pluralism by framing democratic processes as compromised by 'migrant-friendly' policies.	Justified authoritarianism by portraying democracy as a Western imposition undermining Islamic governance.	Analyzed rejection of pluralism and secularism. Keyword Analysis focused on terms like "failure," "compromise," and "undermine."
Security	Migration linked to terrorism and societal instability; exclusion justified for "stability."	Portrays 'the West' as the root of instability. Islamists framed as defenders of community security.	Security concerns intersect in themes of terrorism and protection. Sentiment Analysis: Fear dominates security rhetoric.

Themes	Far-Right Narratives (Europe)	Political Islamist Narratives	Methodology applied
Economics	Migrants, mostly Muslims, are blamed for unemployment, inflation, housing costs, and straining welfare systems, causing financial struggles for locals.	Western economic sanctions and resource misuse are portrayed as deliberate actions to weaken Islamic economies, creating poverty that is instead blamed on 'the West' and its corporations, thereby justifying authoritarian control as necessary.	Economic terms like "poverty," "burden," and "exploitation" are frequent. Thematic Analysis explored economic grievances as narrative drivers.

Findings and Discussion

1. Migration

Migration narratives are central to both far-right and Islamist rhetoric, albeit with starkly contrasting frames. Far-right leaders in Europe portray migration, particularly from Muslim-majority countries, as a significant threat to national security and cultural identity. For instance, speeches from political figures like Marine Le Pen emphasize how migration is eroding "French civilization" and creating "no-go zones" in urban areas (Rueda, 2022). Similarly, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has claimed that migration is part of a "left-wing conspiracy to erase European identity" (Gray Meral & Kumar, 2025).

On the other hand, political Islamist narratives frame migration as a direct consequence of Western wars and interference in the Islamic world. Leaders such as Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei often point to the displacement of Muslims as a symptom of "Western imperialism and aggression," (Kayhan, 2024) portraying migrants as victims of systemic injustice.

This dual framing – where migration is weaponized by both sides – enables these movements to rally support and justify exclusionary and authoritarian policies, whether through stricter immigration controls in Europe or anti-Western mobilization in the Islamic world.

2. Identity

The theme of identity forms the backbone of the antagonistic relationship between far-right and Islamist movements. Far-right rhetoric frequently depicts Islam as in-

compatible with 'European cultural values.' For example, Geert Wilders has openly stated that "Islam poses a threat to our freedom and identity as Europeans" (Bozta, 2023). Such statements position Muslims as 'outsiders,' framing their presence as an existential crisis for European societies.

Conversely, Islamist leaders, such as Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, frame Western societies as antagonistic forces seeking to destroy Islamic identity. Erdoğan has warned against the "cultural imperialism of the West," portraying secular and liberal values as corrosive to Islamic morals and community cohesion (Associated Press, 2024).

This mutual 'othering' reinforces exclusionary worldviews, with far-right movements positioning themselves as defenders of Western identity, while Islamists act as guardians of religious and cultural authenticity in the face of Western intrusion (Gunning & Jackson, 2011).

3. Nationalism and Sovereignty

Nationalism is a shared tool for mobilization across both far-right and Islamist movements, albeit with differing targets. European far-right groups, such as the Alternative für Deutschland, frequently frame 'Islam' as a foreign force that is incompatible with national values, invoking themes of sovereignty to resist globalization. The AfD, for instance, has called for "restoring German sovereignty by halting Islamic immigration and rejecting multiculturalism" (Alternative für Deutschland, 2017).

In contrast, Islamist leaders, particularly those aligned with political movements such as Hezbollah, employ the language of resistance against Western hegemony. Hassan Nasrallah, for example, has stated that "defending Islamic sovereignty against Western aggression is a religious and national duty" (Mosalman TV, 2024).

Both movements reject external influences and use nationalism to legitimize their anti-globalization agendas, although their targets and justifications diverge.

4. Religion

Religion plays a crucial role in the rhetoric of both far-right and Islamist movements, framing religious identity as a fundamental marker of difference. These movements, while oppositional, use religion to reinforce their exclusionary and authoritarian agendas. The far right often depicts Islam as a threat to Western religious and cultural values, while Islamist movements reject Western secularism and Christianity as corrupting forces. These opposing religious discourses fuel mutual exclusion, justifying exclusionary policies and ideologies on both sides.

Far-right movements in Europe often frame Islam as incompatible with Western, particularly Christian, values. For instance, leaders like Marine Le Pen in France and Geert Wilders in the Netherlands have linked Islam to violence and extremism, portraying it as a 'totalitarian ideology' that undermines democratic principles and European cultural identity. In the United Kingdom, Nigel Farage and the UK Independence Party (UKIP) have frequently associated Islam with terrorism and extremism, framing it as a threat to 'British values and traditions.' Farage has argued that 'radical Islam' must be rejected to preserve British culture, positioning Christianity as central to national identity (Ahmed & Lynch, 2024). Similarly, in Spain, Santiago Abascal of Vox has warned that "Islam is a threat to our identity and European culture," using religion as justification for tighter immigration controls and emphasizing the defense of a "Christian Europe" (Corral, Fernández & Prieto-Andrés, 2023). Austria's Sebastian Kurz, a center-right political figure who has at times aligned with far-right rhetoric and policies, has voiced similar concerns – claiming that "Islam is not part of Austrian culture" and associating Muslim migration with increasing social and security challenges (Gerdziunas, 2018). His government has supported policies like banning the full-face veil and limiting mosque construction, reinforcing the far-right's narrative that Islam is a challenge to European, Christian-based values.

In contrast, Islamist movements, led by figures such as Ayatollah Khamenei of Iran and the Taliban, position Islam as a complete and divinely mandated system that governs all aspects of life, including politics and governance. Khamenei has condemned Western secularism as a form of "cultural imperialism," arguing that it leads to the decay of traditional values and weakens Islamic governance (Khamenei, 2011). The Taliban also reject Western-style democracy, framing secular democratic ideals as foreign impositions designed to undermine Islam. In their rule over Afghanistan, the Taliban enforce Sharia law as a defense against the 'corrupting influence of the West,' positioning their strict interpretation of Islam as a necessary safeguard for national sovereignty and Islamic values (Amu TV, 2022).

The religious rhetoric of both far-right and Islamist movements reinforce each other in a cycle of mutual antagonism. Far-right leaders, such as Salvini, Wilders, and Farage, depict Islam as an existential threat to European religious and cultural foundations, often framing Muslims as political adversaries that must be excluded. They argue that Islam's incompatibility with 'European Christian values' justifies exclusionary policies. In response, Islamist leaders, such as Khamenei and Taliban figures, frame the West's secularism and Christianity as corrupt systems that weaken Islamic governance and values. Both movements reject liberal democracy and secularism, strengthening their mutual exclusivity and positioning their respective religious frameworks as the solution to societal decay.

This antagonistic symbiosis perpetuates a feedback loop where the far-right's demonization of Islam justifies Islamist anti-Western rhetoric, and vice versa. Each

side's rhetoric feeds into the other's fears, reinforcing the idea that Islamic practices are a threat to European identity and that Western secularism undermines Islamic values. This cycle further entrenches societal polarization and undermines democratic values, as both movements use religion to justify exclusionary and authoritarian policies.

5. Democracy and Secularism

Both movements share a rejection of liberal democracy but for distinct ideological reasons. Far-right movements in Europe frequently criticize democracy and secularism, arguing that these frameworks erode national identity. Far-right leaders, such as Matteo Salvini, criticize democratic systems for enabling multiculturalism and immigration, arguing that they dilute traditional values. Similarly, Islamist ideologues reject secularism as a "Western imposition," with figures like Yusuf al-Qaradawi (2009), Abu Hamza al-Masri (as cited in Wiktorowicz, 2005), and Salman al-Ouda (2013) asserting that secularism "destroys the essence of Islamic governance" by undermining the integration of religion and state, which they view as central to an Islamic society.

The Danish People's Party (Dansk Folkeparti) has consistently framed democracy as inadequate for safeguarding 'Danish identity' against Islamic influences. Pia Kjærsgaard, a founding member, has asserted that "Danish democracy cannot coexist with Islam's political ambitions," advocating for legislative restrictions on religious practices, including the construction of mosques and public displays of Islamic attire (Meret & Gregersen, 2019).

In a speech Taliban spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid declared, "Democracy is a system imposed by invaders to strip us of our values; it has no place in an Islamic state governed by Sharia law." (TOLOnews, 2022) The Taliban's authoritarian governance model reflects this ideology, dismantling democratic institutions in favor of an Islamic emirate (Khan & Khan, 2024). Similarly, groups like Hizb ut-Tahrir advocate for the establishment of a global caliphate, rejecting both democracy and secularism as alien frameworks that dilute Islamic identity (Rabbani, 2023). This shared discontent with democratic governance underscores their authoritarian tendencies. While far-right movements seek to preserve 'ethnonationalism,' Islamists aim to establish systems based on Sharia law. Both ideologies converge in their critique of liberal ideals, particularly regarding the rights of women and minorities, portraying such rights as threats to societal stability.

6. Security

The securitization of identity and migration underscores the narratives of both movements. Far-right rhetoric often links Islam to terrorism, fueling Islamophobia

across Europe or the United States. Far-right rhetoric often portrays 'the Islamic world' as inherently undemocratic and unethical, framing it as a societal threat that must be controlled. For example, Marine Le Pen have declared that "radical Islam is at war with us," framing entire Muslim communities as security threats (Solletty, 2021). These statements not only legitimize stricter border controls but also erode trust between Muslim minorities and host societies. Leaders in far-right movements, such as those from the Dansk Folkeparti or Germany's AfD, link Muslim communities to radicalism and depict them as incompatible with Western democratic values and cultural cohesion (Deutscher Bundestag, 2024).

Conversely, Islamist figures and political leaders in the Islamic world often characterize Western nations as destabilizing forces. They accuse 'the West' of exploiting the region, fueling crises through military interventions, economic sanctions, and cultural imperialism. For instance, the Taliban have repeatedly labeled Western powers as aggressors undermining Islamic governance, while Saudi clerics, such as Abdulaziz al-Sheikh, critique Western influence as corrosive to Islamic identity and societal stability (Aal ash-Shaykh, 2018).

They often blame 'the West' for perpetuating regional instability. For instance, figures like Nasrallah, Erdoğan, Khamenei, and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi frequently accuse Europe and the United States of 'fomenting chaos' in the Middle East to justify military interventions. This reciprocal securitization sustains an antagonistic symbiosis between the two movements, with each side portraying the other as an existential threat that necessitates exceptional measures. These mutual portrayals reinforce antagonistic narratives, fueling polarization and justifying exclusionary and authoritarian policies on both sides.

Simultaneously with the escalation of the Gaza conflict and Israel's military actions in Gaza and Lebanon from 2023 onwards, there has been a notable increase in anti-Western sentiment across many Muslim-majority countries. This has emboldened their leaders, amplifying their rhetoric and political positions in response to perceived Western complicity or indifference.

7. Economics

Economic arguments are central to the rhetoric of both far-right and Islamist movements, though each group frames the issues differently to justify their exclusionary and authoritarian agendas. Far-right groups often blame migrants for economic hardship, including rising unemployment, strained welfare systems, and social services. They depict migrants, particularly from Muslim-majority countries, as economic burdens that drain national resources, further perpetuating anti-immigrant sentiment.

For example, in Poland, Finland, and Sweden, far-right parties frequently link migration to economic concerns, framing it as a threat to national stability. In

Poland, the Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (PiS), led by Jarosław Kaczyński, argues that migrants strain the welfare system, leading to job losses and increased competition for public services (Voice of Sanity, 2015). Similarly, in Finland, the Perussuomalaiset, under Riikka Purra, contends that migrants "take jobs from Finns" and exploit the welfare system, promoting economic nationalism to protect local jobs and resources (Purra, 2024). In Sweden, the Sverigedemokraterna, led by Jimmie Åkesson, criticize "uncontrolled immigration" for increasing unemployment and 'overburdening' the welfare state, advocating for reduced immigration to redirect resources toward native citizens (Sverigedemokraterna, 20224). These parties use economic anxieties to justify exclusionary and anti-immigrant policies.

In contrast, political Islamists criticize Western economic policies, such as sanctions, exploitation of natural resources, and neoliberal economic interventions, as primary drivers of poverty and instability in the Islamic world. Leaders like Ayatollah Khamenei of Iran and Erdoğan in Turkey argue that these policies undermine regional economies and exacerbate inequalities. They frame Western economic dominance as a form of neo-imperialism that destabilizes the region, feeding into their resistance narratives (Khamenei, 2024).

Conclusion

This study has explored the complex and interdependent relationship between far-right extremism in Europe and political Islamist movements, framing their mutual reinforcement through the concept of antagonistic symbiosis. While seemingly ideologically opposed, these movements share a reciprocal reliance on fear-based narratives and exclusionary ideologies that target the perceived threats posed by migration, cultural change, and governance models. This interdependence, underpinned by mutual antagonism, not only perpetuates their ideological positions but also undermines democratic values and political stability across the global landscape.

The ideological rift between far-right extremism in Europe and political Islamists within the Islamic world represents a complex yet symbiotic relationship, wherein both movements co-opt fear to further their exclusionary and anti-democratic agendas. Far-right extremists in Europe, largely defined by their opposition to Muslim migration, portray Islam as an existential threat to national identity and cultural cohesion. At the same time, political Islamists – who view Islam as a political and societal framework – frame their resistance as a defense against Western influence and imperialism. These Islamist movements believe that Islam serves as a safeguard, offering protection from the cultural, economic, and political encroachment of the West. The rhetoric of these movements often converges around anti-Western sentiment, with both sides amplifying the notion of an invasion: for far-right extremists, it is the migrant 'invasion' threatening European values; for

political Islamists, it is the Western 'invasion' destabilizing Islamic governance and cultural integrity. Both sides, despite their geographic and ideological differences, rely on a similar set of rhetorical strategies to bolster their political legitimacy and justify exclusionary policies.

Though divergent in their political systems and geographical locations, these movements share common ground in their rejection of liberal democracy and their use of fear-based narratives to legitimize authoritarian practices. This shared antagonism feeds into a feedback loop, whereby each movement strengthens the other's position, contributing to global instability and democratic backsliding. Both, far-right parties in Europe and political Islamists in the Islamic world, manipulate migration, identity, and security concerns to perpetuate their respective political goals.

Antagonistic symbiosis is reflected in the way both construct hostile discourses towards each other, using these narratives as tools to legitimize their own ideologies and delegitimize the opposing side. By framing the other as an existential threat, both movements seek to solidify their political power and identity, while simultaneously undermining democratic foundations. This reciprocal antagonism feeds into a cycle where each movement strengthens its own position through the demonization of the other, fostering polarization and weakening the core principles of democratic governance. In this dynamic, both sides use hostile rhetoric not only to gain power but also to diminish the legitimacy of democratic values, thus creating an environment that is conducive to the rise of authoritarianism.

The antagonistic symbiosis between these movements is evident in how their narratives feed into one another, creating a cyclical pattern of polarization that undermines democratic principles. Far-right groups in Europe, by portraying Islam as a political and religious threat, reinforce the Islamist narrative that 'the West' is an imperial aggressor, further validating the Islamist stance of rejecting Western influence. This dynamic not only strengthens the resolve of both movements but also deepens the divisions within societies, eroding the very democratic principles that should foster inclusion, pluralism, and peaceful coexistence.

The implications of this antagonistic relationship are far-reaching, particularly in the context of democratic backsliding. By framing their respective ideologies in mutually exclusive terms, both movements contribute to the erosion of democratic values, such as pluralism, freedom of expression, and the protection of minority rights. The far right's promotion of exclusionary nationalism, combined with Islamist calls for religious governance, creates an environment where democratic institutions are increasingly under threat. The framing of Muslims as 'others' or 'enemies' of both the state and society fuels xenophobia, discrimination, and authoritarian tendencies, while the Islamist rejection of liberal democracy and secularism promotes authoritarianism as the only viable alternative.

The mutually reinforcing narratives of the far right and political Islamism are not only ideologically destructive but also politically destabilizing. Their antagonis-

tic symbiosis perpetuates cycles of fear, exclusion, and radicalization that ultimately undermine democratic governance. To counter this, it is imperative to address the root causes of polarization and engage in efforts to strengthen democratic institutions, foster interfaith and intercultural dialogues, and promote inclusive policies that protect the rights and identities of all citizens, regardless of their religious or cultural background. Only by recognizing the interplay between these ideologies and intervening at both the ideological and institutional levels societies can hope to safeguard the democratic values that are increasingly at risk.

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Storytelling & moral panic

Christian fundamentalism in Germany is increasing rapidly – not only in Germany

Ruby Rebelde (FundiWatch)

revised by Zoe Luginsland (FundiWatch)

"Was that really a good idea?"

As I listen to Tobias Ginsburg talk about his book *Die letzten Männer des Westen* (Ginsburg, 2021), I chew on this question.

In autumn 2024, I am on a conference on far-right extremism organized by the Doctoral College for Intersectionality Studies at the University of Bayreuth, and I ask myself: "What am I doing here?" Neither the topic of Christian fundamentalism, which I brought with me, nor my occupation as a sex worker 'qualify' me particularly for this. At least that's what I have been told many times before.

Anyone reading this text will hardly know the research collective *FundiWatch* (FundiWatch, 2025a), and me even less. *FundiWatch* investigates Christian fundamentalism in German-speaking countries. We are currently less than a handful of people. We assume that this will change over the coming months. Our core topic Christian fundamentalism is becoming too relevant for more and more people, it becomes clear every day that more and more people are being negatively affected by Christian fundamentalism – often without really being able to understand *what* is going on.

In matters of gender, sexual and reproductive rights, the Trump administration and numerous other authoritarian regimes globally are creating startling realities at a rapid pace. There are numerous intersecting topics in the global anti-gender movement, these topics are 'discussed' in a way I refer to as 'culture war.' Culture war topics are being received in middle-class to far-right circles and serve deeply

felt and culturalized resentment towards queer, tian[1] persons and sex workers. They formulate reactionary ideas of a binary, heteronormative and heterosexual understanding of gender and corresponding role models. Christian fundamentalism has long been a central player in the fields of culture war. It fulfils its role through (ultra-)conservative sexual morals and purity culture[2] and has a huge reach (Jetter, 2023), especially among younger people, through contemporary pop cultural, digital phenomena such as #tradwife or #womanosphere (Silman, 2025). More recently, the alliances between "the" far right and "Christian fundamentalism" have become more visible, for example in elaborately staged and streamed baptisms of central figures of the Alt-right (LIEBEZURBIBEL, 2024) or at events such as the "1000 Crosses March" (firm, 2024) or the "March for Life" (Huebner & Ringel, 2024), at which more and more members of the German far-right party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), which has been confirmed as 'right-wing extremist' by a report of the *Office for the Protection of the Constitution* (Tagesschau, 2025), can be seen in addition to the usual faces – such as Beatrix von Storch or Maximillian Krah. All of these topics have one thing in common: they play an important role in the ongoing culture war, which is alarmingly well received in middle-class milieus (Zick, Küppers & Mokros, 2023).

Culture war and moral panic

The modern culture war usually concerns highly personal decisions such as abortion, gender and sexual self-determination, migration, sex work, assisted suicide, surrogacy, or ritual violence and 'porn addiction.' It often builds on an existing discrimination or taboo and uses language and messages of resentment and hatred, disinformation to stir up moral panic.[3]

Before I go into the example in more detail, I would like to return briefly to myself and my doubts. As a non-binary sex worker, I often perceive myself as 'foreign' or 'not belonging,' this was also the case at the conference from which this anthology emerges. However, this is not due to my subjective feeling, but is based on experiences of exclusion, discrimination and stigma. At *FundiWatch* (and elsewhere), I analyse far-right, (ultra-)conservative and Christian fundamentalist culture war topics. And that often causes irritation, because moral panics about the kind of work

1 Trans, inter, asexual and non-binary people.

2 Purity culture: A Christian fundamentalist concept of morality that propagates chastity outside of marriage. This also includes masturbation and the rejection of behavior that is considered sexually deviant.

3 The term moral panic goes back to the sociologist Stanley Cohen. Cohen observed a central role of the media in the emergence and promotion of moral panics (Critcher, 2017).

I do (sex work) and people like me (sex workers) imply that my very presence can trigger arguments. My doubts kick in particularly hard today among all the smart and well-established conference participants from all over Europe with professional backgrounds in journalism, social work, ethnology or political science. But I know exactly what I'm talking about.

Not everyone immediately understands the logical connection between far-right extremism, Christian fundamentalism and sexworkphobia[4] (Rebelde, 2023), so let me explain: Me and my colleagues are directly affected by Christian fundamentalist activities and their breathtaking expansion in social work, as well as in politics and the media. They are becoming an increasing threat to us. At the same time, these resentments against sex workers are based on the discriminatory assumption of the inequality of sex workers and the assertion that it is 'legitimate' to save us, convert us and question our existence. Ideologies of inequality are the fundament for every far-right movement.

In times of loud calls for more bans or even the 'abolition' of sex work, or when questionable practices such as healing or liberation prayers, like Sozo (Bethelsozo, 2025; FundiWatch, 2025b), the use of aromatherapy[5] and even exorcism of demons (Cara-SH, 2024)[6] are part of the practices in Christian fundamentalist networks, there is a huge gaping void: The public, political or even journalistic lack of interest in who is 'saving' whom, why and by what means, and whether this is a human rights-based approach.

As a result, Christian fundamentalist projects are rapidly gaining ground in German-speaking countries. This is enthusiastically welcomed in middle-class women's rights and 'gender-critical' circles, because these groups agree that a 'world without prostitution' must be a better world. There is a yawning lack of interest in what happens in the name of charity when Christian fundamentalist projects rescue 'prostitutes.' A number of such projects are already admitted to protestant welfare organizations ("Diakonien", "diakonische Werke") and one of them, Neustart e.V., has actually been appointed to become a pilot project by the federal state of Germany (BMFSFJ, 2025), while my colleagues disappear into private shelters and/or are deported if they fail to achieve the desired 'exit' from prostitution. Instead of pursuing the question why sex workers are considered 'unequal' or sinners and/or a threat to a 'decent, moral, normal' society, they are thrown to the wolves, i.e. to the rescue industry of Christian fundamentalism and its gender- and prostitution-critical friends (LFS, 2025).

4 Sexworkphobia refers to the experience of discrimination that sex workers experience because they are sex workers.

5 About the cooperation between Mission Freedom and the aromatic oil manufacturer doTERRA see doTERRA (2025).

6 The counselling center Cara-SH has documented a case; see Cara-SH (2024).

"We care" – in German – is a central slogan of the *Salvation Army* in Germany (Heilsarmee, 2025a). The fact that they "care" spares mainstream society a lot: dealing with structural sexism, trans misogyny, classism and racism, for example, not to mention sexworkphobia. The aforementioned associations and institutions fall back on clichés and resentment against sex workers deeply rooted in mainstream society (Rebelde, 2025). In this way, underlying questions are avoided, such as:

- How can we achieve equality of sex workers?
- How can sex workers benefit from human rights and labour rights?

Back to the subject of the conference: Far-right extremism.
What ideologies do Christian fundamentalists, (ultra-)conservatives and far-right-wingers share?

So: What does the devaluation of sex workers have in common with far-right ideologies?

The construction of 'us' and 'them,' 'right' and 'wrong' or 'normal' and 'deviant' is a central criterion for ideologies of inequality, which can be found in authoritarian to far-right concepts. *Germany – but normal* (AfD, 2021) – was the translated title of the AfD's 2021 election manifesto. The party believes that anything that varies from this constructed 'normal' should be reduced or, ideally, no longer take any place at all, such as 'multiculturalism' or sexual and gender self-determination apart from 'biological sex.' In recent years, Pride Walks (Autor*innenkollektiv Feministische Intervention, 2025) have become a key topic for campaigns and mobilization of far-right marches attacking 'gender ideology. Hatred and rejection of a small social group is expressed more aggressively and more loudly every year and is accompanied by a massive increase in violence (BKA, 2024). Alarmingly, the middle-class white women's movement[7] also participates in these attacks on tian and queer people. Another campaign theme of this women's movement was and is the fight against sex work and sex workers for a 'world without prostitution' (Emma Magazine, 2013).

Sexworkphobia is another culture war topic, where far-right attitudes and conservative networks and actors overlap. The approval to anti-sex work statements as well as the restriction of sexual and reproductive self-determination enables broad alliances that run from the far-right to the middle-class women's movement and include Christian fundamentalism (Rebelde, 2023 & 2025).

7 An incomplete overview of the more radicalized spectrum of gender-critical actors in the women's movement can be found here: LFS (2025).

Note: No, FundiWatch does not consist of sex workers only, so far there is only me with this background in our research collective. And yet the reality of sexworkphobia was the starting point for FundiWatch. One milestone was a research project on the *Mission Freedom* association, it can be found on our homepage (Pöhl, 2025).

The extent to which these developments have already progressed makes my hair stand on end: There is hardly any other socially controversial topic where networks, strategies and talking-points of Christian fundamentalism have been able to establish and institutionalize themselves so openly and unchallenged. The 'world without prostitution' or the 'fight against human trafficking,' as Christian fundamentalists call their anti-sex work activities, is by no means their core issue, not even a favourite one. But it is for sure a field of campaigning, where it was easy for them to gain a foothold.

This is illustrated by the following anecdote experienced by another member of *FundiWatch*: At a Christian fundamentalist and sexworkphobic conference, a 'social ethicist' and professor answered the following question *'How can we achieve anything politically in postmodern Berlin?'*

The answer was: Christians could, after all, interpret terms such as 'gender equality.' She gave an example: It is a scandal, she said, that 'misgendering' is a punishable offense, but the actual biggest 'gender violation' itself remains unpunished. In the terminology code of the event, she was referring to sex work as gender-specific violence. She called for the fight of gender equality to be instrumentalized – even though her own thinking is shaped by a strictly binary, 'biological' understanding of gender. Hijacking the term, however, allows to attack sex work effectively and oppose 'postmodern Berlin.' Those present understood and applauded thunderously.

The fight against 'prostitution' was and is both: an ongoing campaign and a laboratory for testing communication strategies, slogans and alliances. The experience from over 150 years is evaluated and updated in real-time. To show this let's take a closer look at the example of the *Salvation Army*.

The *Salvation Army* and 'prostitution'

The *Salvation Army* was founded in 1865 by the pastor couple William and Catherine Booth in London. From the very beginning, the *Salvation Army* was characterized by combining biblical preaching and evangelisation with charitable activities aimed particularly at vulnerable groups (Heilsarmee, 2025a). For a long time, the *Salvation Army*'s motto was: *soup, soap, salvation* (Bracegirdle, 2021). Sex workers have been and still are one of the *Salvation Army*'s preferred target groups. In my hometown Hamburg, the *Salvation Army* is located directly on the Reeperbahn party mile, which for many is synonymous with sex work. But the *Salvation Army* (at least in Europe) would

not use the term 'sex work' but refer to 'prostitution.' In Amsterdam, in a similar neighborhood, the *Salvation Army* even offers a tourist walk through the Red-Light District: For them 'prostitution' is inextricably linked to 'modern slavery' and cannot be separated from human trafficking (Heilsarmee, 2025b). This is a key belief in this free church. Henny Tinga from the *Salvation Army Amsterdam* states in the aforementioned Red-Light District audio walk:

> "Everywhere where there is prostitution there is human trafficking and forced prostitution. (...)" (Amsterdam Red Light District, 2025)

Another recent example from 2024: The *World Evangelical Alliance* and the *Salvation Army Canada* published a joint statement. It reads:

> "The World Evangelical Alliance together with our member, the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada (EFC), and the Salvation Army call on States to recognize prostitution with its connected variations as a system of exploitation and violence, and to adopt an abolitionist legal framework." (WEA, 2024)

This statement was prompted by a corresponding declaration by UN Special Rapporteur Reem Alsalem, which was rejected by sex workers worldwide (ESWA, 2024).

The Salvation Army's *positional statement* from 2015 provides evidence for the justification of this opinion:

> "The Salvation Army does not support treating prostitution as normative or acceptable practice, or as a socially or morally legitimate career choice. We recognize the negative consequences of prostitution on people and society, including personal degradation, exploitation, human trafficking and damage to psychological and physical health. (...) The Salvation Army identifies a need to continually combat demand, develop sufficient support for people desiring to exit sex work, provide community education and challenge behaviors that devalue people through sexual exploitation." (Heilsarmee, 2025c; highlights by the author)

A façade of charity and commitment hides moral codes and sexual ethical behavioural requirements that construct sex workers as a threat scenario, sinful and objects of rescue. The former attributions tend to be implicit, while the latter, salvation, is the core of the self-marketing and self-narration of Christian fundamentalist players in particular. The extent to which the moral basis of such practices is obscured and used by opponents to prostitution explains the following 140 years old historical excursus, which refers to a well-known literary classic:

What connects *Eliza Doolittle* from *Pygmalion* and *My Fair Lady* to the *Salvation Army* and the strategy of moral panic?

The musical *My Fair Lady* is based on the novel *Pygmalion* by George Bernard Shaw. This fact might be familiar to some, at least when I was at school, both the musical and the novel were part of the curriculum. The following, on the other hand, is probably new to most people:

Shaw was inspired to write *Pygmalion* by the 'Eliza Armstrong case' (Stead, 1885) which took place in London at the end of the 19th century. This case is part of media history as one of the earliest examples of scandal journalism (Hattersley, 1999). William T. Stead wrote the series of articles *The Maiden Tribune to Modern Babylon* for the *Pall Mall Gazette* in 1885. Stead was a dazzling figure, a pioneer of scandal journalism, a convicted felon and a skilful self-promoter. His death on the *Titanic* - according to legend with a book in his hand in the saloon of the sinking ship (Sydney Robinson, 2012) – fits seamlessly into his biography. However, it is not the person William Stead that is relevant for our context, but the background to his very successful and widely read *The Maiden Tribune to Modern Babylon* on the 'modern virgin sacrifice.' This would not be the case without the initiative of the women's rights activist Josephine Butler and the active 'help' of the *Salvation Army* … I have already reconstructed this case for my book on sexworkphobia:

> "Stead's The Maiden Tribune to Modern Babylon (…) describes in lurid detail the trafficking of English 'virgins' into continental brothels, citing alleged examples. One of these examples – the case of Lily / Eliza Armstrong – turned out in retrospect to be Stead's journalistic stunt. Stead and accomplices 'bought' and abducted a thirteen-year-old girl and were later convicted for it. (…) Florence Booth, the daughter-in-law of Salvation Army founders William and Catherine Booth, ran the home for 'fallen women'[8] in Whitechapel, a London district known for its extreme poverty and associated problems, from 1884 on. Her husband, Bramwell Booth, acknowledged Josephine Butler's role in the Eliza Armstrong case in his memoirs, and there are numerous other reconstructions of the case. Bramwell Booth was co-defendant in the later trial but was ultimately not convicted as an accomplice of Stead and Rebecca Jarrett (a former brothel madam who had converted to the Salvation Army shortly before the staged abduction). The Salvation Army also helped sell the Pall Mall Gazette. The newspaper ran out of paper several times during printing, so immense was the demand. It has been reconstructed that it was probably Florence Booth who recruited Rebecca Jarrett for the abduction of Eliza and other contacts with suspected people from the milieu. The fact that the Eliza case was staged did not detract from the effectiveness of Stead's article. Stead even used his prison sentence, which he served as a first-class prisoner,

8 Such asylums for 'fallen women' existed in many places.

> for self-promotion by continuing to publish from prison and later processing his imprisonment into reports." (Rebelde, 2025, p. 123)

Stead's 'Eliza case' was therefore both a stunt and an act of violence. Based on the original idea by Josephine Butler and with the help of the *Salvation Army*, Stead and his accomplices abducted a thirteen-year-old girl to France, for which they had to stand trial, and – partially – were convicted. Stead wanted to substantiate his scandalizing account of the trafficking of girls and women by providing 'evidence.' Since it was not possible to provide this 'evidence' by other means, he and his accomplices resorted to this stunt. The *Salvation Army* abused its influence over a member of its religious community (Rebecca Jarrett) and its access to a vulnerable population group bought with 'soup and soap.'

Josephine Butler later justified the entire process, i.e. the stunt and the crime, in the medium of the *Salvation Army* (Salvation Army UK, 2025). 2016, the author Cathy LeFeuvre, herself a member of the *Salvation Army*, described the Eliza Armstrong case as "uncomfortable", but: "Did the ends justify the means? I suppose they did." (Halcrow, 2016)

In fact, both the success of Stead's *The Maiden Tribune to Modern Babylon* and the rampant moral panic about human trafficking helped to foster a change in the law, that Josephine Butler sought at the same time. The law concerned the raising of the age of consent for adolescents and was in itself certainly worthy of approval. However, the way in which vulnerable people were used/tokenized, and the way in which the media and a fused movement of women's rights activists and *Salvation Army* proceeded, is highly open to criticism. The aforementioned Shaw borrowed Eliza Armstrong for his character of Eliza Doolittle, even after it became public that the Eliza case was a journalistic stunt.

How it started and how it's going

The *Salvation Army Germany* is today a member of the association *Gemeinsam gegen Menschenhandel e.V.* (which translates to *Together Against Human Trafficking, short: GGMH)*. The chairman, Frank Heinrich, has a past with the *Salvation Army*, before he became a member of the Bundestag for the conservative Christian Democrats in Germany, the CDU/CSU for a while (Bundestag, 2024). Heinrich was on the board of the *Evangelical Alliance Germany (EAD)* until March 2025 (EAD, 2025). Both the *GGMH* and the *EAD* are heterogeneous associations of very different, but overall Christian fundamentalist members. *GGMH* consists of, among others: *Samaritans Purse* (made famous by the evangelist Billy Graham and today under the leadership of his son Franklin), *Mission Freedom*, from the spectrum of *Christ for all Nation* (*CfaN*),

SOLWODI, Neustart e.V. alongside the *Salvation Army* and many other free-church, evangelical or charismatic projects. They all have two things in common:

How they talk about sex workers, namely as 'modern slaves' and victims. And: What their 'solution' to the 'problem' of 'prostitution' is, namely 'rescue,' as well as the introduction of criminalization of the demand for sexual services (the so-called Nordic model (WEA, 2024).

For this purpose *GGMH* and also the *Salvation Army* are increasingly involved politically, e.g. in the *European Freedom Network* or on the streets, e.g. in the annually increasing number of *Walks for Freedom* (Walk for Freedom, 2025), which are very similar to the concept of *Marches for Life*.

The connections between *GGMH* and the *Salvation Army* could not be closer: The *Salvation Army Germany's* subwebpage on "human trafficking" is adorned with the logo of *Gemeinsam gegen Menschenhandel e.V.* (Heilsarmee, 2025d), without any explanation. Back in 2016, Frank Heinrich and Uwe Heimowski, who was from 2016 -2021 'ambassador' for the Evangelical Alliance Germany in the German parliament and before that employed as assistant of Frank Heinrich, published the richly illustrated and extremely one-sided book (title originally in German, translated by the author): *The repressed scandal. Human Trafficking in Germany*, in which they present their understanding of sex work as 'modern slavery' and Europe as a "marketplace of slaves" (Heinrich & Heimowski, 2016, p. 07, translated by the author) in a collection of pictures and stories. Many of the aforementioned members of *GGMH* have their say there with anecdotal – and that is unverifiable – stories of 'rescue operations.'

This book once again impressively demonstrates the close relationship between Heinrich and the *Salvation Army* as well as the importance of scandal stories.
In the preface, Heinrich makes many disturbing analogies between the enslavement of '*black* people' (that is "*Schwarze* Menschen"), his choice of words – not mine, and 'sex slaves' ("Sexsklaven"). Not once in the entire preface the term prostitution or sex work is mentioned, let alone any attempt to differentiate sex work from trafficking for sexual exploitation. The book contains images that very well could be stock photos for sex work as such, citing the usual attributes such as high heels, fishnet stockings and short skirts: A sexist *male* gaze on female bodies, in front of neon advertisements, nocturnal views of streets and poverty. The book suggests: All people in sex work are victims of human trafficking. According to the book published by Heimowski and Heinrich, human trafficking in Germany is the same as 'prostitution.' The two are not alone in this view, as the following quote from the preface shows:

> "Women's rights activists such as Alice Schwarzer with her sharp and pointed reporting, or the Catholic nun Lea Ackermann, who has been active for 30 years with her association SOLWODI (...) founded in Kenya. The association 'Gemeinsam Gegen Menschenhandel e.V. ' (GGMH) was founded as an alliance to network

> various initiatives in Germany and Europe and support them in their fight against human trafficking. Each of the members has their own story that led to their commitment. In my case, it is closely linked to the Salvation Army. I worked as an officer in this 'Army of God' for twelve years." (Heinrich & Heimowski, 2016, p. 11, translated by the author)

Heinrich then refers explicitly to Stead's *The Maiden Tribune to Modern Babylon* and to the Eliza Armstrong case and says:

> "In the Salvation Army, human trafficking is a key issue. William Booth, the founder, and his son Bramwell had already launched a successful press campaign ('The Maiden Tribute') in 1885 (...) When I was elected to the German Parliament in 2009, I also put the issue at the top of my agenda." (Heinrich & Heimowski, 2016, p. 11, translation and highlights by the author)

Heinrich will keep his word and has poured a great deal of energy into his personal cause. The opposition of sex workers, who do not want more repression and bans, but rights and decriminalization, does not count at all for him.

Approach: The playbook of fundamentalists in 'red-light districts'

The concept is simple, but quite successful.

The first step for this groups is to be present on the streets in a kind of voluntary street missionary work, distributing drinks and pastries free of charge. At this stage, it is already notable that they explicitly use social work terminology, although it is religious missionary work. They refer to it as 'outreach work' (Bundestag, 2025). This often is followed by the establishment of a private 'shelter' or 'shelter house.' Here, the boundaries between an official facility, for example a municipal emergency shelter, and a private, religiously motivated shelter are blurred as much as possible. Both stages are flanked by intensive public relations announcements, social media 'informs' about their activities, Christian media such as *IDEA*, *chrismon*, *Pro+* happily pick up such stories (see IDEA, 2024). Locally, the projects are gradually becoming more offensive, ringing the doors of brothels and entering them, not always saying frankly, that they do not belong to an official and approved counselling center. Sex workers report that these people do not always leave the brothel willingly to let the sex workers carry out their work. In the meantime, these projects have usually found like-minded people locally and are involving more and more volunteers in their activities.

As a next step, the projects then try to be admitted to local welfare organizations on the ground. *Mission Freedom* succeeded in doing this in 2013, when *Diakonie*

Hamburg (an important protestant welfare organization) took on the obviously missionary association despite a major scandal – the "Lisa Case" (Pöhl, 2025; Rebelde, 2025). Around the same time, the association *Neustart e.V.* (*Neustart* emerged from *Teen Challenge* and maintains links with *Samaritans Purse* and *Alabastar Jar*, with the latter it shares its premises in Berlin's Kurfürstenstraße (Neustart, 2025b)) was also admitted to the *Diakonische Werk Berlin-Brandenburg*.

Once they have arrived this stage, the projects often initiate processes of positioning on sex work within the welfare associations. The following self-narrative is used for this: This project is performing pioneering work, has recognized the 'truth' about 'prostitution' and is performing self-sacrificing rescue work on immature victims (Neustart, 2025a). Absurdly, all of this takes place in front of a traditional and widely developed landscape of counselling centers for sex workers in Germany, Austria and Switzerland. However, the Christian fundamentalist projects do not see themselves in this accepting and non-patronizing tradition: they even compete locally with the named counselling centers, which work in harm-reduction, professional and accepting ways. The tenor of Christian fundamentalists here is:

The suffering is enormous and only we see the true extent of it and therefore we have the 'one and only true' solution.

Counselling centers or peer-to-peer projects are often described by Christian fundamentalists as part of the 'prostitution system' or even as 'pimp lobby' because they have a more differentiated opinion than 'prostitution is always violence or the same as human trafficking' and 'every person' in 'prostitution' must be 'saved.' It is enough to claim ambivalence and ambiguity when considering the complex of sex work and human trafficking to be marked and attacked as an enemy by these projects. In order to support their own position they present, very drastic and often not verifiable and/or in retrospect inaccurate cases (see Pöhl, 2025). In hearings with politicians, these descriptions/stories often take up more time than fact-based arguments. An opinion is elevated to a fact and, even more so, to be the 'only' valid 'truth.' However, often this instrumentalizes fears, as fears and worries play a central role in moral panics.

Once the project has been institutionalized in (mostly religious) welfare associations, the way is clear for accreditation in the public aid system, as was recently the case with *SeeNest* (see Pöhl, 2025).

The history of *Neustart e.V.*'s 'exit and shelter apartment' also perfectly fits into this strategy. *Neustart* was appointed to become a federal pilot project, bypassing the official call, only to be seamlessly funded by the Berlin Senate after the end of the federal pilot project by the Berlin Senate. While drastic cuts are being announced everywhere else, including the aforementioned counselling centers, the justification for this is: 'Political will!'

Stoking moral panic continues to be an extremely popular and effective method in the Christian fundamentalist scene. To this end, high, but purely estimated fig-

ures are used and anecdotal evidence is disseminated in the storytelling of individual biographies. Josephine Butler already wanted to enforce a certain law[9] in 1885 when she decided to collaborate with William Stead; today, the networks still engage in lawfare, laws containing more repressions on sex worker, or even the 'abolition' of 'prostitution.' The term lawfare consists of the words "law" and "warfare" and refers inter alia to the use of legal means against political opponents (Kittrie, 2016). In the case of sex work, reproductive and sexual self-determination, it also refers to the strategy of working politically towards more restrictive laws or 'bans.' An example of a successful lawfare strategy is the campaign of *Alliance Defending Freedom* (ADF) against the US Supreme Court ruling Roe v. Wade.

This is not a phenomenon limited to sex work but can also be seen in the ADF's campaigns in the USA to abolish the right of abortion or in the aforementioned campaigns against sexual and gender self-determination. Whether the stories described are true or not is ultimately not decisive for the course of the debate, as Stead's *The Maiden Tribune to Modern Babylon* – or, as Heinrich calls it: 'press campaign' (Heinrich & Heimowski, 2016) – from 1885 impressively demonstrated. The contrived 'Lisa case,' earned *Mission Freedom* critical media and political attention for a short time in 2013, but: once the story is out, it is not at all important whether it is true, but whether the emotionalized or morally panicked target group can *imagine* that it *could be* true. When Shaw wrote his novel about Eliza Doolittle, it was known for a long time that Stead had stunted and carefully curated the 'Eliza Armstrong case' himself. This did not at all diminish the effectiveness of the story. Today, anti-sex work circles glorify Stead as a hero because he kidnapped and abducted a child in 1885 (LightUp Movement, 2024).

To sum up: Was it a good idea to write this text and come to the conference?

Probably yes. In the end, you, the reader decides, at least regarding the text. Shortly before the conference, we founded the research collective *FundiWatch*. All four of us, although from very different backgrounds, felt that the topic of Christian fundamentalism receives too little attention in Germany. Islamic fundamentalism is the subject of breaking news, but Christian fundamentalism has so far been little talked about. As I finish this article (May 2025), another *Protestant Church Day* ("Kirchentag") is taking place. As far as I can see, a critical debate on Christian fundamentalism within the ranks of the protestant church in Germany is not an issue there. There was no room for a workshop pitched by us. The potential for extremism for this kind

9 This involved raising the age of consent from 13 to 16 years for minors.

of radicalization, networking and campaigning (Paul, 2023) has so far been little understood and only exceptionally picked up by journalists or politicians.
And this while a worship band from the Christian fundamentalist spectrum has only just reached number 1 in the charts in Germany… (Offizielle Deutsche Charts, 2025).

Shortly before finishing this text, I received the following information: *Diakonie Bayern* has admitted *Parakaleo e.V.* (Diakonie Bayern, 2025). This is a Nuremberg-based project aimed at sex workers, whose board of directors includes the preacher Justin Shrum from the *Alive Church* (a charismatic Pentecostal free church). He promotes his work as a 'missionary project' on the pages of international fundamentalist missionary organizations. Shrum is also committed to the introduction of a ban of 'buying sex' in Germany. He is also chairman of *The Justice Project*, which runs 'counselling centers' in the German federal state of Baden-Württemberg. According to its own homepage, the story of *The Justice Project* also begins with another very sad story (The Justice Project, 2025) capable of triggering fear, outrage and empathy. Once again: suffering and violence cannot be justified by anything. But the appropriation of the experiences of anonymous people and tokenizing them for political purposes in the style of moral panics, as done by Justin Shrum, nevertheless remains worthy of major criticism. Especially in the fields of culture war-topics approaches based only on religious values should be carefully evaluated and sex workers should be listened to, what we want for ourselves. About such stories I hear next to nothing.

The storytelling of Christian fundamentalist projects remains storytelling, a storytelling that should be fact-checked and analysed in terms of its conclusions and implications, but also its links to and foundational function for far-right discourses.

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Part III: Mapping and/as Intervention

Fostering and constructing intersectional antifascist solidarity

The use of comics for intersectional interventions and perspectives – two comics by Zerocalcare

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Antifascism – in historical development

Working against the far right can follow the terminology of antifascism. However, this term is not without history. A major base for its history is the fight in Italy against the fascism of Benito Mussolini, partly under arms, partly via underground press or sabotage. From early on different attempts of international antifascism were instrumentalized by the Soviet Union, soon making the label difficult for many forces and actors. On the other hand, there were always antifascist actors and forces outside this instrumentalization that tried to fight fascism in Italy or Nazi-Germany and made antifascism a broader movement of the political left. In different regions and countries again, the question was debated in these circles and in the context of what fascism was and how to distinguish it from other phenomena, leading to multiple forms of antifascism (Schneider & Cardoen, 2015). In the years prior to 1945 many organizations and collectives were founded that had relevance later on, so too in Germany with the "Antifaschistische Aktion," founded in 1932; but also songs or chants developed with a major influence post-1945, as for instance "No pasaran" or "Alerta, Alerta, Antifascista" (Langer, 2015).

Though many European countries started after 1945 with a kind of basic or uniting antifascist idea and an ideal of 'no more wars' and 'no more fascism,' soon the so called competition of systems made antifascism less a uniting idea but a field of conflict, being linked by politically right or conservative forces to the political left or even simply the danger linked to the USSR. The new uniting idea of the so constructed 'West' was not antifascism anymore but anti-communism (Doerry, 1980). On the other hand, under the influence of the USSR even though officially antifascism remained and was propagated as a uniting idea and concept, antifascist groups were not allowed by ruling parties outside of official party organizations. And the idea of fascism was reduced and detached from central elements such as racism and

antisemitism. It was a limited idea of fascism that states such as the German Democratic Republic – the GDR – positioned themselves against (Leo & Reif-Spirek, 1999). Instead, antifascism in a not instrumentalized understanding moved more towards subculture and politically to very far leftwing actors, in Germany or Italy, but many other countries, too, and embraced militant action (Schöppner, 2015). Even after the political changes in Europe from 1989 onwards antifascism did not become a uniting idea again. And to this day many fighting the far right do not position themselves as antifascists, even distance themselves from this term. Considering this antifascist solidarity is a kind of limited call respectively a call many distance themselves from automatically. Framing something as antifascist is a limiting factor – to unite, but also to include intersectionality in perspective and analysis.

Antifascism, the far left and intersectional solidarity

It has been and is debated time and again if there is a necessary link between the far left and antifascism, and if all propagating antifascism are to be considered part of the constructed far left or not. Here again different national contexts play a role, each with a different understanding of antifascism. While antifascism has roots in Italy and Germany, in Germany politically center-left are often reluctant to frame themselves as antifascists, not the least not to be in danger of being connected to the GDR (Schneider, 2014). On the other hand, in Italy antifascism has for many years been a more uniting theme reaching the center. However, this did not include the political right, and for sure not the governing far right still reluctant to distance themselves clearly from fascism (Harrison-Gaze, 2025). Still, the term antifascism is less pushed to the margins in Italy as it is in Germany.

This led to the development of a variety and diversity in terminology not to be taken to be too far-left, not only in Germany. And as there are multiple concepts of fascism – logically antifascism can be a more narrow or broad terminology. And not all these concepts or followed and uniting ideas necessarily lead to solidarity in a broader or inclusive understanding. Here the idea of intersectional antifascist solidarity is followed. But depending on the understanding of antifascism there is more critique on the term and concept of intersectionality than support for them. Especially in neo-Marxist thinking there is fierce critique regarding intersectionality (Bohrer, 2019). This will not be discussed here in detail, but it entails at least in parts a limited understanding of intersectionality, but often a more limited focus, too. Following the idea of intersectional solidarity acting gets more complicated, as outlined earlier in this book. But if there is one major 'enemy' constructed to be fought – capitalism – (and all else will follow), then this complication can be seen as distraction. This is not the position here, and neither in the concrete cases looked at. Modern society is complex, diverse and unjust in multiple ways. For this an intersectional

understanding of solidarity is key. And such an understanding can be found in parts of antifascism, too, no matter the neo-Marxist critique on intersectionality (see for the link of antifascism and intersectionality for example Braskén, 2024).

Next to debates about the limits of intersectionality or terminologies like antifascism there is a rise in new forms of fascism and debates about what to call fascism and what not. Is the Italian party *Fratelli d'Italia* a fascist party and resistance against it antifascism or is there 'just' a fascist heritage (Tarchi, 2024)? And what about Donald Trump and Trumpism, is this a new fascism (as discussed by Cox & O'Connor, 2025)? The same is and can be debated for the German 'Alternative für Deutschland' – AfD, at least recognized officially as 'right-wing-extremist' – but is it a fascist party (as discussed by Klikauer, 2020)? There are certainly different positions on these questions, depending highly on the specific understanding of fascism. But resistance against these actors of the far right is time and again framed as antifascist. In a sense new modes of fascism need a new antifascism, and may follow intersectional ideas to better include a diversity of challenges, methods, but modes of fascism, too. Further, fighting different forms of fascism, without necessarily agreeing always on what to call fascist and what not to, but rather to enlarge the idea of solidaric antifascist action to intersectional solidarity against the far right, allows for a more inclusive understanding of antifascism. But this is still future-thinking, however a potential guiding principle to allow more working against the far right to assemble under the term antifascism. Up till today, intersectional antifascist solidarity is still more limited, yet transnational none the less.

Transnational intersectional antifascist solidarity

Here the focus will be a transnational intersectional antifascist solidarity with special attention given to Germany and Italy, but going beyond these two countries, especially since the comics focus on developments in Hungary, and Europe is major framework in them. Additionally larger texts within one of the comics address more international developments. Not only today, but historically such lines are well established. Roots of antifascism and solidaric action can be linked to Spain, Italy and Germany, inter alia. But there is a French or a British tradition of antifascism, too (Balhorn, 2017). Putting aside the mainly instrumentalized approach to antifascism, making it more label and claim than action and policy, of so called socialist Eastern Europe, there have been antifascist activities in many states of Western Europe, with radical approaches in Italy or Germany, or major state limitations as in fascist Spain. However, links are and have been different over time and depending on the country looked at, as from Germany going North and to the United Kingdom and the USA, including revitalizing antifascism in Spain (Antifaschistisches Infoblatt, 2024a). In

Italy instead more links are drawn to the Americas, next to other countries (Rete Dei Comunisti, 2024). But it is important to note that the historical antifascism, in all its variety, is not the same as the antifascism post-1960s roughly. Germany, Italy, and Spain, too, can be considered as roots of modern antifascism, but this is not to be confused with antifascism today. Different developments led to antifascism in autonomist movements, as in Germany; linked to a constructed working class and used as a uniting label, as in Italy. So, there are differences in today's traditions and uses of the term antifascism to be considered (Balhorn, 2017). But taking into account the rise of the far right in the last decades, with increased dynamics in the last years, more meetings to connect more local groups took place and links were established or re-established, not only, but also between Italian and German groups. Nonetheless, this link is not the strongest for both movements in their loose condition and composition (Koch, 2018). That Italy and Germany are in focus as examples of transnational intersectional antifascist solidarity here has a different reason – a concrete case bringing both closer together.

The comics – context and case

The concrete case are protests against the far-right meeting for the so called 'Day of Honor' in Budapest, Hungary. This infamous day is described in a question to the European Parliament this way:

> "Each year, hundreds of right-wing extremists and neo-Nazis from across Europe gather in Budapest to commemorate the failed attempt by Nazi German and Hungarian troops to break through the Soviet army's siege of the city in 1945. The event, known as the 'Day of Honor,' is a shameful display of Nazi banners, slogans and uniforms. The Hungarian Government has failed to impose an effective ban on the demonstration, even though it clearly violates Hungarian law and threatens the security of Hungarian citizens." (European Parliament, 2024b)

Furthermore, this request outlines that the Hungarian government is directly involved in them, as for example by giving grants for the organizers. This event as such is looked at in different ways, from describing it as an outrageous celebration of Nazi pride to 'just' a 'patriotic meeting' allowing to public showing of NS-uniforms (Szijarto & Schwartzburg, 2020). But most often it is framed as a highly problematic meeting that should be banned or at least better controlled, also in more mainstream international media (RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, 2025). But this event is only a framework and background of the comics. Instead, the focus is on protests against this event – and the reactions to these protests by the state of Hungary.

These protests have taken various forms over the years. Specifically two lines are in focus in the comics. One is the case of Ilaria Salis. Ilaria Salis was a teacher from Northern Italy who was arrested in early 2023 in connection with the protest against the 'Day of Honor' and charged with attempted assault and membership in a far-left organization. About 11 years in prison could have been or still can be the sentence. It took nearly a year for her to be taken to court, an event that raised protest not only in Italy when Ilaria Salis was presented in chains. Until then Ilaria Salis was kept in custody under very harsh conditions, rated by many as inhumane, as for example not being allowed to wash or get medical care. Only after 15 months was Ilaria released to house arrest. All the time Ilaria Salis was pictured as an 'enemy' by the far right while solidarity campaigns took place, not only in Italy, but in Germany for example, too. Many saw Ilaria Salis as a political prisoner of the Hungarian government to put pressure on Italy. In June 2024 Ilaria Salis was elected to the European Parliament and granted immunity (Tondo, 2024).

The other line is the so-called 'Hammerbande,' the 'hammer gang,' the idea of a kind of far-left 'storm troop' working with hammers to severely hurt those taking part, for example, in the 'Day of Honor.' This term and the existence of such a gang is controversial. While many media keep the term in brackets and leave open, if such a 'gang' exists (tagesschau.de, 2024), especially conservative and right-wing news channels take and report this as a fact (Blick, 2024). This especially holds true for the media in Hungary. There are reports problematizing the attack only based on clothes or rating someone as far-right, while mentioning most protesters and attackers were foreigners, mainly from Germany (Hungary today, 2023). But there are also reports – from the political right – that go much further. In these reports antifascism is described as a radical and violent movement as such, with no roots in Hungary. Instead: "Most Hungarian commentators highlighted that the attackers were foreigners who have come to disturb the peace in Hungary." (Szalai, 2023) No matter the framing or the position on the actual existence of the 'hammer gang,' the Attorney General of Germany issued an arrest warrant against 'members' of the gang (Der Generalbundesanwalt beim Bundesgerichtshof, 2025). Those arrested were delivered to Hungary to face trial there. An act highly controversial, often with reference to the treatment of Ilaria Salis and the lack of legal protection in Hungary. With the extradition of Maja T. the German authorities even went against the rule of the highest German court (European Parliament, 2024a).

The second line is the background and framework of the comics again. Topicwise the case of Ilaria Salis is in focus. But these cases and developments led to closer ties of German and Italian antifascist movements, a newly fostered antifascist solidarity, to free Ilaria Salis, but also the others prosecuted by Hungary, but Germany and others, too. And the two comics now in focus are part of this new established or newly strengthened solidarity and connectedness of the two loose movements, in different ways and reach. Even though these connections are not the strongest in

recent history, the developments around the events in Hungary and the rise of the far right behind and connected, made the ties stronger (again).

Zerocalcare

The author of both comics is Zerocalcare, born Michele Rech, an Italian cartoonist with great commercial success. Part of his work has been adapted to other media, even Netflix series.' In the beginning his work were mainly cartoons for periodicals, but then moved to a kind of political reportage, covering the G8 summit in Genova, and autobiographical comics. Even though always doing commercial work, too, the work of Zerocalcare was always political, as with the comic "Kobane Calling," about the conflict of the Kurds against the Islamic state, or a short comic about neo-fascism in Italy in 2018. In the following years more comics on international and intersectional conflicts were published, but Netflix adaptions and commercial comics, too (Wikipedia, 2025; Zerolcalcare, 2025). Political comics about Italy and the far right were first published predominantly in the journal "Internazionale," as the two comics in focus here. This weekly news magazine publishes translated articles and comics on a regular basis. Self-framed, the magazine is politically 'progressive' (Progressive International, 2025). Zerocalcare is based in Rome, using a Roman dialect in writing at times, as in the comics here in focus, being autobiographical comics in part, too (Wikipedia, 2025; Zerolcalcare, 2025). Beyond Italy Zerolcalcare is known, especially for the comic "Kobane Calling," however in the German antifascist movements newer reference all go to the two comics in focus here, especially the more zine-like (Antifaschistisches Infoblatt, 2024b).

"Unten im Loch" – the political zine-like publication

The first comic in focus here is a self-published zine-like comic with the German title "Unten im Loch. Eine Geschichte über Nazis, Knast und Verantwortung" – 'Down the hole. A story about Nazis, prison and responsibility (Zerocalcare, 2024b). It is published in German by SoliZero in cooperation with other antifascist groups. Next to the printed version there is a digital one on Indymedia, where also the Italian original can be found online. Originally the comic was published in "Internazionale." The German comic is not sold but given for free with the request of a donation. And before the first page initiatives are introduced that work specifically to Eastern Europe, the trials in Budapest or the prosecution in Germany in relation to the cases in Budapest. Language-wise the black-and-white comic is mainly in German, with some scenes rated as not translatable, especially swearing that remains in the Italian original. And while the original follows in parts a Roman dialect this translation follows

only in parts, making some translations a mixture of Berlin dialect with standard German, as only putting the Berlin dialect 'wa' at the end of a sentence (Zerocalcare, 2024b, p. 03 [own numbers]). The comic is divided into parts, to allow for understanding the 'complicated history' that affects Hungarians, Germans and Italians, "but also the hundred other nationalities, communities, orientations."[1] Because this is "a story about violence. About perpetrators and victims and how they see themselves. About ethics and morality. About real court cases. About media monsters. Reduced to the essentials. (…) This is a story about Nazis, prison, and responsibility."[2] (Zerocalcare, 2024b, p. 01)

The first part is about the Nazis. Framework here is the author being in Budapest himself, getting first accounts on an international meeting of the far right, in 'these days,' the days around the 'Day of Honor.' Organized is the comic in part like an educational comic, giving accounts, such as what happened in Budapest in 1945, and drawings of the author himself commenting on it. These are the panels with untranslated bubbles at times, as in "Mo', mannaggia al clero oviparo paludoso di pomezia…" (Zerocalcare, 2024b, p. 05). Different far-right groups are shown and international links, including politicians explaining away the Nazis as patriots. In the comic these sections are framed as "I-am-getting-on-your-nerves"[3]-comments, in more vulgar language in the German translation (Internazionale, 2024, p. 45; Zerocalcare, 2024b, p. 06). The comic further stresses that these events are not only some neglectable events of some not important groups, especially due to the links of these groups to political power and state funding for Nazi concerts etc. But further, even if votes for the most radical far right may remain limited, violence is on the rise. The comic concludes with: "What appears to be a problem that can be ignored in a democracy… / … can be devastating for individuals' lives."[4] (Zerocalcare, 2024b, p. 08) This is the reason why the Italian exchange student talking to Zerocalcare at the table of the comic event in Budapest – all the educational and informational in this part could be talk between them – asked the Syrian friend 'Ben' to stay at home (Zerocalcare, 2024b, p. 03). This makes the author think back to 'these days' the year before – to 2023. In these days something happened, and that is the content of part 2 of the comic.

This is in general about 'fear changing the side,' as introduced on a black page. Part 2 then is in concrete about 'the prison.' We zoom in to the high-security prison,

1 Aber auch die hundert andere Nationalitäten, Gemeinschaften, Orientierungen.

2 eine Geschichte über Gewalt. Über Täter und Opfer und wie sie sich selbst sehen. Über Ethik und Moral. Über reale Gerichtsverfahren. Über Medienmonster. Aufs Wesentliche reduziert. (…) Dies ist eine Geschichte über Nazis, Knast und Verantwortung.

3 Ich-geh-dir-auf-den-Sack / Seconda ondata dei rompicazzo

4 Das, was wie ein zu ignorierendes Problem für die Demokratie erscheint… / … kann für das Leben einzelner zerstörend sein

to a female-read person – to Ilaria, being arrested on the 'Day of Honor,' the 11th of February 2023. "Pulled out of a taxi together with Tobi, a German antifascist. He had also been at the counter-protests. / They are accused of participating in two attacks on neo-Nazis. / The injuries they caused would have healed in 5–8 days, according to medical prognosis. / Since that moment, the two have been swallowed up by the black hole of the Hungarian prison system."[5] (Zerocalcare, 2024b, p. 12) But the focus is not on both in the following, but rather Ilaria and her conditions and charges. The conditions are described as some most only know by reports of Amnesty. And in this situation, and in a language Ilaria does not understand, a deal is offered if she pleads guilty – eleven years in prison. Without the deal it would be 16 years according to the comic. Now the focus of the comic is more educational again, asking why this charge is a political one and not just, framed as a dialogue with 'uncle fatty' / 'uncle crust' ("Onkel Fetti" / "Zio Crosta") (Zerocalcare, 2024b, p. 14; Internazionale, 2024, p. 53). One reason is that the accusation of life-threating injuries and the healing prognosis of eight days do not fit together according to Zerocalcare. The other is more complicated. Here parts of the text are in read, as an apology to the readers that the next three pages will be complicated, but also the framing of the accusation, that the crime took place 'in context' (highlighted in red) with a criminal organization. It is explained that the organization – with the purpose to beat up Nazis – is said to consist of 14 Germans, and all that Ilaria did was only 'in context' with their activities, whatever this means as the comic asks. Here the author in the comic directly asks: "At this point, one asks oneself: What kind of association is this? / Who are they supposed to be? / The spirits of the Inglorious Basterds? / So for the prosecution, it's somehow another manifestation of the … / HAMMERBANDE."[6] (Zerocalcare, 2024b, p. 16) In the Italian original there is a different text. On the one hand-side it is not 'Inglorious Basterds' but "Sgobbanazistis" and after HAMMERBANDE follows "La Banda del Martello" (Internazionale, 2024, p. 55.). Zerocalcare clearly outlines that in fact there is no such gang – the name has been an 'invention of the German press' – and the organization is a juridical construction only to punish the accused harder. But beside this, the comments on Germany remain limited and more on the surface, even though Zerocalcare clearly positions himself: it is outlined that this group has nothing to do with the events in Budapest. Because: "The

5 Zusammen mit Tobi, einem deutschen Antifaschisten, aus einem Taxi gezogen. Auch er war bei den Gegenprotesten gewesen. / Sie werden beschuldigt, an zwei Angriffen auf Neonazis teilgenommen zu haben. / Die Verletzungen verursacht hätten, welche nach ärztlicher Prognose in 5–8 Tagen verheilt wären. / Seit diesem Moment wurden die zwei vom Schwarzen Loch des Ungarischen Haftsystems verschluckt.

6 An diesem Punkt stellt man sich die Frage: Was ist das für eine Vereinigung? / Wer soll das sein? / Die Geister der Inglorious Basterds? / Also für die Staatsanwaltschaft ist es irgendwie eine weitere Erscheinung der … / HAMMERBANDE.

trial of the Hammer Gang concerns actions that took place almost five years ago."[7] (Zerocalcare, 2024b, p. 17) This allows Zerocalcare to conclude that the connection is only 'topic-wise.' That is the climate in which the trials began, blaming the accused to be a 'monster' and letting them disappear in the deep hole.

This leads to part 3 about 'responsibility.' This in a sense is even more educational, for sure more philosophical. It starts with the clear statement: "I agree that everyone should take responsibility for what they have done. / (…) / But there should be some standards."[8] This is shown with the author pointing at a scale from "lecture" to "Ride Mailand-Rom with Guiseppe Cruciani", marked worse than "gallows"[9] (Zerocalcare, 2024b, p. 19). Interestingly this 'Ride'-reference is directly from the Italian original, where it is "in Bla Bla Car" (Internazionale, 2024, p. 58). Reference in the following is an 'empirical experience' of the author being severely hurt by some eight Nazis, one being too slow to flee, but only getting six month – nothing compared to the 16 years Ilaria faces. From this simpler question the comic moves to the more philosophical one of violence or non-violence: "Many [a robot speaking] say the following: / Violence is always wrong! / If you use violence, you're on the wrong side. / For heaven's sake, you can go along with that."[10] (Zerocalcare, 2024b, p. 21) And the author shows himself interfering in acts of violence. Following, there is a 'but' on the next page: "Nevertheless, when people—full of arrogance and conceit—say: / The only right answer is nonviolence. / (…) / It makes my blood run cold. / They are abusing something important."[11] (Zerocalcare, 2024b, p. 22) Because, even though non-violence matters and it is brave and noble to answer violence with non-violence, it is something different if others are attacked and you remain passive. Following, the key for Zerocalcare is responsibility. "Those who decided a year ago to take action against the Nazis in Budapest made a decision. / Everyone made their own decision. That's something we can talk about. / We feel connected to some people more than others. / But for me, they are all my brothers and sisters. / They took responsibility. / Those who shout from their sofas at home, lecturing others about morality and good manners, what responsibility have they taken? / (…) / What do they say to Ben from Syria? / Or to the hundreds of other people who have been attacked, threatened, or frightened? / "Sorry, folks, stay at home." / "We'll tell you how it was." / "We… with the right skin

7 Im Prozess um die Hammerbande geht es um Aktionen die fast 5 Jahre zurück liegen.

8 Ich bin damit einverstanden, dass jeder dafür Verantwortung übernimmt, was er getan hat. / (…) / Aber es sollte doch irgendwelche Massstäbe geben.

9 Standpauke / Mitfahrgelegenheit Mailand-Rom mit Guiseppe Cruciani / Galgen.

10 Viele sagen folgendes: / Gewalt ist immer was falsches! / Wenn du Gewalt ausübst, stellst du dich damit auf die falsche Seite. / Um Himmels Willen, grob kann man da mitgehen.

11 Trotzdem, wenn Leute – voller Arroganz und Überheblichkeit – sagen: / Die einzige richtige Antwort ist die Gewaltfreiheit. / (…) / Das lässt mir das Blut in den Adern gefrieren. / Sie missbrauchen was wichtiges.

color." / "With the right partners." / "With the right passport."[12] (Zerocalcare, 2024b, p. 23)

Condensed this is the baseline of intersectional antifascist solidarity – it is about taking responsibility and accepting differences, as differences in power, as of the 'Ben's' having less power in fighting the racist far right, leading to another responsibility of the others. And this has an intersectional character, even though in writing all is kept in masculine terms in the German translation, not as in the Italian original (Internazionale, 2024, 62), because other intersectional dimensions, and especially power differences are clearly addressed. The opposite to violence along these lines is not non-violence but taking responsibility in solidarity, which may include even violence at times, at least for some. But Zerocalcare makes clear to not know the solution, being sure that violence is not the only way to react to Nazis, but that there are other measures, too, as elections, being afraid, taking other paths or not having the chance of violence – addressing ableism with a wheelchair in the panel. But what is certain for the author is: "Those who feel this responsibility and act on it, regardless of the means they use, deserve respect. // [zooming in on the insects and rats on the next page] Respect is due to the doubts and uncertainties of all those who, / in the face of injustice, / are searching for their way [zooming in on Ilaria] / to remain on the right side of history."[13] (Zerocalcare, 2024b, p. 24–25) On the last page we see some standing in 'the hole,' looking up to faces appearing, calling to take responsibility for those 'buried alive' instead of requesting to be left in peace. This all is dedicated to Ilaria, to Tobi, to Maja, to Gabriele, to all 'down in the dark hole' but also all still running.

Clearly this zine-like comic is no neutral report, no neutral educational approach. Instead, it clearly takes position, allows readers to follow thoughts and doubts. But it is obviously not the aim of the comic to pick up those doubting, those showing understanding for the 'Day of Honor,' instead it is to bring those doubting about the means of the accused and the trial to position themselves, to leave the track of passive observation, but move on to solidarity. Again differences

12 Wer sich vor einem Jahr dazu entschieden hat Gegen die Nazis in Budapest vorzugehen, hat eine Entscheidung getroffen. / Jeder hat seine eigene getroffen. Darüber kann man reden. / Mit manchen fühlt man sich verbunden, mit anderen weniger. / Aber für mich sind es alles meine Brüder und Schwestern. / Sie haben Verantwortung übernommen. / Wer von zuhause aus von seinem Sofa rumbrüllt, Unterricht über Moral und gute Manieren gibt, was für eine Verantwortung hat der dann übernommen? / (…) / Was antwortet er dem syrischen Ben? / Oder den anderen hunderten angegriffenen, bedrohten oder verängstigten Leuten? / "Sorry Leute, Stay at home". / "Wir erzählen euch wie's war". / "Wir… mit der richtigen Hautfarbe". / "Mit den richtigen Partnern". / "Mit dem richtigen Pass".

13 Wer diese Verantwortung fühlt und was macht, egal mit welchen Mitteln, verdient Respekt. // Respekt verdienen die Zweifel und die Unsicherheiten all derer,/ die angesichts der Ungerechtigkeiten / ihren Weg suchen / um auf der richtigen Seite der Geschichte zu bleiben.

in vulnerability are considered, it is no solidarity that asks all to do the same, but an intersectional solidarity, and one clearly with one direction, against the far right, using actively the label antifascism as uniting bond. This taking of position is strengthened by the author being presented himself once and again in the comic, his thoughts and considerations, and his experiences, too. The author is narrator but also moderator in this comic, a comic clearly moving beyond Italy or Hungary, repeatedly taking a more general stance, as in the third, more philosophical part. It is a guidebook at times of how to react to common replies and objections, but overall a call for action, meaning active solidarity, along the own decisions and considerations, not propagating only one line. And part of this solidarity is the comic itself, in its publication in a journal in Italy to raise awareness, but in its spread as zine-like comic for donation in Germany, too. This clearly follows a tradition of political zines not produced for profit in the first place, of a zine culture in antifascist action, often with an educational approach at least in parts of them (royalhistsoc, 2024), or zines even produced together in activist and empowering manner (see e.g. Gray et al., 2021, p. 887ff.). The comic is not a produced zine, in the first line it is a comic drawn for a journal. But it is used as a kind of zine, and in this as a medium of and for solidarity, concretely for intersectional antifascist solidarity. This is a bit different for the second comic by the same author, not being handed out for a voluntary donation, but sold and produced more professionally.

"Diese Nacht wir keine kurze sein" – "Questa notte non sarà breve"

This much longer comic – in comparison – was published in Italy in 'spring' 2014 by "Momo edizioni," containing pieces that before were published in "Internazionale" between January and June 2024. In Germany the comic was published in late 2024. It now officially is translated from Roman Italian to Berlin dialect, following the wording of the German singer Nico Seyfrid of the political left band K.I.Z., but being translated as such by Alessia Radomsko and Caterina Namuth. The German edition has a preface and an afterword, while the Italian original only contains the afterword. Since afterword and preface give meaning and context to the comic, they will be looked at in more detail here but analyzed separately from the comic-content.

Preface and afterword – transnational framing and call for intersectional antifascist solidarity

The preface is by German antifascists, in gender-inclusive language – "Antifaschist*innen aus Deutschland." The afterword instead by "Antifaschist*innen aus Italien" – Italian antifascists. The first is from December 2024, the later from

'spring' 2024. The preface starts with references to Hanau, the racist murder there, to the meeting about 'remigration' in Potsdam, to successes by the fascist AfD, hatred spread by press publications and underground fascist movements acting more and more open. All these references are to Germany. "This is Germany. Not the gloomy Germany of the 1930s and 40s under Hitler, but the Germany of the 21st century."[14] (Antifaschist*innen aus Deutschland, 2024, p. 05) From there the text moves to the incarceration of Lina and the police group investigating left-wing activities labelled as 'terror,' firming under the name "Linx." This is put in context with the orchestration of bringing Lina to a helicopter, widely used in conservative and right-wing media, in contrast to humanizing right-wing terrorists as Beate Zschäpe in their appearance in court. And from this conclusion a link is drawn to experiences in Italy, and by this to the comic as such, with Ilaria Salis brought to court in Budapest. However, the reactions to the pictures differ between Italy and Germany: "In contrast to Lina's image in Germany, Ilaria's appearance in Italy is causing quite a stir – not because society is being terrorized by the myth of the danger of "left-wing extremism," but because the question of proportionality is being raised loudly. An antifascist outcry is rocking Italy, the country ruled by the post-fascist party "Brothers of Italy" under Giorgia Meloni. (…) Thanks to the commitment of Ilaria's family, friends, and the entire antifascist movement, a solidarity campaign unfolds that even revives the left in Italy, which had been believed dead. It goes so far that Ilaria Salis is elected to the European Parliament in early summer 2024 and, thanks to her newly acquired immunity, is able to leave prison and Hungary."[15] (Antifaschist*innen aus Deutschland, 2024, p. 07) This again is taken as context for the comic and the linked engagement by Zerocalcare, spreading the story about Ilaria to a wider public with his comics. But this is not the end – unfortunately: "Unfortunately, the story of the current repression against antifascists in the context of the Budapest complex did not end with Ilaria's release. Tobi had already been sentenced to one year and ten months in prison, while Anna lives in Germany and is awaiting the end of her trial to gain clarity about her life. But that

14 Das ist Deutschland. Nicht das düstere Deutschland der 1930er und 40er Jahre unter Hitler- sondern das Deutschland des 21. Jahrhunderts.

15 Im Gegensatz zu dem Bild von Lina in Deutschland, sorgt der Anblick Ilarias in Italien für großen Aufruhr – allerdings nicht, weil gesellschaftlich die Mär von der Gefahr durch "Linksextremismus" durch die Republik gejagt wird, sondern weil hier lautstark die Frage der Verhältnismäßigkeit gestellt wird. Ein antifaschistischer Aufschrei erschüttert Italien, jenem Land, das von der postfaschistischen Partei "Brüder Italiens" unter Giorgia Meloni regiert wird. (…) Durch das Engagement von Ilarias Familie, Freund*innen und der gesamten antifaschistischen Bewegung entfaltet sich eine Solidaritätskampagne, die sogar die totgeglaubte Linke in Italien wiederbelebt. Es kommt so weit, dass Ilaria Salis im Frühsommer 2024 ins Europaparlament gewählt wird und durch die neu erlangte Immunität das Gefängnis und somit Ungarn verlassen kann.

is not enough for Hungary. Many more people are on the run from European arrest warrants. In December 2023, Maja was arrested in Berlin, and in May 2024, Hanna was arrested in Nuremberg. Maja is extradited to Hungary in July 2024 in a cloak-and-dagger operation of unknown scope. There is not even a symbolic image of this, as the Saxony State Criminal Police Office and the public prosecutor's office made every effort to circumvent all legal barriers in order to deceive Maja's lawyers and family."[16] (Antifaschist*innen aus Deutschland, 2024, p. 08) This clearly is not topic of the comic as such, not the least because parts of it happened after the first release in Italian. But it is part of the (re)constructed framework. The preface follows the understanding, that the fight against the far right is one of solidarity, and covering countermeasures needs solidarity, too. Ilaria is free for now, but Hungarian authorities and others, like German authorities, keep up the fight against transnational intersectional antifascist solidarity. As shown before for "Unten im Loch" the comic works in contexts and frameworks. And these greater and partly not verbalized connections are strengthened with the preface and the afterword, giving the comic a framework, also physically.

This contextualization is followed by more details and background, coming to a warning: "In Germany's nearly eighty years of post-war history, there has probably never been a worse time to turn a blind eye to the far right. (…) The far right, which was pushed back in the 2000s by antifascist work and civil society engagement, is no longer simmering in the dark corners of isolated Incel forums or in hobby basements with beer taps. It is coming to the surface openly and bluntly."[17] (Antifaschist*innen aus Deutschland, 2024, p. 09) This assessment about the far right in Germany and beyond is taken as vantage point for an assessment of antifascist movements in Germany, a movement in crisis:

16 Die Geschichte der aktuellen Repression gegen Antifaschist*innen im Rahmen des Budapest-Komplexes endete leider nicht mit der Freilassung Ilarias. Tobi wurde bereits zuvor zu einem Jahr und zehn Monaten Gefängnis verurteilt, während Anna in Deutschland lebt und auf das Ende ihres Prozesses wartet, um Klarheit über ihr Leben zu erhalten. Doch das reicht Ungarn nicht. Viele weitere Personen sind auf der Flucht vor europäischen Haftbefehlen. Im Dezember 2023 kam es zur Verhaftung von Maja in Berlin, und im Mai 2024 wurde Hanna in Nürnberg festgenommen. Maja wird im Juli 2024 in einer Nacht-und-Nebel-Aktion unbekannten Ausmaßes nach Ungarn ausgeliefert. Es gibt nicht einmal ein Symbolbild davon, denn das LKA Sachsen und die Staatsanwaltschaft bemühten sich, alle rechtlichen Barrieren zu umgehen, um Anwälte und Familie von Maja hinters Licht zu führen.

17 In der fast achtzigjährigen Nachkriegsgeschichte Deutschlands gibt es wohl keinen schlechteren Zeitpunkt, um auf dem rechten Auge blind zu sein. (…) Die extreme Rechte, die in den 2000er Jahren durch antifaschistische Arbeit und zivilgesellschaftliches Engagement zurückgedrängt wurde, brodelt nicht mehr nur in den dunklen Ecken von abgeschotteten Incel-Foren oder in Hobby-Kellern mit Zapfanlage. Sie tritt offen und unverblümt an die Oberfläche.

> "The current situation of antifascist action in Germany could be better – in recent years, we have been hit by attacks from the state, and alliances with civil society have broken down. We have allowed ourselves to be intimidated and have become increasingly isolated. (…) Where we were successful on multiple levels, i.e., on the streets and in discourse, the right now has the upper hand. It is time for a comeback, which must also be a reinvention. Because times have changed […]. (…) As in the Italian afterword, we see a "plural right" at work, which consists of different parts but speaks the same language. We decided to publish this comic in Germany as well because our friends and we ourselves are also affected by repression. The ongoing wave of repression is currently paralyzing large parts of our actual antifascist work because we have to collect money for those affected, organize support, and accompany legal disputes. But as the Italian antifascists write, it is important not to portray ourselves as victims in these times. It is important to take a clear and honest stand on the right side. The stories of Ilaria and Gabriele show that even small, if temporary, moments of success are possible."[18] (Antifaschist*innen aus Deutschland, 2024, p. 10)

Following this argumentation the comic itself has multiple purposes – to give hope, to organize solidarity, but to raise money for solidaric action, too, to get interlinked again, and to start anew. That there are the new and closer links between various antifascist movements, coming together in solidarity, working against a more and more far-right Hungary, is clearly marked here only as a starting point. More focus is put on the other side, the far right getting better connected and stronger in their transnational links and diversity. Because even though there is hope, still these are times of danger and repression, as the preface stresses. Even though Ilaria has been elected to the European Parliament others are on the run or prepare for prison sentences, and the publication is dedicated to them. But the preface does not want to

18 Die aktuelle Lage der Antifaschistischen Aktion in Deutschland könnte besser sein – in den letzten Jahren haben die Angriffe des Staats uns getroffen, Bündnisse mit der Zivilgesellschaft sind zerbrochen. Wir haben uns einschüchtern lassen und zunehmend isoliert. (…) Wo wir mehrdimensional erfolgreich waren, d.h. auf der Straße und im Diskurs, sind es nun die Rechten. Es ist Zeit für ein Comeback, das zugleich eine Neuerfindung sein muss. Denn die Zeiten sind nicht die Gleichen [.] (…) Wie im italienischen Nachwort sehen wir eine "plurale Rechte" am Werk, die zwar aus unterschiedlichen Teilen besteht, aber die gleiche Sprache spricht. Wir haben uns entschieden diesen Comic auch in Deutschland herauszubringen, weil unsere Freund*innen und wir selbst auch von Repression betroffen sind. Die anhaltende Repressionswelle lähmt aktuell große Teile unserer eigentlichen antifaschistischen Arbeit, weil wir Geld für Betroffene sammeln, Support organisieren und juristische Auseinandersetzungen begleiten müssen. Aber wie die italienischen Antifaschist*innen schreiben, gilt es, sich in diesen Zeiten nicht als Opfer zu inszenieren. Es gilt sich offen und ehrlich auf die richtige Seite zu stellen. Die Geschichten von Ilaria und Gabriele zeigen, dass auch Kleine, wenn auch temporäre, Erfolgsmomente möglich sind.

stop there, but rather with a moment of hope, giving a purpose to the comic and publication, too, providing a fragile hope: "Although the freedom we dreamed of always carries with it the risk of losing everything, we must continue."[19] (Antifaschist*innen aus Deutschland, 2024, p. 10) This hope can be achieved by intersectional antifascist solidarity only, and is framed as responsibility, as in the first comic by Zerocalcare looked at here. And for this it needs, according to the preface 'unyielding' antifascists.

Similar tones can be found in the afterword by 'Italian antifascists.' This follows on the other side of the comic, after its epilogue. Interestingly, first point of references in this afterword is the meeting of fascists and far-right actors in Potsdam in November 2023 in Germany, a meeting that – after reports about it – kindled the discussion about the far-right concept of a so-called 'remigration' into broader consciousness and let to massive protests after being made public in early 2024. From this the afterword moves to the probably most prominent participant of the meeting, the Austrian fascist Martin Sellner, main figure of the Austrian Identitarian Movement. Lines are drawn between Sellner and the assassin of Christchurch, but also to Elon Musk as an important financier of the far right. This is background to the reference on the elections to the European Parliament, in the time of writing of the afterword yet to come, and the expectation that the far right, in the text with reference to the main far-right Italian parties Fratelli d'Italia and Lega, will get more votes. Indeed, an expectation that came true (European Parliament, 2024c). But it is not about numbers primarily, but what the numbers mean content-wise, as the afterword stresses: "The notion that the ideas of the far right are merely propaganda is profoundly wrong. Anyone who has followed the trial of antifascist activist Ilaria Salis and other activists will have noticed that, after years of Orbán's government, Hungary is indeed an authoritarian democracy in which there are essentially no procedural guarantees for members of the opposition"[20]. (Antifaschist*innen aus Italien, 2024, p. 96f.) However, there are more conclusions that can be drawn from the meeting in Potsdam, next to the movement of far-right policies and rhetorics into conservative circles, it is that going out to the streets can make a difference (Antifaschist*innen aus Italien, 2024, p. 97).

Albeit, a conclusion is, too, that the far right today is more than a few single voices, as the Potsdam meeting shows again: "The third finding is that there is a

19 Obwohl die Freiheit, die wir uns erträumten, immer mit der Gefahr verbunden ist, alles zu verlieren, gilt es, weiterzumachen.

20 Die Vorstellung, dass die Ideen der extremen Rechten nur Propaganda sind, ist zutiefst falsch. Wer den Prozess gegen die antifaschistische Aktivistin Ilaria Salis und andere Aktivist*innen / verfolgt hat, wird das festgestellt haben: Ungarn ist nach Jahren der Orbán-Regierung tatsächlich eine autoritäre Demokratie, in der es im Wesentlichen keine prozessualen Garantien für Oppositionelle gibt

broad political spectrum that identifies with certain slogans, and this spectrum is extensive: it ranges from the institutional right to populist parties to neo-fascist extremists and the richest man in the world."[21] (Antifaschist*innen aus Italien , 2024, p. 97) And this clearly is a European and transnational 'spectrum,' as the afterwords lines out: "The 27 countries of the European Union are home to very different parties, but they are able to speak a common language: some of them have direct links to // the fascist movements defeated in 1945, such as those led by Marine Le Pen and Giorgia Meloni, while others emerged from the liberal opposition to real socialism, such as Fidesz under Orban (sic!). Still others have grown in response to immigration and have a populist or ethno-nationalist orientation, such as the Lega in Italy or the Vlaams Belang in Belgium. All these parties share a common language."[22] (Antifaschist*innen aus Italien, 2024, p. 97f.)

In summary, the text claims that 'we' are worse off than a few years ago. A reason for this is, according to the afterword, that calls against the far right, especially by institutional actors, often remained empty because they called for the defense of something that is not good for most. Despite these conclusions there is still hope in the afterword, as in the comic itself, but not in defending the status quo, because we live in "a present marked by injustice, racism, dramatic inequalities, suffering, and wars. Warnings about the rise of the far right, which stands for austerity, war, and Fortress Europe, can only seem hypocritical. And although things can always get worse, // it is equally true that the only antifascist movement that has a chance of success is one that carries within it the seeds of a new world."[23] (Antifaschist*innen aus Italien, 2024, p. 98f.) And (part of) this seed is in the comic, too, that narrates a story known about by many, but in a clearly and consciously one-sided perspective, a

21 Die dritte Erkenntnis ist, dass es ein breites politisches Spektrum gibt, das sich in bestimmten Parolen wiedererkennt, und dieses Spektrum ist umfangreich: es reicht von der institutionellen Rechten über populistische Parteien bis hin zu neofaschistischen Extremisten und dem reichsten Mann der Welt.

22 In den 27 Staaten der Europäischen Union gibt es sehr unterschiedliche Parteien, die jedoch in der Lage sind, eine gemeinsame Sprache zu sprechen: Einige von ihnen haben eine direkte Verbindung zu den im Jahr // 1945 besiegten Faschismen, wie die von Marine Le Pen und Giorgia Meloni geführten, während andere aus der liberalen Opposition gegen den Realsozialismus hervorgegangen sind, wie Fidesz unter Orban (sic!). Wieder andere sind als Reaktion auf die Einwanderung gewachsen und haben eine populistische oder ethnonationalistische Ausrichtung, wie die Lega in Italien oder das Vlaams Belang in Belgien. Alle diese Parteien teilen eine gemeinsame Sprache.

23 Eine Gegenwart geprägt von Ungerechtigkeiten, Rassismus, dramatischen Ungleichheiten, Leid und Kriegen. Die Warnungen vor dem Vormarsch der extremen Rechten, die für Austerität, Kriege und die Festung Europa stehen, können nur heuchlerisch erscheinen. Und obwohl es immer schlimmer werden kann, // ist es ebenso wahr, dass die einzige antifaschistische Bewegung, die eine Chance auf Erfolg hat, jene ist, die den Samen einer neuen Welt in sich trägt.

worldview that follows the idea there should be no Nazis and fascists, and a perspective that moves beyond the one case of Ilaria Salis, repeatedly reminding the reader that many more are involved. To raise awareness about a chance for an antifascist voice is seen in the election of Ilaria Sali to the European Parliament. It is a hope only partially fulfilled by the time of writing with most references about Ilaria Salis still being in the context of the accusations and Hungary keeping up the accusations (The Left, 2024). What's more Hungary uses the election of Ilaria Salis as a case to discredit the Parliament as such (Morsa, 2024). But there are traces of antifascist work in the Parliament, as with questions by Ilaria Salis (European Parliament, 2024a). Contrary to this the afterword written before the election is much more hopeful and refers to the success so far, until then, to put the case into spotlight and show the injustice of the Hungarian legal system; successes claimed to be achieved by acting in solidarity and as 'collective intelligence.' However, this is framed as responsibility again, the need to secure that no one is left behind (Antifaschist*innen aus Italien, 2024, p. 99). Here clearly again solidarity is framed as an obligation of taking responsibility.

Important for this is, according to the afterword, that Ilaria Salis never presented herself and is never presented in the comic as victim. This is said to be especially important in a time in which just being an antifascist is discredited and punished. It remains unclear why here 'antifascist' is not gendered in the German translation and remains in masculine ("das bloße Sein von Antifaschisten"). Since it is gendered in the text in general this might be interpreted as a careless mistake (Antifaschist*innen aus Italien, 2024, p. 100). Against this danger and threat a 'need' for being antifascist, in a newly needed consciousness, is brought forward – in the end the idea of intersectional antifascist solidarity: "Antifascism is a collective responsibility that we inherit from those who gave their lives before us against a deadly ideology and for a world based on justice and equality. For this reason, it is our duty to live it, spread it, and fight against its criminalization, as is currently happening in the courtrooms of Hungary and Germany (but we could also add the USA, Italy, France…). For us, antifascism must free itself from hypocrisy; it must not be used merely as a bogeyman in election campaigns, but should be something living and constructive."[24] (Antifaschist*innen aus Italien, 2024, p. 100) This is a call for action, making being antifascist a kind of historical obligation and at the same

24 Antifaschismus ist eine kollektive Verantwortung, die wir von denen erben, die vor uns ihr Leben gegen eine tödliche Ideologie und für eine Weltidee basierend auf Gerechtigkeit und Gleichheit gegeben haben. Aus diesem Grund ist es unsere Aufgabe, ihn zu leben, zu verbreiten und seine Kriminalisierung zu bekämpfen, wie es momentan in den Gerichtssälen Ungarns und Deutschlands geschieht (aber wir könnten auch amerikanische, italienische, französische… hinzufügen). Für uns muss sich der Antifaschismus von Heucheleien befreien; er darf nicht nur als Schreckgespenst in Wahlkämpfen verwendet werden, sondern sollte etwas Lebendiges und Konstruktives sein.

time demanding to make being antifascist more than a claim or acting as an agent of hypocrisy. This is constructed as an obligation to also work against strong tendencies of societies moving towards the far right, as legal threats would show, especially, but not only, in Hungary and Germany, making another link between the Italian production and the German adaption of the comic. In line of this call to action the afterword ends with the explanation that part of the money earned with the comic will be used in a solidarity fund and the activists call to "free all antifas!" (Antifaschist*innen aus Italien, 2024, p. 100)

The comic – more background and a clear positioning

Preface and afterword are only the framework of the comic that is centerpiece of the publication. But they give purpose and reasoning to the comic, a direction and an interpretation. The comic starts with identical pages of "Unten im Loch" – basically pages 15 to 40 are a reprint of "Unten im Loch." However, this appears in another translation, to cover for the humor of Zerocalcare, based on his Roman dialect, made possible by following the Berlin dialect of Nico Seyfrid (Zerocalcare, 2024a, p. 13). While "Unten im Loch" remains more or less in standard German, albeit informal even in writing, on the same pages in "Diese Nacht wird keine kurze sein" it is a Berlin dialect for the drawn words by Zerocalcare himself, while the rest of the text is in standard German, if nonetheless in another translation than "Unten im Loch." This is, most of the time, only a slight movement but no change content-wise. However, what is missing are the parts not translated in "Unten im Loch", explained to be untranslatable swearing words there. Yet they are translated nonetheless in "Diese Nacht wird keine kurze sein," but not word for word, not even in their meaning, just to signify 'swearing in dialect' – and by this – translated by the words – "Damn the oviparous clergy of Pomezia…"[25] (Zerocalcare, 2024b, p. 5) becomes, in Berlin dialect, "Dude, born stupid, learned nothing, and forgot the rest!"[26] (Zerocalcare, 2024a, p. 19) Another change is that the parts in red in "Unten im Loch" as: "Dear reader [only male in German], please read the next three pages, then continue with the lighter, more relaxing comic"[27] (p. 14), is no presented in standard text without any form of highlighting, for the most part. Only some of the words are underlined in "Diese Nacht wird keine kurze sein" (Zerocalcare, 2024a, p. 28f.). Furthermore the comic "Diese Nacht wird keine kurze sein" moves references to a German-context, as the joke of what the worst punishment could be. While this remains in "Unten im

25 Mo', mannaggia al clero oviparo paludoso do pomezia…

26 Alter, Dumm jeboren, nüscht dazujelernt und den Rest verjessen!

27 Lieber Leser (sic!), lies bitte die nächsten 3 Seiten, danach geht es mit dem eher leichteren und Kopf abschaltenden Comic weiter.

Loch" with "Ride Mailand-Rom with Guiseppe Cruciani"[28] (Zerocalcare, 2024b, p. 19) in an Italian example, in "Diese Nacht wird keine kurze sein" it transforms to a partly adapted German example "Frankfurt to Berlin in a BlaBlaCar with Richard David Precht"[29] (Zerocalcare, 2024a, p. 33). Taking this "Diese Nacht wird keine kurze sein" in this first part is less direct in content, more a narration, a general story, while the zine-like publication "Unten im Loch" is on the one hand more linked to the Italian context and original and on the other hand more directly addressing. Only in some parts the adapted translation is more a direct translation, as in the dedication not anymore to those – in English in the comic itself – "on the run" (Zerocalcare, 2024b, p. 26) in "Unten im Loch," but to those "who keep on running"[30] (Zerocalcare, 2024a, p. 40), as in the original – "chi continua a correre" (Internazionale, 2024, p. 65). These parts are the exception of the general tendency of "Diese Nacht wird keine kurze sein" to be more an adaptation in translation, fitted to a German audience, than a very direct translation.

From there, the yet unpublished German comic part starts, the part now called "Diese Nacht wird keine kurze sein" – the title of the comic as such. This is described as a weekly comic-series looking at actual developments of the case of Ilaria and other antifascists of the 'Budapest-complex' (Zerocalcare, 2024a, p. 43). It starts with the question why the comic is still necessary – with the clear message it is necessary to keep attention and those 'in the hole' in focus and not allow media attention to shift as for other topics. This again is modified with a German contextualization and listing of topics in high awareness in the German media and soon no longer in mass attention (Zerocalcare, 2024a, p. 45). "That's why the big media fireworks that lights up the sky at midnight for a brief moment is pointless – and then it gets dark and everyone goes to bed."[31] (Zerocalcare, 2024a, p. 46) Instead, there is a need for light and care for those keeping the light, the attention, to allow for orientation and recognize each other in the night. "Also because this night… …fuck it, isn't going to be a short one."[32] (in dialect in: Zerocalcare, 2024a, p. 47) – explaining the title. The 'long night' of far-right dominance has to be covered, and the comic calls for linked action and raises awareness on the need for covering. This is linked to a donation website address for the juridical costs on the same page – showing the comic clearly goes beyond informing in a certain way but calling for action and activism.

The following comic is ordered in episodes. Episode 1, one of four pages, is about the manipulation of the debate. Fake news producers are named and described here

28 Mitfahrgelegenheit Mailand-Rom mit Guiseppe Cruciani

29 Frankfurt-Berlin in nem BlaBlaCar mit Richard David Precht

30 die weiterhin laufen.

31 Deshalb bring das große mediale Feuerwerk nix, das den Himmel um Mitternacht für einen kurzen Moment taghell erleuchtet – und dann wird's dunkel und alle ab ins Bett.

32 Auch weil diese Nacht … … verfickt noch mal keene kurze sein wird.

while the term itself is criticized as too weak. And concrete examples are shown of far-right descriptions and media statements, contrasted with facts, as the use of pictures of beaten-up Nazis that in fact were not beaten up by those linked to graphically (Zerocalcare, 2024a, p. 48f.). At times this is linked to other debates, as in the German translation the question how to address the crimes in Gaza and who is to be called antisemite and who not.[33] But main point is not to decide about guilt or rectifying anything in Budapest. Instead: "The point is that those who spread lies, distort facts or omit important details do so deliberately. (…) Because this [the trial against Ilaria] is a purely political process. It is political in its course and political in the way it is told. It is important to be clear about that."[34] (Zerocalcare, 2024a, p. 51)

Episode 2 is about 'the other attacks' discussing the counter-argument often heard, that crimes are crimes and those committing violence have to be punished. But it is shown, that for the similar attacks far-right attackers are punished with some hours in jail while Ilaria and Tobi are in jail for more than one year (Zerocalcare, 2024a, p. 52f.). This episode is shorter than episode 1 with just two pages. The same holds true for episode 3 showing how private details of Ilaria and the police photo of Ilaria moved fast to fascists websites. This fact is used to argue for an immediate need to transfer Ilaria to Italy to get at least a fair trial in tendency since police forces in Hungary and fascists seem to be too close (Zerocalcare, 2024a, p. 54f.). Next comes an interlude, showing the author travelling to Budapest to the trial and telling the reader this time they will be ahead with their information since the newspaper will be published in two weeks only (Zerocalcare, 2024a, p. 56). From the interlude onwards a clear episode structure is lost. After this section, the next pages are about the days in Budapest, the author and others being followed all the time, and the author looking worried for the things yet to come. This is followed by the comic-diary 'A day in Budapest' that tries to capture the atmosphere, but also how much of a fair trial the situation in Budapest is allowing for. There are no police forces at the court building outside. Instead, there are multiple and diverse fascists filming and threatening others, no free press, no state forces, only a fascist controlled zone. Even at the door seemingly fascists, or at least not state security, are positioned (Zerocalcare, 2024a, p. 62ff.). And as opposed to potential readers that might be afraid of being filmed by fascists or afraid of potential violence, the author is not and makes a different point: "But that is the best example of what we mean when we say that

33 The Italian original unfortunately is not available for these parts of the comic to the author.

34 Der Punkt ist, dass diejenigen, die Lügen verbreiten, Fakten verzerren oder wichtige Details weglassen, das bewusst tun. (…) Denn das ist ein rein politischer Prozess. Er ist politisch in seinem Ablauf und politisch in der Weise, wie er erzählt wird. Es ist wichtig, das klar zu haben.

there are no conditions for a fair, democratic process there."[35] (Zerocalcare, 2024a, p. 69)

In the courthouse the author finally sees Ilaria, covered by two police in anti-terror-armor, first barely visible behind, then shown to the press as public. All scenery in the courthouse is more and more seen by the author as something antique, the presentation of the body of enemies, a hunting trophy. And this broadens for the author the distance between the trial and a state of law and habeas corpus (Zerocalcare, 2024a, p. 73f.). At court it is only decided about the request that the arrest be made outside the jail, with electronic cuffs. But instead of arguing and accepting the arguments put forward by Ilaria's lawyer, the judge simply decides that Ilaria has to stay in prison, without even considering the new circumstances. Much more so than before the author reports about a state of fading hope, of injustice, with him getting back to Rome while Ilaria goes back to 'the hole' (Zerocalcare, 2024a, p. 75ff.). Contrary to this scenery of fading hope, supporters from all over Italy gather in front of the court building, including some not in favor of what Ilaria had done, but all united by the conviction that Ilaria should not be 'thrown to dogs with rabies.' The decision at the Hungarian court is further contrasted in the following with the juridical decision in Italy against Gabriele Marchesi, confronted with the accusation of the same crimes. However, in contrast to Ilaria Gabriele is set free and will not be extradited to Hungary, referring to inhumane conditions in jails in Hungary. This simultaneously makes Ilaria more a hostage than a defendant as comic and Zerocalcare stress (Zerocalcare, 2024a, p. 78ff.). But how to react to this? – the comic asks. Some claim that less politicization and more silence would be the solution. The comic clearly argues against, giving counterarguments in bullet points. It does not provide a solution, no easy steps to follow, but explains a path, that those 'outside the hole' none the less have to act. According to Zerocalcare they cannot opt for silence or easy answers, because those in 'the hole' do not give up, which makes those outside even more obliged to carry on. Again, the comic stresses a need for solidarity, an obligation for solidarity, taking differences into account – an intersectional antifascist solidarity (Zerocalcare, 2024a, p. 83).

After this message another black page follows and one more, albeit unnumbered episode. Now readers are confronted with the apparent 'solution' to the Ilaria case – in the moment of writing –, the option of arrest at home until the court rules. The last part of this 'solution' is stressed by the author, in the translation in Berlin dialect again – making it no 'solution' at all: "It's a kind of mini summer break. With an electronic ankle bracelet instead of chains. Then she might get 20 years in Octo-

35 Aber das ist das beste Beispiel dafür, was wir meinen, wenn wir sagen, dass es dort keine Voraussetzungen für einen fairen, demokratischen Prozess gibt.

ber and have to go back. Until 2045, understood?"[36] (Zerocalcare, 2024a, p. 85) And it is even worse – again putting the Hungarian legal system into spotlight – the judge is publicly mentioning the address of the arrest at home. "A moment of carelessness? Or revenge to pay her back for getting out of prison? Either way, it shouldn't have happened. Because Ilaria Salis and her family are constantly threatened by neo-Nazis."[37] (Zerocalcare, 2024a, p. 86) And indeed 72 hours later the address can be found on a fascist-website. This leads to the last page of the comic, a one-page panel – a night scenery with a tram without light and apparently a person's shoulder on the left corner. The text above the picture is: "This is the 1454th example of how there are no conditions for a fair and democratic trial in Hungary. On the contrary, the lives and safety of Ilaria and the people who are sheltering her are being deliberately endangered by the institutions and neo-Nazis."[38] And in the picture itself: "And in the darkness of night, the boundary between these shadows is truly difficult to discern."[39] This is finalized beyond the nearly page-large picture with: "It's not morning yet. / And / Nothing has been resolved."[40] (Zerocalcare, 2024a, p. 87) The night that is not a short one continues, as the page suggests.

However, after this page another comic part follows, an epilogue of four pages, discussing the question: "But now, finally, why did you get so worked up about it?"[41] (Zerocalcare, 2024a, p. 90) This epilogue narrates the insecurity of the situation and the conclusions drawn. At the moment of drawing, the European elections have not taken place yet, there was no court ruling yet. Nonetheless the author stresses, that even though some parts of the comic might 'age badly,' one principle remains immortal and will stand true – in German 'seven simple words:' "You don't let people rot in jail".[42] (Zerocalcare, 2024a, p. 90) This principle is framed as indispensable, especially in 'our times' when 'all' warn that fascism is on the rise again and we have to do something. But if someone is doing something, most nonetheless distance themselves from methods or certain aims. According to the comic only a podcast

36 Det is so ne Art Kleene Sommerpause. Mit de elektronische Fußfessel statt die Ketten. Dann kann es sein, dass sie im Oktober 20 Jahre kriegt und wieder zurück muss. Bis 2045, verstanden?

37 Eine Unachtsamkeit? Oder Rache, um ihr den Gefängnisausgang heimzuzahlen? So oder so hätte das nicht passieren dürfen. Weil Ilaria Salis und ihre Familie ständig von Neonazis bedroht werden.

38 Das ist das 1454. Beispiel dafür, dass es in Ungarn keine Bedingungen für einen fairen und demokratischen Prozess gibt. Im Gegenteil. Das Leben und die Sicherheit von Ilaria und den Menschen, die sie bei sich aufnehmen, werden von den Institutionen und den Neonazis absichtlich gefährdet.

39 Und in der Dunkelheit der Nacht ist die Grenze zwischen diesen Schatten wirklich schwer zu erkennen.

40 Es ist noch nicht Morgen. / Und / Nichts ist gelöst.

41 Aber jetzt zum Schluss, warum hast du dir da so druff einjeschossen?

42 Man lässt Menschen nicht im Knast verrotten

might be accepted by most, again reframed in writing with a German podcast-example. But the position of the author is a different one, because "this should really be basic knowledge (…) / If you see yourself as part of a community."[43] (p. 91). It is the hope of Zerocalcare that when he himself will stumble in the drawn darkness others will help him up and not walk away as if nothing happened. Otherwise none can ask for engagement according to the author. Here a circle is drawn, connections made between conservative narratives of an unengaged- or disinterested-youth, a rising far right, and being left alone as soon as something happens. This is the circle civic engagement is stuck in often, endangered by neglect and just too easy distancing. And this has highly adultistic features, as the comic lines out indirectly. There is no unengaged- and disinterested-youth, but a system disengaging, especially youth and voices against current trends in society. Though, this is not followed up further. Rather, the focus of both comic and author is the simpler but at the same time more fundamental message, that it needs collective support to and for change: "I know that sounds almost like a political prerequisite. But in the sense that it prepares us for politics. Taking responsibility only works collectively. You defend everyone who goes with you."[44] (Zerocalcare, 2024a, p. 92) This 'conclusion' finally is used for a statement on the current situation in the time of drawing the comic: "In Budapest, it is not only Ilaria Salis who is being sentenced, but dozens of antifascists [in binary gender in the translation]. / Arrested or on the run across Europe. / (…) 1,000 survival tricks for those who find themselves in this stranglehold. / But just a few words to those who are outside. / – Seven are enough – / You don't let people rot in jail [.] even if I have to repeat it 7,000 times."[45] (Zerocalcare, 2024a, p. 93)

And following this idea the comic has three last pages after the afterword by 'Italian antifascists,' first sound appearing to be emanate from or to the opening of 'the hole' on one page, light and faces and people appearing in the dark around 'the hole,' assumably symbolizing collective action and awareness raising, on the second page. Finally a last page showing many people in the center, standing against what can be assumed to be police forces depicted only as shadows in both corners of the page, with the line "Free All Antifas" above them and on a sign between the people and the police again. This is completed by a kind of paper bird flying on the back of the back

43 Aber das hier, das sollte wirklich das Einmaleins sein. / Wenn man sich als Teil einer Gemeinschaft versteht.

44 Ich weiß, das klingt fast wie eine politische Vorbedingung. Aber in dem Sinne, dass uns das auf die Politik vorbereitet. Verantwortungsübernahme funktioniert nur kollektiv. Du verteidigst alle, die mit dir gehen.

45 In Budapest wird nicht nur Ilaria Salis verurteilt, sondern dutzende Antifaschistinnen und Antifaschisten. / Festgenommen oder in ganz Europe auf der Flucht. / (…) 1000 Überlebens-Kunstgriffe an diejenigen, die sich in diesem Würgegriff befinden. / Aber nur einige Worte an diejenigen, die draußen sind. / – Es reichen sieben – / Man lässt Menschen nicht im Knast verrotten [.] Auch wenn ich es 7000 Mal wiederholen muss.

cover and the feet chains torn apart on the back cover itself (Zerocalcare, 2024a, p. 102ff.). There is hope in the ending of the comic – if you follow intersectional antifascist solidarity.

Comics and intersectional antifascist solidarity – the example of Zerocalcare and beyond

Activism against the far right can be labeled as antifascist action. However, the label is rejected by many whose work could be labeled as 'working against fascism' on an analytical basis. This is not the case for the comics in focus here, neither for the author nor the structures behind. They themselves label and see themselves as antifascists. But at the same time being aware of the broad rejection of the label, the call to action is broader and more inclusive, going beyond 'antifa,' and by this way providing a first pillar for intersectional antifascist solidarity. Part of this is to understand not all want to or can call themselves antifascists, but can work against the far right in their own manners nonetheless. Including all of them in their diversity and differences in power, makes it an intersectional approach. This is not without limits and flaws, as misgendering, remaining in binarisms or being still ableist, as the comics – but also preface and afterword – in part do. Approach and demand are not the limits, but the opening, making it a practical intersectional approach, with all its limits in different forms of practice. And it is an intersectional antifascist approach, following a broad understanding of antifascism as working against the same tendencies and actors, loosely labeled far right or Nazis. While this is frame and base, the call for action is one of solidarity. No solidarity as a mere claim or one too easily achieved, but rather a challenging one. Nevertheless it is no question of choice, following the comics and their message, but of obligation and responsibility. To remain human and part of civic society it is necessary to take responsibility – along their own limits and power, making it an intersectional obligation. This duty of solidarity is the clear message in the comics. And the comics themselves are part of this duty and solidarity, following a specific constructed perspective. They are sold or spread for money used for those imprisoned or 'on the run.' And they call for action and raise awareness. In this sense the comics by Zerocalcare are clear examples of media for antifascists calls to action and solidarity in an intersectional perspective. Even though the topic is a concrete case of an Italian woman accused in Hungary, the comics once and again try to move beyond this limited perspective and remain open for further intersectional perspectives. And even though they inform, educate and raise awareness, they also call for action. Lived intersectional antifascist solidarity is not looking away, but giving light, going on fighting the far right, as the comics and the accompanying preface and afterword make clear. And this needs transnational action without fixed limits, making the label antifascism not just a choice, but a de-

scription of solidaric action against the far right in intersectional awareness at the same time. This claim, description and call is fostered and constructed in different ways – here summarized in analytical manner as intersectional antifascist solidarity –, but comics like the ones by Zerocalcare play a significant role in this, to intervene and give perspective, as shown here. And they are not only the perspective of Zerocalcare, who is declaring once and again that all work is always a collective one, only this makes them political (Ercolani, 2014). The comics by Zerocalcare are clearly political, not giving voice to just one, but to a collective with different perspectives. This is lived – and drawn – intersectional antifascist solidarity, with the ability of Zerocalcare to offer a specific and unique contribution to this solidarity.

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Gender Ideologies of Past and Present: The Christian Civilization Mission

Puja Kaur Matta

1. Introduction

The current rise of anti-gender discourse across Europe is a central feature of far-right movements. These movements aggressively promote a return to so-called 'Christian family values' and 'traditional gender roles,' wherein cisgender men are positioned as the rightful actors in public, political, and economic spheres, while cisgender women are relegated to the private, domestic realm of caregiving and household management. This rigid gender binary is enforced through narratives that claim to protect 'morality' and the 'innocence of children,'[1] casting these groups as self-appointed 'defenders of society' (DVCK e. V., 2025, *my translation*). However, this seemingly protective language obscures the violent dimensions underpinning their agendas.

Far from being a recent cultural reaction to liberal policies, the notions of Christian 'family values' and 'Western Christian Civilization' have historically served as a tool of social control, deployed to justify the domination of colonized peoples and enforce racial and gender hierarchies.[2] Therefore, it is not surprising that the current organizers of anti-gender campaigns are also involved in campaigns against migration. Recognizing this continuity reveals that today's far-right narratives are

1 A concrete example is the online platform *Aktion Kinder in Gefahr!* ("Campaign: Children at Risk!"), operated by the *Deutsche Vereinigung für christliche Kultur* (German Union for Christian Culture, DVCK), chaired by Benno Hofschulte. Founded in 1983, the organization claims to defend the "cultural values of Christian Western culture and civilization." Benno Hofschulte is directly linked to the fundamentalist Catholic organization *Tradition, Familie, Privateigentum* (Tradition, Family, Property). In 2009, Hofschulte released a publication that names the "TFP Committee on American Issues" as the co-author (Amazon, 2025).

2 Gendered hierarchies in Europe were as well justified by a similar narrative. For an historical analysis on the violence against women in Europe, Silvia Federici provides perspective in which it becomes apparent how Christian churches operated to create the gendered hierarchy (2004).

not simply nostalgic but part of a broader imperial legacy that continues to shape European societies.[3] In this, I argue that the current critical debate on far-right movements would benefit from Aimé Césaire's work, and by extension from Frantz Fanon (1986), to understand the current situation. Aimé Césaire argued that the violence once exercised in the colonies does not vanish but returns to the metropole. Through exercising violence against humanity, the colonizer lost their humanity, thus creating a racist society that is 'sick' (Césaire, 1972, pp,14ff.; Jokic, 2025, pp. 01ff.).

The case of the German 'Rhenish Missionary Society' ("Rheinische Missionsgesellschaft") in 'Southwest Africa,' today's Namibia, which was active in colonization in the 19th and 20th centuries, exemplifies how the European Christian ideology of family values and traditional gender roles was implemented through violent means. The missionaries were far from bystanders of the colonization of Namibia; rather, they were deeply involved in establishing the German colony to spread their gospel and their Eurocentric ideal of gender roles. This makes it apparent how historically loaded the term 'Christian family values' is and how it is inherently a materialistic approach to controlling territory, space, and bodies.

The Catholic transnational organization 'Tradition, Family, Property' (TFP) illustrates the return of Christian family values to the metropole in the 21st century. From 2015 to 2023, the Polish branch partner organization of the transnational network of Tradition, Family, Property, under the name of 'Ordo Iuris,' was actively involved in the legislation of the 'Law and Justice' (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość – PiS) government in Poland. It implemented 'LGBT-Free Zones' in over 100 municipalities in Poland, advocated against abortions, and demanded a 'return' to Christian values (Datta & Paternotte, 2023, p. 48; Keinz & Lewicki, 2023, p. 14).

This essay does not propose a comparison[4] between the genocide in Namibia and the political activities of the TFP. Instead, it traces how the seemingly benign discourse of 'Christian family values' has been historically a project of domination, specifically the control over territories and bodies. Through analyzing two distinct contexts – German colonialism in Namibia and contemporary far-right movements in Europe – this essay highlights how 'Christian family values' function not as neutral ideals but as instruments of structural violence and control rooted in colonialism.

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3 Similarly, Lewicki argues to consider the call for Christianity in Eastern Europe as an attempt to achieve *whiteness* and thus, overcoming the century-old racialization of Western Europe in regards of Eastern Europe. This analysis is a contribution of Lewicki in conversation with Keinz on the topic of understanding Polish policies (Keinz & Lewicki, 2023, pp. 13ff.).

4 Comparisons, particularly historical ones, are problematic due to the nature of obscuring cultural contexts, political particularities, economic circumstances, etc.; however, colonial agents across the colonizing nations exchanged their ideas and approaches, discussed vividly, for example, the issues of sexual morality (Stoler, 2010, pp. xiv-xv)

The inherent violence of 'Christian family values' and 'Western Christian Civilization' has not only had deadly consequences for the colonized but also transformed the colonizer and the racist society into 'savagery,' according to Césaire, because the exercised violence requires the loss of humanity for the colonizer (1972, p. 13). In this, I argue that to understand current anti-gender ideology, which is inherently anti-human, the return of violence in Europe is a direct cause of the psychological boomerang effect described by Césaire (Jokic, 2025, p. 04). Thus, it leads me to the only conclusion: as long as the colonial world order persists and Europe continues to deny fundamental human rights to all people, far-right movements will persist and continue to be a threat to society.

2. Colonization is not philanthropy: the missionary-military complex

> "*I* am talking about societies drained of their essence, cultures trampled underfoot, institutions undermined, lands confiscated, religions smashed, magnificent artistic creations destroyed, extraordinary *possibilities* wiped out."
> Césaire, 1972, p. 21 (italics in original)

In German debates on colonization, the case of the genocide in Namibia is quite remarkable. Until 2021, the German government denied an official apology to Namibia for the genocide of the Nama and Herero in 1904 and 1905 during the German colonial rule (Permanent Mission of the Federal Republic of Germany, 2021). Although the Namibian Parliament already requested in 2005[5] an official acknowledgment of the genocide by the German government, it was denied on the claim that there was no explicit intent of annihilation on the part of the German military in Namibia (Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2024); however, reviewing the German colonial literature of the 19th and early 20th centuries reveals an explicit desire to annihilate at least the culture of the local African population. As Aimé Césaire already explained European colonization destroyed cultures and 'sacrificed' millions for the so-called 'progress' that colonialism brought the world (1972, pp. 21f.). The intention of annihilation was far from hidden from the public; on the contrary, it was celebrated as a civilization mission. In 1879, Friedrich Fabri, the director of the German Protestant 'Rhenish Missionary Society' (RMS), published a pamphlet that demanded the German colonization of Africa and framed it as a duty of the Germans to bring civilization and Christianity to the 'underdeveloped world.' His pamphlet

5 Namibia became an independent nation only in 1990.

gained popularity among the political elite, thus pressuring the German Reich to sponsor colonial expansion (Gründer, 1982, p. 25).

In 1907,[6] Paul Rohrbach published his monograph on 'Southwest Africa,' today's Namibia. In it, he describes the land and infuses commentaries on the local population. He presents the reader with photographs of the desert and provides information about the differing climates in Namibia, constructing an image of a 'vast land.' Typical for his times, such geographic descriptions reflect the ideals of the Enlightenment, in which land measurements, weather conditions, and land fertility are the main features (Gottschalk, 2013, p. 55). The information on the indigenous population is limited to their usefulness for the colonial enterprise, as Rohrbach (1907) points out:

> "With the Herero, however, the situation is now different after the complete defeat of the natives,[7] in that it must henceforth be our task to deprive[8] this tribe – just like the other native tribes of Southwest Africa – as far as possible of its distinct nationality and ethnic identity, and to gradually merge it with other natives into a single colored working race." (p. 21, *my translation*)

The 'defeat' to which Rohrbach refers here is the genocide of the Nama and Herero of 1904/1905. It further becomes apparent that Rohrbach seeks to annihilate the culture of the population and reduce them to a 'working race,' as opposed to directly naming it as enslavement.[9] The next step for Rohrbach was to seize the land for the German

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6 The shift from human trafficking of African people to the colonies to direct colonization of the African continent in the 19th century is what Walter Rodney (1981) describes as a transition from European colonialism to European imperialism. The consequences of human trafficking had devastating consequences on the whole continent. Areas not directly affected by raids and abductions became more isolated, and any efforts at economic development were destroyed by European traders. Due to the USA becoming an independent imperialist state, the European nations focused on the exploitation of other colonies. They speculated exorbitant profits gained from mineral, gold, and possibly diamond extraction from African soil. In this, Africa became a space that needed civilization to employ the local population for resource extraction (Rodney, 1981, p. 100 f,, 104 & 109).

7 The German word 'Eingeborne' reflects a rather racist ideology; here it is translated as 'native.'

8 The German original quote uses 'entleiden' which could be translated as taking away the suffering of having their own culture.

9 As Eric Williams (2021 [1944]) explains, the main reason behind abolishing formal abduction of Africans in 1803 and later the enslavement in 1833 relied primarily on economic calculations. By the 19th century, the demand for sugar, once a key driver of plantation economies in the Caribbean, had begun to decline relative to earlier periods, reducing the economic centrality of sugarcane production and prompting European powers to seek new sources of wealth and raw materials, particularly in Africa, and provide the global market with cheaper sugar imported from South Asia (Williams, 2021 [1944], p. 108 & 121).

colonists (Gründer, 1982, p. 126). In this, the genocide is not a culmination of German military violence but rather the starting point of the colonizing process.

Paul Rohrbach's description of the genocide and the ideology to colonize the 'vast land' not only reflects the general narratives of German colonialism but also specifically that of the German Christians who were active in missionary work in Namibia. Fabri and Rohrbach, a theologian who became a colonial official during the colonization of Namibia, are personifying the missionary-military complex (Ryland, 2013, pp. 21–24).

The aforementioned culture of the Herero, which Rohrbach sought to eliminate, necessitated a complete reconfiguration of gender roles in accordance with German Christian moral frameworks. Colonization was, therefore, not only the exploitation of human labor and natural resources but a force that alienated the colonized from their culture to reconfigure it for the economic needs of the colonial 'motherland' (Bhabha, 1986, pp. x-xii; Césaire, 1972, p. 5; Fabri, 1879, p. 16).

What appears to be a juxtaposition, namely, the Christian civilization mission vs. the exploitation of the land and people, was, in fact, an interwoven project wherein salvation and economic profits created synergies, and the German Protestant RMS was a driving force in this.[10]

When the German Reich officially acquired 'Southwest Africa' after the so-called 'Berlin Conference,'[11] the RMS had been present in the region for over forty years. With the help of the German troops, the RMS saw it as a chance to spread the gospel, civilize the locals, and establish their 'Protestant work ethic'[12]: repetitive wage labor should discipline the spirit and the body, especially sexuality, which was considered only as a means for reproduction (Rempfer, 2022, p. 154). To spread the Christian ideal, the missionaries needed control over the Hereros' territories and, by this, to eliminate any form of living independently from the settlers (Olusoga & Erichsen,

10 The missionaries were actively involved in the dispossession of the land for the German military. By 1896, the missionaries were the leading force for the colonization of Namibia (Gründer, 1982, pp. 118ff.)

11 In this context, the so-called 'Berlin Conference,' held from November 1884 to February 1885, divided the continent among the Imperial powers and regulated the competition for speculated resources. Africans were deemed unable to run states and hence needed European political intervention to fulfill the needs of the European-controlled global market (Rodney, 1981, p. 140; Olusoga & Erichsen, 2010, p. 34). For in-depth analysis of Germany's role during colonization and Bismarck's position in establishing 'Southwest Africa,' see Olusoga & Erichsen, 2010, pp. 33–45.

12 Max Weber's concept of the 'Protestant Work Ethic' was forwarded in retrospect to explain the capitalistic advancements of Protestant Europe while obscuring European Colonialism and Imperialism and ignoring economic developments in Catholic Europe (Amin, 2010, pp.163f.).

2010, p. 102). The Rhenish Missionary Society thus depended on the presence of German colonial authorities and military forces[13] to sustain their operations (Gründer, 1982, p. 117; Olusoga & Erichsen, 2010, pp. 84 & 100ff.).[14]

The ongoing resistance of the population against the colonization, spearheaded by Hendrik Witboois, was considered by the missionaries as 'unchristian' and undermining the 'God-given' hierarchy (Gründer, 1982, p. 124), and thus, the cooperation of missionaries and the German military culminated in the genocide of 1904/1905.[15] In the following years, the Germans created labor camps for the survivors, where they preached the gospel to an incapacitated audience.[16] The prisoners were further 'rented' to settlers by the missionary administration (Olusoga & Erichsen, 2012, p. 164).

The Eurocentric Ideology of Gender

Founded in 1828, the Protestant Rhenish Missionary Society had already sent missionaries to South Africa in 1839, Borneo in 1835, China in 1847, and Sumatra in 1861, making it the largest missionary society in Germany (Gründer, 1982, p. 27). The objective was to spread the gospel through a 'civilization mission.' This becomes particularly apparent in the rules of clothing imposed by the missionaries on the local African population. The clothing of the local women served as a tool to discipline

13 Thus, the German settlers started to secure the territory from the local population for their benefit which meant dispossessing the local population of land while their livestock was destroyed by a pandemic affecting their cattle and leaving them with no means to survive (Olusoga & Erichsen, 2010, p. 100ff.). Various treaties were signed between the German colonizers and the local population; however, it is necessary to point out that the Germans regularly broke the treaties to further their expansion and establish control over the territory (Olusoga & Erichsen, 2010, p. 84). By 1903, the Germans owned over half the cattle of the Herero people.

14 Like other missionary groups, such as the 'London Missionary Society,' the RMS also pursued economic and infrastructural development, employing German traders and setting up wood workshops, blacksmith forges, butcheries, and even facilities for producing arms and ammunition. The Missionary Societies functioned as trading unions on the European continent. For an in-depth analysis, Horst Gründer (1982) and Thomas Braun (1991), among others, have reviewed the archives of the RMS and recounted the political and economic context by analyzing the letter exchange, the missionary's books, and other encounters (Braun, 1991, p. 45)

15 By reviewing letters and archives, Olusogan and Erichsen provided an accurate account of the events leading up to the genocide, the genocide itself, and its aftermath, such as how the concentration camps were run and the renting of prisoners to the settlers. Their findings were published in 2010 as 'The Kaiser's Holocaust.'

16 In 1905, the missionary Heinrich Vedder reported to the headquarters of the RMS in Germany about the dire conditions of the work and military concentration camps; however, no consequences or significant changes in the policy followed (Olusoga & Erichsen, 2010, p. 167ff.).

sexual morality, in which sexuality is reduced to a means for reproduction. Therefore, long dresses for women signaled their 'virtue' and 'virginity' and marked them as faithful Christians. Based on the European narrative that women are, per se, sinful, the long dresses served as a reminder of self-discipline and suppressing other gender and sexual expressions (Rempfer, 2022, pp. 153ff.).

This vision of European Christian civilization for the colonized required an implementation of Eurocentric concepts of temporal and spatial relations: the introduction of working hours in a specific space and resting hours at home, the division of days with Sunday reserved for the church only, and a clear division of public and private spheres, which were gendered. While the Herero men were expected to occupy the public spaces, the Herero women, by contrast, were confined to the private realm and expected to serve their husbands, care for the children, and take over all reproductive labor in the houses of the colonialists. Additionally, the Herero women were also prohibited from selling goods at the market, maintaining social and trading networks, and significantly disrupting their prior economic roles. In religious life, this gendered (and simultaneously also racial) separation continued. Herero men were permitted to preach the gospel but only in the absence of German missionaries and were denied the status of ordained ministers. Herero women, meanwhile, were expected to be passive listeners during church services (Rempfer, 2022, p. 225).

In this regard, colonialism profoundly disrupted the roles and status of African women who were previously active in trading and maintaining social networks. For the ideals of Christian gender roles, the Herero women were stripped of their social, political, and cultural rights. At the same time, they were expected to sustain the household and serve in colonial settlers' homes. Walter Rodney (1981) argues that this process contributed to the breakdown of traditional social structures by fostering a worldview in which each individual labored for their own spiritual and material gain (p. 254).

The case of the RMS highlights how colonization was inherently a project to assert control over territories, spaces, and bodies. By imposing clothing rules, control over bodies was claimed, and the control over territory and the dispossession of the land allowed the missionaries to establish their Eurocentric world order that was deeply racialized and gendered. Framing the resistance of the local population as 'un-Christian' or as defiance against 'God' reveals how those in power monopolized biblical interpretation. This historical analysis shows that the notion of Christian civilization, 'christliches Abendland,' was not neutral or benevolent but entangled with structures of domination and violence.

3. Coloniality persists: Christian fundamentalism and anti-gender campaigns

> "[…] we must study how colonization works to *decivilize* the colonizer, to *brutalize* him in the true sense of the word, to degrade him, to awaken him to buried instincts, to covetousness, violence, race hatred, and moral relativism […]"
> Césaire, 1972, p. 13 (*italics in original*)

Aimé Césaire describes in his analysis how the brute violence directed at the colonized also transforms the colonizer psychologically (Jokic, 2024, p. 04). In the act of asserting violence against the colonized, the claimed virtues of 'European civilization,' namely, humanity, have to be morally relativized, turning the colonizer into someone who operates on the grounds of 'race hatred' at all times and in all spaces. In this, the colonizer lost all sense of humanity and thus denies it in Europe as well.

While colonialism is over, the nostalgic view of European imperialism is not a fringe phenomenon. The following citation presents a revisionist account of the Portuguese colonization of Brazil: "The Jesuits infused a soul into what up to then had been a land rich in potential but shapeless," and the sentence continues, "the missionaries carried out the task (…) of Christianizing and, at the same time, civilizing the lands of Brazil," states Roberto de Mattei in his publication of 1998 (p. 06). In this, de Mattei connects Euro-Christianity, personified by the Portuguese Jesuits, with the 'civilizing mission' that 'reshaped the land' and further 'gathered' the indigenous population into 'special villages.' The Christian civilization mission is combined with control over the territory of Brazil, control over the space by introducing infrastructure, and control over the bodies of the indigenous people.

Roberto De Mattei is a self-ascribed disciple of the founder of 'Tradition, Family, Property' (TFP), Plinio Corrêa de Oliveira. De Mattei's publication might appear as another example of apologetic settler colonialism that retells a romanticized and revisionist version of European imperialism; however, de Mattei is a professor emeritus of modern history at the European University of Rome, a private university accepted by the state. More importantly, he was a counselor for foreign politics for the Italian government from 2002 to 2006, directly linking him to Silvio Berlusconi, former prime minister and leader of the conservative alliance 'Casa della Libertà' in Italy (Garbagnoli, 2017, p. 159).

De Mattei is not the only 'interesting person' connected to the TFP and European governments. Aleksander Stępkowski, the founder and former president of the Polish TFP branch Ordus Iuris, served as an undersecretary of the state Ministry of Foreign Affairs during the first PiS legislation and is currently a judge at the Polish Supreme Court (Henning, 2023, p. 87). In 2021, the Hungarian Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Péter Szijjártó, held a keynote speech at an event by the 'Slovakia Christiana' Foundation that shares similar goals to the TFP. Present at the

summit was also Boris Kollár, Speaker of the Slovak Parliament, among other politicians (Sekerák & Rosůlek, 2023, p. 188).

In 2019,[17] nearly 100 municipalities, provinces, and local governments in Poland adopted legally non-binding resolutions that became known in the media as 'LGBT-Free Zones.' Although most of these declarations were eventually withdrawn or invalidated by Polish courts by 2025 (Knight, 2025), their symbolic power endures. One of the key forces is Ordo Iuris, a Catholic think tank closely linked to the transnational network Tradition, Family, Property, which mobilizes aggressively against gender equality and LGBTQIA+ rights (Datta & Paternotte, 2023, p. 48; Ciobanu, 2021). The 'LGBT-Free Zones' were not merely symbolic gestures; they marked an attempt to reassert control over territory and a return of 'family values' in which queer people are not part of. Similarly, Ordo Iuris requested that the right to asylum be restricted to Christians in 2015 (Hennig, 2023, p. 88). Since then, the organization has published numerous reports on the EU's asylum system and demanded reform while strategically not mentioning religion (Ignaszcza, 2023; Ordoiuris, n.d.). In Germany, Beatrix von Storch, the former deputy of the far-right party AfD ('Alternative für Deutschland' – Alternative for Germany), is the cousin of Paul von Oldenburg, who represents the European umbrella organization of the TFP (Norris, 2025). Although the AfD is not part of the governing coalition, it currently holds the position of the largest opposition party in the German Bundestag. The party has repeatedly doubted the historical consensus regarding the genocide committed by German colonial forces in Namibia (AfD Bundestagsfraktion, 2019), echoing revisionist narratives such as those advanced by Roberto de Mattei. In 2024, AfD Member of Parliament Sven Tritschler underscored this position during an official visit by the German delegation, where he paid tribute to German colonial soldiers. This act symbolically reaffirmed the party's refusal to acknowledge the genocide (Rust, 2024).

While there is no clear link between the AfD and the TFP in personal regards, both organizations share an ideological agenda that is informed by a revisionist view on European colonization, the so-called anti-gender ideology, and upholding the concept of 'Western Christian civilization,' which usually features a narrative to control territories, spaces, and bodies within Europe.

However, the nostalgia for European colonialism is not a marginalized position in Germany, although the TFP's supporters, the AfD, remain in opposition and are not part of the governing coalition. In 2025, the German Chancellor, Friedrich Merz, appointed Wolfram Weimer Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media. Weimer has authored publications that have repeatedly emphasized his conservative positions. Particular 'Land Unter,' published in 2012, reveals a revisionist

17 For an in-depth analysis of the Christian Right movement and the political context in Poland, Anja Henning (2023) provides insight in her article.

history of European colonialism. The second chapter begins with the sentence: "We Europeans live with the confidence of cultural and economic dominance since centuries. We are the world leaders" (Chapter 2, *my translation*)[18]. Weimer further regrets that Europe is losing its position to "think, define, cultivate, and change" (Chapter 2, *my translation*) the world. From this rhetorical starting point, Weimer constructs the low child-birth rate in Europe, the loss of colonial territories, European Christianity, and loss of cultural influence, and the economic stagnation as indicators of the decline of civilization.[19] In this rhetorical move, Weimer classifies gender mainstreaming and quotas for women as another strategy of an overcontrolling state, which in consequence would lead to the loss of European hegemony (Chapter 5 & 6).

While the revisionist perspective on European colonialism, the perceived decline of European Christianity, and the critique of gender mainstreaming appear as separate thematic chapters in Weimer's publication, they serve together as interlocking rhetorical tools in his broader call for restoring 'European supremacy' and a return to 'morals' and hierarchical structures. Given Weimer's position now in the German government, it reveals how the political elite endorses colonial nostalgia and continues to frame European colonialism as a positive 'civilization mission.'

This rhetoric, despite in differences of style and approach, echoes the position of Roberto de Mattei. Both authors anchor their arguments in a nostalgic narrative that regards European colonialism as a Christian civilizing mission, while instrumentalizing the language of 'cultural survival' to advocate for deeply conservative and exclusionary political projects.

In this rhetorical act of asserting dominance over the world, the claimed virtues of 'Christian European civilization' are relativized in favor of exclusionary politics that are rooted in denying the humanity of anyone who does not and cannot adhere to the ideals. The obscuring of the genocidal violence of European colonialism is a crucial feature of glorifying and rewriting the past. By negating the lived experiences of colonized, the process of 'decivilizing,' as described by Césaire, continues to dominate European politics. While the TFP and the AfD in Germany remain fringe actors of the far right movements, their positions on colonial revisionism and gender politics are aligned with politician's that are currently in office, such as Wolfram Weimer.

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18 This notion of maintaining the 'European supremacy' reflects Oswald Sprenger's rhetoric, author of "The Decline of the West" (1926 [1918]), and remains a crucial positive reference in Weimer's publication. Spengler's second volume features antisemitic rhetorics that also include anti-democratic positions (Wyrwa, 2009, pp. 784f.)

19 His notion of European supremacy is further upheld by the claim that 'others' would not have a concept of temporality and thus Weimar claims that only the 'European civilization' invented calendars, years and the clock to measure the 'European invention' of hours, and seconds (Chapter 3).

In this, the former colonizer not only rejects the humanity of the former colonized but further spreads the 'poison' of anti-humanity on the continent by funding anti-gender campaigns (Datta, 2021, p.12). The violence that once raged in the colonies, through atrocities and genocides, continues in the metropole and articulates itself through envisioning a European supremacy informed by Eurocentric ideals of Christian civilization.

The holy trinity: Tradition, Family, Property

The Catholic network Tradition, Family, Property, founded in Brazil in 1960, is clear in its ideological orientation: a commitment to traditional 'Catholic values,' patriarchal family structures, and the protection of private property. TFP's explicit emphasis on 'property' differentiates it from other Christian organizations. This materialist stance has translated into resistance to land reforms in Latin America, aligning the organization with the interests of the wealthy, land-owning elite. Since its founding, TFP has expanded across Europe, where it mobilizes against movements for social justice, consistently opposing gender equality and LGBTQIA*+ rights (Datta, 2020, p. 09ff.).

In order to understand the triplet of abstract, seemingly arbitrary choices of words, the historical analysis by Samir Amin (2010) provides an insight into the meaning. While the American Revolution triumphed liberty, equality, and property as its slogan and declared them as a basis of its newly founded nation, far-right ideology dropped liberty and equality in exchange for tradition and family, while property remained a crucial feature of their ideology of a 'free market' (p. 15). The exchange of words is not simply a rhetorical strategy to stress the necessity of 'family' or 'traditions;' rather, it is a symbolic move to emphasize hierarchical power structures informed by an Eurocentric worldview that evokes the ideals of a 'Western Christian Civilization.' Regarding property, the TFP mentions that "the possibility to create inheritance (…) that will be left for wife and children, is the best natural source of human creativity" (TFP Deutschland, 2025, *my translation*). In this, Samin (2010) asks:

> "So one is asked to go back in history to the mythical day of the original social contract made between equals, who later became unequal because they really desired it, as evidenced by inequality of the sacrifices to which they consented." (p. 16)

Amin alludes that property, even in this logic, is not the result of a just trade but is instead rooted in violence. To justify the unequal distribution of property and wealth, far-right ideology invokes 'tradition' as a historical fact that justifies inequality. In a rather romanticized version, the TFP mentions on their homepage: "And inheritance

is an institution that unites family and tradition (…) that is given to the next generation" (TFP Deutschland, 2025, *my translation*). By framing inheritance or property as 'natural,' the TFP omits the question of how property was obtained in the first place.

In terms of property, the TFP opened its building in 2008 in Brussels, which serves as its headquarters for Europe. The TFP owns numerous real estate properties in France and Belgium (Datta, 2022, p. 14). This brings in the question about the wealth the TFP supposedly generates through its fundraising networks and who donates to an organization known for its aggressive approach against gender equality in Europe. According to a report by Neil Datta (2021), the European TFP spent alone in Europe over a decade 113 million Euros on anti-gender campaigning, thus making it only the second biggest spender, after the European 'Foundation Jérôme Lejeune' (p. 97). Among the donors, Datta lists Paul von Oldenburg, Beatrix von Storch, and the Imperial Family of Brazil, Orléans-Bragança.

Recalling the TFP's revisionist interpretation of European colonial history, these financial flows symbolize not only a sustained commitment to opposing gender equality but also a broader ideological project aimed at denying and rewriting Europe's colonial past that seeks to subjugate anyone that does not fulfil their ideology of 'Christian family values' combined with owning property and wealth.

4. Conclusion

> "(…) unless Europe galvanizes the dying cultures or raises up to new ones, unless it becomes the awakener of countries and civilizations (…) Europe will have deprived itself of its last chance and, with its own hands, drawn up over itself the pall of mortal darkness."
> Césaire, 1972, p. 61

Europe has a final chance to redeem itself before the 'pall' of the far-right movements covers the whole continent. By acknowledging the colonial past as an act of annihilation and destruction and by implementing human rights for all, Europe can be transformed and prevent the rise of far-right politics that are deeply rooted in anti-humanity politics. Césaire's words cannot be translated to a symbolic opposition against the far-right movements in the present; rather, he asks us to critically review the language of the colonizer, the rhetorics that aim to dehumanize the colonized but in return 'decivilize' Europe itself. Thus, as long as a critical assessment of the colonial past remains in the shadows, the 'poison' will further spread.

In this, I have highlighted how the language of German colonizers, such as Friedrich Fabri and Paul Rohrbach, advocated for an annihilation of African culture in the 19th and 20th centuries by utilizing the metaphor of a 'Christian civilization mission.' German missionaries imposed their Eurocentric Christian gender

ideology together with the German military. Their aim was to confine women to the household while positioning men in the public sphere and, hence, supersede indigenous social structures. By being complicit in the German colonization, the missionaries gained power over territory to assert control over the indigenous bodies.

This entanglement of religious rhetoric and political domination returns to the metropole, as Césaire describes, in the form of anti-gender campaigning that is accompanied by a longing for 'Christian European hegemony' in the world. Roberto de Mattei, former counselor of the Berlusconi government and representative of the Catholic organization Tradition, Family, Property, articulates such views through his publications. The TFP gained influence in Poland through its close collaboration with the Polish think tank Ordo Iuris, whose members held government positions during the administration of Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (Law and Justice Party). By supporting and legitimizing the symbolic establishment of so-called 'LGBT-Free Zones,' Ordo Iuris asserted ideological control over bodies and identities that fall outside its conservative moral framework.

While the colonial past appears to be distant on the spatial-temporal axis, the echoes of longing for a 'Christian civilization' underpinned by Eurocentric ideals of the gender binary are articulated through the far-right movements; however, far from being a sudden newfound longing, dominant conservatives have cultivated such visions for centuries. Wolfram Weimer, the newly appointed German Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media, called in his publication of 2012 for 'European supremacy.' As long as such positions dominate in political offices, the threat of the far right will remain an integral part of Europe.

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Beyond the Firewall. On infiltrating the far right and fascist masculinities

Tobias Ginsburg

The text is a revised transcription of a lecture and the subsequent audience discussion.

It was 15 years ago that I have started with my strange occupation. I infiltrate groups and movements, one should really steer clear of: I spent a considerable amount of time amongst Neo-Nazis and anti-democrats, anti-Semites and Islamists, lived in cults, visited militias and a wide range of fringe groups. But above all, I immersed myself within the far right – again and again. Just September 2024, just one month before the original lecture, I spent mostly amongst fascists and quite a few murderers. So, sorry if I may seem a bit tired and let's address the obvious question: Why would I, why would anyone pursue this line of work? What is the gain in knowledge, what's the journalistic benefit and what on earth is a sensible motivation to justify the occupational hazards? Here is the best answer I can offer: Fear.

We live in times full of great reasons to be frightened. We can be scared of the rise of the far right and authoritarians, frightened by the radicalization of western societies, terrified by the constant attacks on pluralistic and democratic values. But the scariest threats are those we do not understand, the ones that go thump in the dark. And I am a pretty anxious guy, I'm easily scared and terminally worried, so my research might be counter-intuitive, but it is an attempt to combat fear: I try to look behind the threatening facades of the extremists, try to tear down their intimidating display of grandeur and violence, I want to understand fanatics and their convictions. That doesn't make these people, their movements or their ideologies any less dangerous, but it makes them comprehensible. It makes them tangible and above all: human. And if we want to stop them, we need this comprehension.

Unfortunately, such a perspective on fanaticism is largely missing in public discourse, not even among those who oppose the authoritarian and neofascist backlash. When we talk about the far right and fascists, we tend to exoticize them. We

make the far right *the other*, creating an ideological and moral distance between *us* and *them*. As a rhetorical gambit, this allows us to portray *them* as strange or downright silly madmen and sadistic fanatics, to judge, ridicule and laugh about them and simply dismiss their ideologies – dismiss fascism as incomprehensible gibberish. It is a false, but alluring narrative: 'These far-right extremists and fanatics must be sub-proletarian idiots, uneducated or lunatics from the fringes of society. Or, if they are not intellectually inferior to us, their inferiority must be a moral one: Their anti-democratic and hateful perspective must be a moral failure. These people must simply be evil.' This false narrative is a more pleasant one than the sobering fact that the extremist's hatred is always mirrored in the very heart of society and often times fueled by it. Fascist ideas are not raging at the edges of society, but just as well at its cushy center. It is a false dualism that diminishes the threatening nature of the far right, and it implies a moral self-aggrandizement: If the root of fanaticism are moral, intellectual and overall individual failings of *the other*, then *we*, as their counterpart, must be educated, clever and morally upstanding citizens. Hillary Clinton illustrated this latter aspect infamously during her failed election campaign 2016, when she gleefully stated that you could put half of all Trump supporters into "the basket of deplorables" (cit. in Reilly, 2016). This statement was met by cheers and laughter from her audience.

This way of arguing is all too familiar in Germany: In public and political discourse, time and time again, fascism is depoliticized and downplayed as a moral and psychological anomaly. This belief was extremely helpful for establishing a nominally 'denazified' post-war Germany. By turning the Nazis into the others, the rest of society could be exonerated, and all ideological convictions of the past did not have to be analyzed, understood or refuted. The past could be put in the past, Nazism was declared something diffusely dangerous and hateful with which we neither have, nor had any contact. After Germany's reunification, the differentiation between *us* and *them*, this mostly fictious red line, became elemental for the German self-portrayal, and somewhat recently it became a semi-official name: The Firewall, "*die Brandmauer*" (Wilke, 2023). The Brandmauer as a political slogan and a sort of lip service to democratic values, was popularized during the persistent rise of Germany's far-right party 'Alternative für Deutschland' (AfD). In 2024, when millions of Germans took to the streets, protesting these worrisome developments, "We are the Brandmauer!" became their central rallying cry (van der Kraats, 2025). The message was clear: Even if there are differences in our politics, we stand united against the antidemocrats. It is a nice sentiment, but if one stops and thinks about this expression, its metaphorical idiocy becomes glaring: 'Over there the ideological firestorm is raging, but here, behind our sturdy firewall, we're safe and sound – no fire, no heat, no smoke. Only well-tempered convictions.' This slogan contains a negation of any existence of one's own bigotry, implying the German establishment and mainstream to be immune to any hateful, fascist or anti-democratic ideas. (In

this context, it must be borne in mind that the resurgence of the German far right in the early 2010s was largely fueled by the racist tirades of politician Tilo Sarrazin, a functionary of the social-democratic SPD.) The already problematic metaphor is made even worse by its geographical insinuation, referring to the old notion of an 'enlightened' West Germany on one side versus the 'backward countries' of the former GDR on the other.

The issues we will discuss today are not the problem of some separated far right, of a somehow closed-off circle of Nazi-ideologues. We are talking about a rapidly spreading ideology and omnipresent ideologemes. You find them throughout society. The rise of the far right does not only refer to a few far-right parties or fascist organizations. Yes, these movements reach for power with increasing success, are becoming more and more shamelessly blunt and give rise to violence, but significant parts of their ideas are either absorbed by the social mainstream or they are rooted there. In any case, these ideas are getting closer and closer to us; and the more often they are repeated, the more ordinary they sound. Of course, this is part of a well-tried far-right strategy: the widening of the Overton window.

We drink it up. All of us. And I literally mean: us. You and me.

That is the reason why I am drawn into the ideological abyss time and time again. Understanding extremists and the fringes of society means: understanding our society as a whole, understanding ourselves. I want to grasp what makes hate desirable; what are its political and individual promises? While I spend time with people who subscribe to the most vile convictions imaginable, the people themselves are as ordinary as anyone else, stemming from all walks of life. And while their dangerous ideas are capturing ever more minds, endangering and destroying ever more lives, many of *us* do not notice it. And just as many do not want to notice. Why should we? We're on the right side of the Brandmauer. We're the good guys.

It was in 2009 that I went undercover for the first time. Fittingly, I was researching for a play on the continuity of Nazism and Nazi ideology in German families, when I stumbled across a network of far-right think tanks and institutes, publishing houses and student fraternities. This network was the so-called New Right, the *Nouvelle Droite*, but this term and the existence of this network were unknown to me, as they were unknown to most people back then (Weiss, 2017). Driven by morbid curiosity and full of naiveté I picked up my phone, I called a far-right fraternity house in Munich. I could not imagine that you could simply walk in there. But I am a man, and I am white – and that's enough.[1] A few days later, I spent my first night amongst self-proclaimed fascists in their pompous mansion. My undercover alias: Tobias Günzburg. I couldn't think of anything better on the spot.

1 Due to the reactionary discourse at issue, I will only refer to a plainly binary, cisgender conception of 'men' and 'women.'

For all of you who don't have a picture of the time-honored German fraternity tradition in mind – It is a spectacle! Imagine university students in 19th century costumes, gold studded uniforms and feathered hats, nostalgic rites with hyper-nationalistic slogans and terribly heavy beer consumption. Several of these German frat boys proudly wear scars on their faces, the result of traditional fencing. And just as many of them belong to the far right. I knew that. Kind of. Of course, these bigoted and antiquated frat-boys were resented in my social circles – but they were the *others*. Silly fascists in silly mansions. But I didn't know what that actually meant.

I had entered a world of hate and alcohol, neither of which I was accustomed to in such raw quantities. And most importantly, I had never experienced this quality of hate before: ice-cold, rationalized, and studied, recited by young neo-Nazis who were working on their university degree. The ritualized excesses, I learned, all the highly disciplined binge-drinking, the military regimentation and hierarchization, all that was supposed to be a conditioning, a necessary return to a proper, Teutonic masculinity. I sat there, overwhelmed, and around me a seemingly endless stream of breathless elaborations gushed at me to explain the necessity of these measures: I learned about sinister plots against the German people and the "white race," listened to stories about "cultural Marxists" that wanted to eradicate the ideas of nation states and traditional families via political correctness and homosexuality whilst the vengeful "Jewry" plotted the "great replacement," overrunning the Western population with "alpha males" from the global south, destroying Christian values, and so on and so forth (Ginsburg, 2021a).

I am sure, you all heard these buzzwords and conspiracy theories before and far too often at that. Fragments and variations of these dark tales flood the Internet, can be found in best-selling books and major newspapers, can be heard in the speeches of politicians, from the mouths of more and more heads of state. But back then, in 2009, to me it sounded like sheer insanity. My impression was not entirely wrong. Much of what was said was exactly that: sheer madness, mixed with clever disinformation and age-old myths. But in itself, this narrative was congruent, its axioms easily understandable, its implicated call to violent action blatantly clear. And at its center stood a focus on masculinity: the threat to masculinity posed by modernity and 'the foreign,' the irrepressible urge to become ever more masculine, the *Männerbund* – the men's union, a lifelong band of brothers – as the nucleus of nationalist-reactionary resistance. An ominous realization, because these ideas are socially widely compatible. Yet, in public discourse on fascist movements, we tend to focus on the oddities, on the grotesque articulations of hatred and the shrill conspiracy theories. It is the false hope that pointing out the fanatic's *weirdness* would dismantle their ideology as a whole. But given time, pretty much anything can become normalized (or, in other circles, was never perceived as odd, to begin with). To stop the reach of these worldviews, we need to understand them and dismantle them as a whole, it is

not enough to point at the surface and laugh. I know that, and still, I fail from time to time.

A few years back, I spent quite some reading and evaluating a weird, esoteric krypto-fascist and the online space surrounding him: Mencius Moldbug was the quirky online pseudonym of an equally quirky character, a self-proclaimed neo-monarchist and thought leader of the so-called neoreactionary movement or NRx for short. Moldbug's central plea was to dismantle our decadent democracies and establish authoritarian micro-nations instead which should be run like companies – de facto dictatorships, ruled by wise CEOs and modern monarchs. His writings were not only filled with racisms and post-ironic fascistic slogans, they were meandering, intellectually convoluted and full of mistakes. In short: They were weird and wacky. A nerdy read for people who must deal professionally with esoteric extremism or spend too much time online. No need to tell the wider world about this fanatic and his few devotees … Well, here we are. Today we know wacky antidemocrat Moldbug by his real name: Curtis Yarvin. US-Vice-President JD Vance speaks openly about the intellectual influence Yarvin's work has on him (Wilson, 2024), far-right billionaire Peter Thiel supports Yarvin and enjoys a close personal relationship to him (Pogue, 2022), and the *New York Times* just published a lengthy interview with him, including a very handsome photograph (Marchese, 2025). The 'lunatic fringe' runs across the whole of society and straight through the White House. So no, intellectual crudeness and superficial weirdness are not a criterion for the failure of ideological narratives. As a German, I really should have known that.

But let us return to the nexus of far-right extremism and hypermasculinity. I believe it is due to our obsession with the *weird* aspects of fanaticism that this topic receives so little attention. Yet this aspect, the mania for masculinity with its downright militant anti-feminism and anti-genderism is a pivotal one. In almost every manifesto, every video and every statement that neo-Nazi terrorists and far-right gunmen have belched out into the world, this idea can be found: The men of the West have become soft and emasculated, feminism has poisoned women and destroyed birth rates, to safe our nations we need to return to 'true masculinity' and 'traditional family values.' Of course, this is not original. Fascism rarely is. As we will discuss later, very similar sentiments inspired Nazi ideology and today, they are once again part of the stock repertoire of rhetoric used by authoritarian and populist politicians: These sentiments were formative for the emergence of the Alt-Right and other modern far-right movements, and they stand at the very center of the 'anti-woke' backlash worldwide. So why is this ideological nexus hardly ever discussed, not even in Germany where far-right extremism plays such an important role in public discourse? I suspect it is due to the lack of spectacle. Because this topic is not considered weird enough, hatred of women and queer people is not exotic. Because these sentences do not necessarily have to come from a fascist. They are already familiar to

us; how could they be dangerous? How could something be fascist if I myself believe in it?

While fascist ideologies and aesthetics, historical as well as modern permutations, have this obsession with masculinity, the far right as a whole builds on the ideas of the patriarchy. It is one of very few foundational aspects uniting all the different milieus, scenes and schools of far-right extremism. Based on its inherent desire for strength and contempt for any perceived weakness, it is logical and inevitable for any far-right ideology to be patriarchal and obsess over masculinity, gender and manliness. But furthermore, the topic of masculinity is of strategic importance for the far right because it holds such a low threshold: Living in a patriarchal society it is immensely easy to reach out to *normal folks* via these topics. The far right desperately needs to radicalize young men, being dependent on new blood and manpower, its methods of outreach and radicalization are carefully considered and therefore honesty is not an option: In a post-1945 world, the battle cry to create an ethnostate or defeat the 'world Jewry' is fortunately still a deterrent for the vast majority of people. But the question of masculinity offers a simple first step: 'Shouldn't we be real men again? Real men! Manly men! Remember when men were men?' And people seem eager to remember, they want to remember: 'Oh, yes, I remember, back in the 1980s or the 1960s or the 1930s or during the crusades.' It is a nostalgia for a time filled with pure, empowering masculinity. Nostalgia for a time that never was. It is frightening how often I have witnessed particularly young men driven to radical extremes by this fictitious nostalgia, these insatiable longings.

Traditional masculinity is a diffuse construct, its concrete symbols, aesthetics and habitus are interchangeable; as much as these specifics are talked about, they do not really matter. What does matter is the structural narrative underneath, a narrative of constant crisis: You are not enough man, your manhood is under attack, masculinity itself is under attack, you have to become *more* man, you have to fulfill your destiny as a man. German sociologist Klaus Theweleit elaborates on this in his 1978 book "Männerfantasien," his seminal study on fascist constructions of masculinity. He describes traditional masculinities as a dynamic building on fear, feeling of insufficiency and loss of power and privilege. The utopia of the fascist man, Theweleit explains, is the mastery and transformation of the body: the disorganized teeming of flesh, fat, skin and bone is to be turned in drill into a controllable instrument for the cause, a machine, functional and functioning. You can find this obsession with the functionality of the body not only with Nazism, but with all kinds of fanaticisms. The body has to attempt to fulfill its gendered and ever-growing duty: Women cannot ever have enough children, men cannot do enough for the grand idea, cannot be tough enough, disciplined enough, drunk enough, sober enough, brutal enough, educated enough, and so on. Whatever the details of your ideological construct may be: your body has to become a pure instrument to fulfill its goals. It is the unfulfillable longing to be 'more of a man,' and it has given rise to an entire industry of men's

coaches, red-pill-activists and pick-up artists, and it is no wonder that reactionary and even far-right ideas prevail in this scene.

As a wanderer between the different milieus of the far right, it is astonishing how much the gender performances change, how vastly different the roles are that I have to slip into, ranging from the gruff thug or nerdy edgelord to the flamboyant intellectual, from strict military discipline to black-out drunken excess. In classic neo-Nazi structures, to little surprise, an aggressive blue-collar machismo prevails, but at the same time the mythical idea of the Valkyrie is kept alive: Women are allowed to fight for the German *Volk* and partake in the battle for survival (Ginsburg, 2021b). They are to be respected and, in some cases, even take on central roles in these structures. The so-called New Right on the other hand, which tries so very hard to appear modern by putting pretty young women with braided plaits in their front row, is driven by an astonishing contempt for women. While the men present themselves as Germanic gentlemen and intellectual sophisticates, women in these structures are generally considered to be housekeepers, mothers or mothers-to-be – and if they are involved in the activist field, then they are widely understood as aesthetic ornaments and expected to keep their damn mouths shut. But as different as the far-right conceptions of gender may be, masculinity is unanimously defined by a fragility, perpetually threatened by effeminization. Accordingly, feminism and queerness, the culprits behind society's emasculation, are the enemy that needs to be stopped or wiped out in its entirety (the ominous 'cultural Marxists,' i.e. the Jews, are only found as the big bads when you go a little further down the rabbit hole). And since diffuse fears of sexual minorities and resentment against feminists are firmly anchored in society as a whole, and since trite jokes about trans people and blue haired feminists are very much mainstream, the far right can reach a wide audience with its narrative. If only we could get rid of the influence of femininity, so the story goes, then we could return to actual masculine strength. It is unsurprising that this far-right narrative garners such a success throughout society, after all this specific kind of disdain for women has a long tradition in Germany.

In 1902, German ethnologist Heinrich Schurz coined the term *Männerbund*. Schurz came to the conclusion that all social progress was due to the unions of exclusive groups of men. Women, Schurz argued, were only capable of taking care of procreation and the family unit, so men always had to break away from them and join forces. Only in this way could the capable types have created civilizations and given birth to cultures. The male alliance was therefore the nucleus of the modern state, Schurz wrote. Then he died of appendicitis. But his profoundly wrong theses lived on and soon the idea of the *Männerbund* developed into a veritable theory of the state. Above all, it was the writer Hans Blüher who started to develop his theory in 1912. Since a strong nation-state can only come from strong men, Blüher explained, it needs strong leaders. Such a "charismatic male hero" would be able to wrest German boys from the clutches of women, from the "soft and sultry" relationships

with their mothers and family associations, and to awaken in them a man-male eroticism. This eroticism would hold the male alliance together in the first place, could reinforce the masculine virtues of the "Germanic race," and thus end the "feminist age" (Blüher 1912, translation by the author). The masculine nation-state was within reach.

Today Blüher's theses may sound bizarre, but at the time they inspired a whole lot of men, from Thomas Mann to Franz Kafka, from Kaiser Wilhelm II. to Heinrich Himmler. Particularly for the reactionary anti-democrats of the Weimar period (i.e., the proto-fascists whose work today's New Right cites as its ideological basis), Blüher's basic idea, the political ideal of the *Männerbund*, became a central idea (Bruns, 2008).

Accordingly, it significantly influenced the Nazi's ideology and the structures of the *Männerbund* live on unbroken in the current far right: The curious love of all things masculine, the worship and fetishizing of muscles and the male body, the contempt for everything feminine and feminized, the sultry love between comrades. With the political backlash, these seemingly strange obsessions are gradually finding their way back into the mainstream.

One could cite all sorts of examples: AfD-politicians such as flagship fanatic Maximilian Krah praises the rediscovered manliness of the German right on TikTok while sucking on Freudian cigars (Schiffer, 2024), and all kinds of far-right figures in the USA insist on awkwardly calling their beloved president "daddy" (most recently, Hollywood's favorite anti-Semite Mel Gibson treated us to this sentence: "Daddy arrived and he's taking his belt off" (Skinner, 2025)) – but the focus on masculinity with homoerotic undertones is particularly noteworthy when it comes to describing the 'enemy.' In German context that is when referring to Muslim men.

Historically, Europe's Neo-Fascists, who directed their hatred mostly against 'foreigners,' did not consider Islam as a main antagonist, on the contrary, many even held a certain degree of respect. It was only after the attack of 9/11 that Europe's fascists adapted to the Islamophobia of the political mainstream. Of course, the anti-Muslim panic could be seamlessly combined with their racism and profound xenophobia. But still, in the racist and ethnosexist hatred of Islam, as represented by the AfD, the neo-Nazi's admiration for the imaginary Muslim man and the fetishization of his masculinity still seeps through: Muslim men are dehumanized, portrayed as uncivilized savages and hypersexual animals – sweaty, bearded hordes of rapists. In this depiction lies a bit of lust. The tale of the hyper-masculine beasts offers not only great targets, it also creates objects of desire, virile role models. Desire, envy and contempt go hand in hand. 'If the foreigners are alphas, then we, the white men, must become even more alpha!' I heard this talking point in slight variations from alt-right activists in the US (switching Muslims for Latinos, of course) and clerical fascists in Poland, it is pushed onto young men throughout the

menosphere, and it was a central tenet of a crew of Nazi rappers, I accompanied quite a while, observing their disconcertingly successful radicalization of lost boys.

It is an utmost perfidious outreach program: It is based on teaching men that they are not only being betrayed and abandoned by society but that they themselves are insufficient on top. It is a narrative playing into male insecurities, driven to fight the seemingly hostile world around them. Virtually everything becomes a threat: Once feminism is perceived as a plot to deprive men and Western nations of their strength, every other progressive movement and the whole political system supporting these movements will soon be villainized as well. And lurking above it all is the danger of the migrant-Muslim-Latino-Black man, this mixture of sub-human and superman, whose virile and weirdly sexy masculinity we must surpass. In short: The far right's conception of masculinity is not only a fragile one, it is downright paranoid.

This narrative is effective because of its low-threshold, and it appeals directly to unstable males and to pretty much every 14-year-old boy. After all, what 14-year-old boy, what pubescent person is not unstable and fragile? And now the demagogues tell you some scary stories of why your fears are justified, and if you listen for too long, if you start to really internalize it all, then there is only one path left: radicalization. Maybe into the hate-filled power fantasies of the fascists, maybe into the endless self-hatred of the incels, maybe you spend all your money for some red-pilled men's coach … The options are not great. But let me be clear: As dangerous as many of my acquaintances in these milieus and subcultures are, I don't despise them. These are people who get caught up in grim webs of ideas, who believe in horrendous things and, if pushed, may commit horrendous deeds – but up close, these are mostly pitiful stories. However, when you spent time with demagogues and predators who spread these ideas, who know exactly what they are doing, who openly brag about their financial or political profit – then you can't help but feel disgust and utter contempt.

So, why are we so ineffective in countering these demagogues and predators? Especially now, that politicians are calling with grandiose rhetoric for the protection of democracy: why is this protection so ineffective, why the institutional battle against the far right so helpless?

It is not as if there is a lack of analysis from the academic world, civic education programs or outreach from the political left. However, the tendency of leftists and academics is to counter the immensely simple, under-complex and low-threshold offers of the far right with overly complex counternarratives. Tragically, this lies in the nature of things: If I explain that masculinity is a construct, arbitrarily reinterpretable and the only distinct trait of 'traditional masculinity' is the perpetuating of its own crisis which is why it fits seamlessly into the fascist world view – then I might be correct, but it's a bit wordy. It will take some time to explain, I have to presuppose knowledge and to make matters worse: I will most likely use buzzwords the right,

not only the far right, has long discredited as 'woke.' The far-right populist narrative requires considerably fewer words: 'Men have to become real men again, don't let those deranged feminists get you down, fight for your nation and family and join my Alpha mindset course – link in bio, use the promo code, like and subscribe.' That's it. That is pretty concise. So, this is the issue we as publicists, scholars and writers concerned with the far right have to face head-on: how to reach a broad population and at the same time convey a complex message.

Historically, academics have always got lost in critical discussions on fascisms and the far right. Ideological wars were waged by liberals, socialists and communists over a suitable theory of fascism, various schools of political thought competed against each other, offered clever and not-so-clever explanations. But among most people, there is no broad understanding, no hermeneutic or practicable definition of fascism. This lack of definitions and basic knowledge makes us vulnerable. Presumably this is especially true for Germany, where a self-congratulatory pride on its apparent '*Erinnerungskultur*' and '*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*' (its 'culture of remembrance' and 'coming to terms with the past') stands in stark contrast to the frightening failure to understand the mechanisms of the far right and Nazism.

So, there is an educational emergency and to tackle that is a herculean task at hand. Especially young people need the tools to recognize fascism, expose its myths and mechanisms and we need concepts to convey the knowledge and expertise. How this is still to be achieved is a gigantic question. But if we want to stand a chance, we first have to rid society of its baseless optimism and smug ignorance: We have to tear down the rhetorical '*Brandmauer*' and look beneath the surface. Even if it hurts.

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The "Initiative Gegen die Bezahlkarte Nürnberg" – The Initiative against the payment card, Nuremberg

An example to counter far-right rhetorics and linked politics

Initiative Gegen die Bezahlkarte Nürnberg

Far-right policies are often a reaction by various political forces to far-right claims and rhetorics and do not have to come directly from the far-right actors and parties. This holds true e.g. for Denmark, but for migration policies in Germany, too. This is visible looking at the discussion about payments to asylum seekers in Germany. In early 2024 the German Conference of Prime Ministers decided to establish the payment card for people in Germany who applied for an asylum or residence permit and receive transfer payment (MPK, 2024). This followed earlier decisions of late 2023 to establish such a card in all of Germany (Hessen, 2023). The card was introduced to reduce international money transfers which is considered a pull factor, although this cannot be proven scientifically. Nevertheless, Bavaria decided to introduce the card much earlier than most other federal states and not wait for a card working in all over Germany. This was described by the Prime Minister of Bavaria as "faster and harder". Even before the decision, the concept was criticized by experts and refugee organizations (Bayerischer Flüchtlingsrat, 2025).

The system then established is operated by a private company and requires the use of an app with comprehensive access rights to the smartphones, which already raises data protection concerns. And this is only one major concern raised about the payment card, next to endangering the existential minimum or following far-right discourses not proven scientifically (Mediendienst Integration, 2024).

Before the introduction of the payment card, the money had been paid out in cash. Now, all money is transferred to a prepaid card that is not connected to a bank account. There is a cash limit of 50 euros per person per month. Each money transfer, for example to a sports club or for a mobile phone contract, must be approved by the responsible caseworker at the social welfare office. And this procedure does not only need a huge amount of time and bureaucracy, but is also prone to errors. But this follows the general lines of regulations for asylum seekers and those applying for a residence permit. In Bavaria, mandatory residence is extremely restrictive compared to the rest of Germany. It is limited to the administrative districts. Accord-

ingly, the payment card is only activated for these districts, which leads to problems particularly in rural regions.

There have been many reports of supermarkets that do not accept the card, either because there are technical problems or because the shop owners do not want to serve refugees. At flea markets and charity second-hand shops, it is often only possible to pay in cash (Bayerischer Flüchtlingsrat, 2025). And digital platforms require Paypal or similar, which in turn requires a bank account – but the card is not connected to one.

The critique is clearly stating that the established card is inhumane, that it disempowers those affected and that it aims to prevent people seeking protection and fleeing from exercising their right to asylum through impoverishment. There have already been court judgements not only in Nuremberg, which confirm that the general cash limit of 50 euros violates the law. The baseline of all asylum policies must be – by law – in Germany 'human dignity,' which according to the highest court of Germany also means a certain amount of money. This is clearly violated by the payment card (Bayerischer Flüchtlingsrat, 2025).

This is why our initiative was founded in Summer 2024. We are an alliance of individuals, human rights organizations, political groups and social interest groups from the region. Following the example of similar initiatives in Munich and Hamburg, we decided to offer weekly 'exchange cafes' for people affected by the payment card. Every Monday. from 5pm to 7pm, people affected by the payment card can bring us previously purchased vouchers from supermarkets, topped up with a credit balance of 50 euros, and receive the value of the voucher in cash. People in solidarity with those affected by the payment card bring cash and exchange it for the vouchers. With this it is possible to legally bypass the cash limit. In addition to these weekly events, we cooperate with different social initiatives and actors. We do campaign work at events like concerts or other cultural events where our target group is primarily people from the so called or perceived 'majority of society' with potential for solidarity. We want to raise awareness of the inhumane practice of the payment card and gain new supporters. Our motto behind is 'smash the card': a card that is linked to a bank account could be helpful for many people. But we consider the payment card in its current form, without a bank account and with a cash limit, to be unlawful and inhumane (Bayerischer Flüchtlingsrate, 2024; Instagram, 2025).

We know that our options are limited and perhaps a drop in the ocean. We can only reach a fraction of the people affected in the region and because we can only hold a limited amount of cash, we have to set ourselves very strict limits. For example, we can only exchange one voucher worth 50 euros per person per week and there is always the risk that we will run out of money. We probably will not be able to raise enough money to equal the full amount of money on the payment cards of all the people living in our region, let alone that everyone affected will learn about us or be able to make it to our exchanges. But it annoys the ruling party of Bavaria, the

Christian Social Union – CSU, actively following far-right narratives and adopting far-right policies, much too often with symbolic measures like the introduction of a payment card. We even annoy the Bavarian federal government enough to threaten us with legal consequences. Our exchange cafés are drawing attention to the inhumane practice of the payment card, and we think it is an important signal from civil society. We have received a lot of encouragement and support so far and we hope it motivates others to organize against the payment card. And we can at least show concrete solidarity in individual cases and relieve those affected a little, even if in the end we prefer the abolishment of the payment card altogether.

Though this is a local initiative focusing on a concrete topic, it can also be understood as commitment against far-right tendencies as it is an act of solidarity and resistance within general society tendencies. We understand our actions as a necessary act of solidarity and civil disobedience in a social context in which democratic parties violate basic human rights principles. Extremism of the far right does not exist in a vacuum, but many inhumane attitudes are evident throughout society. We as initiative think that especially when inhumane attitudes become more visible in the so-called middle of society, resistance against them and the support of people who are affected by this inhumanity become all the more important. At the same time, we are facing legal threats – albeit unfounded – from a party that calls itself 'Christian democratic' and which claims to have nothing in common with the far right.

We think a lot about how we can protect people affected by the payment card. In Regensburg, another Bavarian city, there was already a situation of Identitarian far-right activists photographing and denouncing refugees during a voucher exchange. We know that our actions are legal, but that does not necessarily protect us from repression. And of course, we also think about how we can think about solidarity in an intersectional way. For example, we made sure that we chose an accessible location for the exchange. But there are also challenges for which there is no easy solution. If we want to empower people from a feminist perspective, it makes sense that, even in families, all adults independently exchange a voucher for cash. At the same time, the bus journey already costs money and if money is already tight, double the travel costs are an unnecessary expense. How intersectionality, concrete support and the threat from far-right actors can be taken into account at the same time remains an open question.

A challenge for this is that intersectionality can mean different things to different persons, that although we often stress the same discriminatory patterns like racism, sexism, classism, to name the most common, others are not always taken into account. And maybe this is a pragmatic necessity because they are not equally important everywhere: For example, in Nuremberg there is a big Ethiopian and Eritrean community, which makes the topic of anti-black racism a big one. Anti-Muslim Ressentiments are much stronger in rural Bavaria than they are in other German

cities like Cologne for example. But if there are strong Kurdish communities locally, racism from Turkish nationalists may become something to consider. And this still leaves out queerness, attitudes to disabled people, or how we understand class first and foremost. To allow for pragmatic and relatively fast action – as it was and is needed to counter the payment card – it is never possible to connect all diversity aspects. On the other hand, there is an intersectional connection behind the discriminatory patterns of far-right actors and linked politics. There are bridging narratives between far-right sexism, classism or racism, like the Idea that inequality is 'okay' or 'natural,' whatever the inequality might be, or that there are some 'natural' hierarchies or differences, whether this is connected to gender or racist stereotypes.

To bring together the approach of intersectional solidarity, pragmatic activism and critical reflections, as approached in the "Initiative Kartentausch" there are some learnings to consider. A central one is to include a variety of people, with different, and kind of 'insider' perspectives. Combining this with patience and self-awareness can allow for critical self-reflections and to stay open for changes and shifts. Further, taking the initiative as example, it can be stressed that there is a necessity to local action next to regional, national or transnational action. Some things have to happen locally, for example the way the payment card is managed differs, even in Bavaria, from municipality to municipality, but from federal state to federal state, too. This requires different reactions. At the same time, we learned a lot from existing initiatives and we are in contact with Initiatives and people who want to found an initiative all over Germany. Connection and solidarity are key here. Allowing for these, across different actors, levels of society and approaches, helps to counter far-right politics and policies in a broad and strong way. It always has to go both ways, making the specific approach a local and regional one and framing and connecting it in wider circles. Local action is concrete and limited at the same time, it has to adapt to different national politics and policies. But keeping it only local limits the reach and effect. It is key to counter far-right policies and tendencies by linking with other initiatives that even may have a different approach. Considering this 'Kartentausch' sees itself and its action in line with other activities of intersectional solidarity as 'Ni una menos' (Salazar-Pérez & Zebadúa Carboney, 2018). For this exchange via social media is of central importance. At the same time this always needs moderation in reflection of own time budgets. Since 'Kartentausch' is totally based on volunteers this has limits leading to more deleting of too often racist comments – focus is the action on the ground not the discussion of positions with those presumably just against the approach of 'Kartentausch.'

Following 'Kartentausch' stresses consisting of individuals, human rights organizations, political groups and social interest groups from the region. This includes groups and actors involved in different or broader fields, as the Bavarian Refugee Council and anti-fascist groups from Nuremberg. But focus of action is the concrete work against the payment card by countering its logic of limitations. We stand

in solidarity with refugees and oppose an increasingly authoritarian political and social atmosphere that criminalizes and excludes asylum seekers. We are convinced that human rights have priority over a policy of refugee defense and that social benefits must not be restricted as a deterrent. Social problems require a solidarity-based solution for society as a whole, which cannot consist of excluding individual population groups. Following this self-image work is less on the abstract political, on a theorist scale, but in concrete, non-profit action. At the same time this has no effect without working on and against the more and more authoritarian framework. It is a dialectic process working in concrete against the discriminatory payment card and linked policies, to alter from the ground upwards policies and politics. And this is based on solidarity, courage and engagement by those behind the initiative, but by all taking part in it in any way, too.

'Kartentausch' is active work against far-right policies based on intersectional solidarity, but it is a call to action, too, a concrete work on the ground, but linked to a wider agency, for a different and more solidaric society. It is a local example with limited scale but signifying the chance to not endure a shift to more far-right and authoritarian policies, but that societies and people can actively, and best together, work against this shift, against the far right. Based on analysis and accompanied by communication 'Kartentausch' is an active intervention countering far-right policies and politics.

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Appendix

Author biographies

Aleo Susan Arndt is a professor for English literature and Intersectionality Studies – and spokesperson of the Doctoral College for Intersectionality Studies at Universität Bayreuth. Pillaring on the agenda of political intersectionality, they have worked on the history of racism as white supremacy as well as sexism as heteronormative patriarchal supremacy.

Arash Beidollahkhani holds a Ph.D. in Political Science and is a Research Fellow at the Global Development Institute, University of Manchester. His research interests focus on Middle Eastern politics and society, as well as the political sociology of non-democratic and authoritarian regimes in the Middle East and Central Asia. He is also affiliated research fellow at the Hannah Arendt Institute for Totalitarianism Studies, TU Dresden.

Safia Dahani is a political scientist and sociologist. Postdoctoral researcher at Sciences Po Paris (CSO), she obtained her PhD in political science from Sciences Po Toulouse. For the past ten years, her research has focused on the sociology of political parties, political professionals, and political behavior on the far right.

Konrad Moussa Ibrahima Erben holds a B.A. in Social Work and an M.A. in International Criminology. He is currently a lecturer at the Department of Social Work, Ernst Abbe University of Applied Sciences in Jena. His research interests are intersections of race, gender and class in the construction, perception and prosecution of crime, as well as political radicalization. He is also an active field social worker in the area of child welfare in the city of Hamburg.

Guillermo Fernández-Vázquez holds a PhD in Political Science and teaches at Carlos III University in Madrid. His work focuses on Europe's radical right, with particular attention to the cases of France, Spain, and Italy. He has written extensively on the political agendas and strategies of these movements and is the author of a

monograph on France's Rassemblement National. He also contributes regularly to Spanish media.

Tobias Ginsburg is a writer, journalist, and theater director. For his research, he goes undercover in fanatical and extremist movements. Among other, he lived amid Neonazis, conspiracy theorists, and in a cult, infiltrated militant settlers, Alt-Right activists and an international network of influential clerical fascists. His books *Die Reise ins Reich. Unter Reichsbürgern, Rechtsextremisten und anderen Verschwörungstheoretikern* (Journey to the Reich: Among Reichsbürger, Neonazis, and Other Conspiracy Theorists, 2018/2021) and *Die letzten Männer des Westens. Antifeministen, rechte Männerbünde und die Krieger des Patriarchats* (The Last Men of the West: Anti-Feminists, Right-Wing Men's Groups, and the Warriors of Patriarchy, 2021) were published with Rowohlt. His new book, *Nie Wieder und andere Lügen. Unter neuen Faschisten und vergesslichen Deutschen* (Never Again and Other Lies: Among New Fascists and Forgetful Germans), will be published in early 2026.

Puja Kaur Matta is a doctoral researcher at the Doctoral College of Intersectionality Studies and the Institute for Religious Studies at the University of Bayreuth. Trained as an ethnographer, Puja Kaur takes a transdisciplinary and intersectional approach to research. Their current project focuses on Afghan Sikh and Hindu communities who have experienced religious discrimination in Afghanistan and continue to navigate questions of belonging, memory, and identity in the diaspora, particularly in Germany. The research explores how religious practices, displacement, and embodied memory shape everyday life and communal continuity across borders.

Ruby Rebelde is sex worker and author in Hamburg. Ruby published her book "Why they hate us – sexworkphobia" (Edition Assemblage) in May 2025 to counter resentment and discrimination against sex workers with analysis and a call for solidarity. Since 2021 Ruby monitors networks, strategies and ideologies of anti sex work-alliances in Germany and Europe, with a special focus on the intersection between the far right, Christian right and the reactionary part of the international women's rights movement. Ruby is co-founder of FundiWatch, an interdisciplinary research collective on Christian Fundamentalism.

Mario Faust-Scalisi is a postdoctoral researcher at and coordinator of the Doctoral College for Intersectionality Studies at Universität Bayreuth. Academic work focusses on comic studies and activism, civil society activism, minorities, queer studies and activism and intersectionality with works on Europe, the Americas and beyond.

Natascha Strobl studied Scandinavian Studies and Political Science in Bergen, Norway, and at the University of Vienna. She is a political scientist and journalist and is considered an expert on right-wing extremism and the New Right. She writes for newspapers including Der Standard, Zeit online and taz and for Momentum Institute publications. Recipient of the Bruno Kreisky Prize for the Political Book 2021.

Daniel Trilling is a journalist who has been writing about the far right in Britain and elsewhere since 2009. He is the author of books including "Bloody Nasty People: The Rise of Britain's far right" (Verso, 2012). This is an expanded version of a piece originally published in the "London Review of Books" (Trilling, D., 2024, 06. August. This time it's worse. London Review of Books. https://www.lrb.co.uk/blog/2024/august/this-time-it-s-worse).

Editorial

Authoritarian political projects are gaining immense popularity. Right-wing movements instrumentalize societal insecurities triggered by multiple crises in order to increase existing social polarization. They stage identitarian communities as the answer to complex global problems – provocation, deception, intimidation, violence and terror are the means of their politics. With our series **Right-Wing Extremism and Populism**, we provide an editorial space for research that analyzes the ideology and composition of the right-wing spectrum and highlights threats to the liberal and democratic society from authoritarian forces. Its main foci are the intertwining of culture and politics, of economy and social structure, media and language as well as the regional and global references of the far right and its historical predecessors.

Mario Faust-Scalisi is a postdoctoral researcher at and coordinator of the Doctoral College for Intersectionality Studies at Universität Bayreuth. Academic work focusses on comic studies and activism, civil society activism, minorities, queer studies and activism and intersectionality with works on Europe, the Americas and beyond.

Aleo Susan Arndt is a professor for English literatures and spokesperson of the Doctoral College for Intersectionality Studies at Universität Bayreuth. Pillaring on the agenda of political intersectionality, they have worked on the history of racism as white supremacy as well as sexism as heteronormative patriarchal supremacy.