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Cultural criminology, counter-extremism and the contemporary far right

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Abstract

This article draws together existing criminological work as well as developments from sociology, political science and media studies to argue that cultural criminology can offer a useful corrective to current ‘counter-extremist’ thinking about the contemporary far right. The first part of the article introduces the contemporary far right, describes how it differs from previous instances, and explains that this resurgent far-right movement has to date primarily been analysed through the lens of ‘counter-extremism’. The second part of the article problematises the concepts of ‘extremism’, ‘radicalisation’ and ‘terrorism’. The article argues that these concepts are ambiguous, imprecise and normative, and that they are freighted with ideological baggage and unsupported by empirical evidence. The third part of the article argues that cultural criminology can better inform our understanding of the contemporary far right owing to its focus on subculture and style, its attendance to networked digital media and its foregrounding of emotion and affect. The article concludes by outlining a tentative programme for cultural criminological research into the contemporary far right.

Keywords

Counter-extremism, cultural criminology, extremism, far right, radicalisation, subculture, terrorism

Introduction

Several scholars have begun to deploy the insights of cultural criminology to further our understanding of contemporary radicalisation and political violence (Cottee, 2020, 2021; Sunde et al., 2021). With some notable exceptions (Castle et al., 2020; Castle and Parsons, 2019) this emergent body of literature has largely neglected to consider the contemporary far right, although some authors have suggested this would be a productive avenue for future research (Cottee, 2020; Sunde et al., 2021).

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The present article sets out to address this gap in the literature, drawing together existing criminological work as well as developments from sociology, political science and media studies.

The article proceeds in three parts. First, the article briefly introduces the contemporary far right, explaining how it differs from earlier instances. The article explains that this resurgent far-right movement has been analysed primarily through the lens of 'counter-extremism'. While the discussion of the contemporary far right and counter-extremism in the present article is informed primarily from a British context, it is also illustrative of broader international trends and dynamics. The second part of the article problematises three key terms or concepts within the lexicon of counter-extremism: 'extremism', 'terrorism' and 'radicalisation'. The article argues that these concepts are ambiguous, imprecise and normative – that they are freighted with ideological baggage, and unsupported by empirical evidence. The third part of the article suggests that a cultural criminological approach offers a useful corrective to counter-extremist thinking. Specifically, the article considers three ways in which the insights of cultural criminology can better inform our understanding of the contemporary far right: first, cultural criminology's focus on subculture and style; second, its attendance to networked digital media; and third, its foregrounding of emotion and affect. The article concludes by suggesting some productive future directions for cultural criminological research into the contemporary far right.

The contemporary far right and counter-extremism

The far right is undergoing an international resurgence.[1] Several commentators have described this ascendent movement as the 'new' far right (see, for example, Larsen and Jensen, 2023; Sibley, 2024). While important ideological, programmatic, organisational and cultural continuities exist in parts of the movement, the contemporary far right differs from previous iterations in at least four ways: its relationship with the Internet and new media, its relationship with the mainstream; its internal heterogeneity and diversity; and its increasingly networked or 'post-organisational' form.

A defining feature of the far right today is that it is **not only *on* the internet, but *post*-internet** (Fielitz and Thurston, 2019; Moore and Roberts, 2021). For Moore and Roberts (2021), the post-internet is 'not a time after the internet, but a time in which the internet has receded into the background of how life appears simply to be. It is no longer remarkable that politics is mediated through the internet' (p. 15). Within this context, online activity is no longer an end in itself (as it was with the 'alt-right', the largely online white nationalist movement that emerged in the mid-2010s), but, increasingly, a means to galvanise political networking, organising and activism *offline*. Today an online ecosystem of far-right content creators, livestreams, podcasts and social media communities is catalysing a shift back to real-world organising.

Far-right movements, parties and politicians, as well as commentators and 'influencers' – and their ideas, narratives and talking points – **have entered the political and cultural mainstream** (Miller-Idriss, 2018; Mondon and Winter, 2020). Far-right parties and politicians have enjoyed electoral successes and victories in recent years: the presidencies of Trump in the United States and Bolsonaro in Brazil, the prime ministerships of Orban in Hungary and Meloni in Italy, and the electoral gains of National Rally in France, Vox in Spain, and the Sweden Democrats. We should also look beyond electoral politics to consider the role of the media in mainstreaming the far right (Mondon and Winter, 2020). Commentators have highlighted the role of elite actors in setting the news media agenda in a manner that normalises and legitimates far-right narratives (Mondon and Winter, 2020). At the same

time, the contemporary far right has consciously pursued a strategy of cultural intervention or 'metapolitics' in an attempt to 'disseminat[e] and anchor[] a particular set of cultural ideas, attitudes, and values', thus laying the groundwork for 'deeper political change' (Friberg, 2015: 4).

The contemporary far right is **heterogeneous**, comprising a political milieu that encompasses **diverse organisational forms, identities, ideologies and audiences**, with 'increasingly porous and permeable borders' between them (Larsen and Jensen, 2023: 1). The diverse elements within the contemporary far right are also using the internet and social media to prompt and catalyse offline networking, protest and political violence in a variety of different ways. The lager-drenched 'pisshead nationalists' of the far-right football hooligan scene mobilise confrontational street protests through Facebook pages and WhatsApp group chats (Moore and Roberts, 2021); pseudo-intellectual 'race realist' bloggers convene at secretive conferences; self-styled citizen journalist 'migrant hunters' livestream from outside migrant processing facilities; and accelerationist neo-fascist militants venerate mass shooters and share bomb-making instructions on encrypted messaging applications.

Finally, this organisational, strategic and ideological diversity, combined with the effects of the internet and social media have lent the contemporary far right a distinctly **networked** character, with some commentators describing the movement as having entered a **'post-organisational'** phase (Allchorn, 2021; Comerford, 2020; Mulhall, 2018). To characterise the contemporary far right in this manner is not to claim that conventional organisational structures no longer exist, but rather that they are being rendered increasingly irrelevant, as more and more people engaged in far-right politics are able to participate in informal, semi-autonomous, networked forms of activism 'outside the confines of traditional, organisational structures', facilitated by the internet and social media (Mulhall, 2018).[2]

The resurgence of the far right has been accompanied by renewed attention from journalists, scholars and policymakers. Overwhelmingly, the contemporary far right has been viewed through the lens of 'counter-extremism' and framed, accordingly, as a problem of 'extremism', 'radicalisation' and 'terrorism'. Counter-extremism is something of a paradox: a fundamentally anti-liberal project, it aims to secure and perpetuate liberal democratic capitalism by mobilising both the institutions of the state and wider society to combat non-liberal worldviews, (which it designates as 'extremist' regardless of their political content) (Boukalas, 2019). Despite their prevalence, counter-extremist programmes and policies have been criticised for the racist securitisation and criminalisation of (Muslim) social life (Collins, 2021; Sian, 2017; Younis, 2021) – and as ineffective, and even counterproductive in their stated aim of preventing (violent) 'extremism' (Blakeley et al., 2019; Faure Walker, 2019a, 2019b; Skoczylis and Andrews, 2020). Nevertheless, counter-extremist thinking continues to inform policy, both directly (through lobbying efforts, and a 'revolving door' between counter-extremism thinktanks, academic and government policymaker roles – see CAGE, 2019) and indirectly (through the moral entrepreneur's role of agenda setting in media and public discourse) – as well as facilitating policy transfer internationally (Kundnani and Hayes, 2018; see Becker, 1963).

Counter-extremism is predicated on a particular way of thinking about how and why people become 'extremists' – through a specific ontology of 'radicalisation' – and how 'extremism' leads inevitably to 'terrorism'. It is this conceptual language of counter-extremism that the present article seeks to interrogate. Cultural criminologists recognise that the language we use to interpret the social world structures our thinking: Hallsworth and Young (2008) have, for instance,

challenged attempts to interpret urban violence through the concept of 'the gang'. Similarly, zemiological and social harm approaches reject the discourse of 'crime' (see, for example, Davies et al., 2021). Accordingly, the subsequent section of this article problematises three key terms within the counter-extremist lexicon: 'extremism', 'radicalisation' and 'terrorism'.

The language of counter-extremism

'Extremism'

Although lawmakers, policymakers and academics have struggled to define 'extremism', the term is now used widely, imprecisely and uncritically (Zedner, 2021). The British government defines extremism as: 'vocal or active opposition to *fundamental British values*, including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs' (HM Government, 2011, emphasis added). This is a bizarre and expansive definition that 'defines extremism negatively not by what it promotes but by reference to what it opposes. . . the word 'including' implies that the list is not definitive' (Zedner, 2021: 62). Frequently vague and imprecise, the discourse of 'extremism' performs several interrelated functions. First and foremost, 'extremism' is an inherently normative category, that serves to naturalise the managerial politics of late capitalist liberal democracies, while stigmatising worldviews outside of an increasingly narrow mainstream (Ali, 2015; Kundnani, 2014).

'Extremism' also conflates ideas, beliefs and values with violence. Faure-Walker (2019a) has found that in previous iterations of the UK government's Prevent counter-extremism strategy, the terms 'extremism' or 'extremist' always appeared alongside the term 'violent' (p. 81). By contrast, the strategy now targets 'extremism' itself, 'extending to anyone opposing an undefined "British" value system' (Faure-Walker, 2019a: 82). Similarly, Onursal and Kirkpatrick (2021) have found that distinctions between 'extremism' and 'terrorism' have become increasingly blurred within British parliamentary discourse. Such conflation is symptomatic of an often implied yet poorly evidenced premise that 'extremist' ideology inevitably leads to violence. In fact, the research literature fails to offer a convincing demonstration of any causal relationship between ideology and violence (Kundnani, 2012).

The increasingly wide-ranging application of the term 'extremism' is accompanied by the implication that all 'extremisms' are alike, regardless of their political content. In 2011, the UK government reviewed its counter-extremism strategy to include 'all forms of extremism' (McCann, 2019). Then Home Secretary, May (2015), declared that: 'we draw no distinction between a neo-Nazi and an Islamist extremist'. The upshot of this has been a generic approach to countering 'extremism', largely modelled on policies developed to counter Islamist radicalism and political violence – without a clear understanding of far-right 'extremism' as a distinct phenomenon (McCann, 2019: ix–x). The problem is that the worldviews of radical Islamist and far-right actors are not defined by a generic opposition to 'fundamental British values', and that there is no one-size-fits-all political solution, counterspeech narrative or other response to 'extremism'. To be able to genuinely challenge such misanthropic and harmful worldviews, we must understand their (sub) cultural architectures, medial environments and emotional appeals.

This issue is further complicated by the interrelationships between the state, the mainstream, and the far right. We should not accept the idea that the far right is 'just another ideology for sale

in the "marketplace of extremisms"', but rather should recognise it as: 'the convergence of affinities and affiliations at the periphery and centre of society' (Fekete, 2018: 8). The blurring of boundaries between the mainstream and 'extreme' is evidenced by far-right street movements' appropriation of official counter-extremist discourse. The Democratic Football Lads Alliance, a recent incarnation of the so-called 'counter-jihad' movement, comprised of rival football hooligan firms – has marched under the slogan 'AGAINST ALL EXTREMISM'. Writing about the English Defence League (EDL)'s earlier, similar rhetoric, Kundnani (2014) has argued that:

> it would be wrong to see the EDL's rhetoric of antiextremism as simply a mask for more familiar forms of far Right politics. In fact, *its ideology stems as much from the official antiextremist narrative of the war on terror as from the far Right tradition*. According to conventional wisdom, the mobilization of far Right groups in Europe has pressured centrist politicians into adopting more xenophobic positions, leading to far Right ideas entering the mainstream. But the example of the EDL suggests *the flow of ideology is more in the opposite direction*. The EDL is a movement that appropriated the culturalist and reformist discourses of the official war on terror and gave them organizational form on the streets. (p. 241, emphasis added)

To summarise, then, we can say that 'extremism' is an unhelpfully vague term that functions: to naturalise the status quo; to conflate drastically different worldviews while ignoring their political content; and to conflate ideas with violence and terrorism. Furthermore, the notion of 'extremism' obscures the interrelationship, in the case of the far right, between the political periphery and the establishment.

'Radicalisation'

Like 'extremism', the term 'radicalisation' is now widely and uncritically used by journalists, academics and laypeople. Yet the term's ubiquity belies a discourse riddled with ambiguities (Heath-Kelly, 2013; Sedgwick, 2010). For instance, there is no academic consensus about the basic nature of 'radicalisation' or its relationship with political violence (Knefel, 2013; Schuurman and Taylor, 2018). The concept of 'radicalisation' is deeply contested even among mainstream (counter)terrorism scholars and policymakers. Yet to understand why it is more fundamentally problematic from a critical criminological perspective, it helps to understand something of the term's renewed popularity. Prior to 2001, the term 'radicalisation' had been 'used informally in academic literature to refer to a shift towards more radical politics' (Kundnani, 2012: 7). In the aftermath of 9/11, academic and journalistic use of this term skyrocketed (Kundnani, 2012: 7). Suddenly, it 'became very difficult to talk about the "roots of terrorism", which some commentators claimed was an effort to excuse and justify the killing of innocent civilians' (Neumann, 2008: 4). Within this context, 'radicalisation' became the preferred term of experts and officials to describe 'what goes on before the bomb goes off' (Neumann, 2008: 4), allowing them to emphasise the role played by the individual and, to some extent, the ideology and the group, and to significantly downplay the wider political motivations that it had become so 'difficult' to talk about (Sedgwick, 2010: 480). Kundnani (2012) writes that:

> Answers to the question of what drives this radicalisation process are to exclude ascribing any causative role to the actions of western governments or their allies in other parts of the world; instead, individual psychological or theological journeys, largely removed from social and political circumstances, are claimed to be the 'root cause' of the radicalisation process. While some accounts acknowledge politics as a component of radicalisation (using euphemistic phrases, such as 'grievances against real or perceived injustices'), this is only done in the face of overwhelming empirical evidence, before quickly moving on to the more comfortable ground of psychology or theology. (p. 5)

In this way, the new discourse of radicalisation functions to depoliticise politically motivated violence. Furthermore, in a conceptual sleight of hand, it also contributes to the depoliticisation and pathologisation of otherwise legitimate political activity, and functions to conflate such activity with terrorism. Kundnani continues:

> While terrorist violence is not seen as having political causes, non-violent political activity by Muslim groups that are thought to share in the belief system of terrorists is seen as another manifestation of the same 'radicalisation' process, with roots in individual theological and/or psychological journeys (Kundnani, 2012: 5–6; see Younis, 2021)

This discourse also postulates a specific *ontology* of radicalisation. Efforts to prevent or to counter 'radicalisation' are oriented towards stemming 'the circulation of 'extremist ideas', seen as a kind of virus, able to turn people into violent radicals' (Kundnani, 2012: 10). The state and counter-extremists now conceive of individuals' pathways into political violence through an 'epidemiological imaginary' of contagion, vulnerability and risk (Heath-Kelly, 2013, 2017; see, for example, HM Government, 2012). Cottee writes that:

> Terrorism, as Prevent constructs it, isn't a form of political activism that sentient people choose to engage in for reasons, however poorly conceived; rather, it's an ideological contagion—a 'disease', . . . that afflicts the vulnerable and 'risks' their safety and well-being. (Cottee, 2015a)

Conceived in this way, it has become possible to speak of individual pathways into radical politics in terms of 'vulnerability to exposure to extremism' (Barracosa and March, 2022: 2; see also, Bouhana and Wilkstrom, 2011; Dear, 2013; See et al., 2017). At risk of stating the obvious, it bears pointing out here that contracting a transmissible disease is very different to engaging with radical politics. 'Exposure' to a virus or some other pathogen is something that happens to us unwittingly and incidentally, where the exact point of infection may be unknowable – it is something that we have little to no control over. This is fundamentally different from an embodied, affective, emotional, social, (sub)cultural, intellectual and, ultimately, political process of personal transformation. 'Radicalisation', understood in this way, denies any agency involved in the adoption of worldviews and practices labelled as 'extreme' (McDonald, 2020; see, for example, Coppock and McGovern, 2014). Instead, 'radicalisation' comes to be understood as 'something *done to*' people who are 'vulnerable' to 'indoctrination or recruitment' (McDonald, 2020: 35, emphasis in original). Such understandings, premised on outmoded ideas of 'propaganda as a system of one-way communication' fail to recognise the intensely social nature of processes of

political transformation, which almost always take place within a social milieu or subculture (McDonald, 2020: 35; see Crone, 2016; Sageman, 2004).

In summary, the discourse of 'radicalisation' is beset with ambiguities, functioning to compound the discursive conflation of 'extreme' ideas and political violence, and often implying a linear and deterministic relationship between them. This discourse often functions to depoliticise political thought and activism (including political violence) and, through invoking an 'epidemiological imaginary' of contagion, obscures and denies motivations and agency for engaging in worldviews and practices labelled as 'extreme'. Despite these issues, I continue to use the term radicalisation in the informal sense to refer to a shift towards more radical politics. Elsewhere I refer to 'political journeys' – a less loaded phrase and one used by contemporary far-right supporters and activists themselves to describe their conversion to a far-right worldview.

'Terrorism'

As with 'extremism' and 'radicalisation', the notion of terrorism is beset by definitional and normative issues (Ganor, 2002; Schmid, 2004). The concept has long evaded a widely agreed upon definition among academics, and as critical terrorism scholars have pointed out, terrorism is also a social and cultural construct (Jackson, 2011). I want to argue here that terrorism is a largely unhelpful lens through which to view the contemporary far right for at least two reasons. First, counter-extremism's myopic focus on terrorism as the inevitable end point of radicalisation functions to obfuscate other harms. Terrorism and hate crime are examples of what Žižek (2008) terms 'subjective' violence: that which is performed by a clearly identifiable agent (p. 1). However, Žižek exhorts us to step back from the spectacle of subjective violence in order that we can 'perceive the contours of the background which generates such outbursts' (Žižek, 2008). This generative background assumes two forms: symbolic violence (racism, hate speech, discrimination), and systemic violence (the 'catastrophic consequences of the smooth functioning of our economic and political systems') (Žižek, 2008: 2).

It is relatively rare that far-right supporters or activists perpetrate hate crimes – rarer still that they are motivated to commit acts of mass murder. Nevertheless, the far right is continually engaged in producing and sustaining myriad other symbolic and systemic forms of harm. For instance, seeding far-right ideas, narratives and talking points in public discourse – such as racialised tropes of non-European asylum seekers as jihadists or sexual predators – functions to raise the level of ambient prejudice in society. In this way the deliberate and strategic 'metapolitical' interventions of the organised far right coalesce with everyday casual bigotry as well as the use of dehumanising language by the press and the political establishment, contributing to a political and cultural climate in which minority groups are vilified, and paving the way for the legislative erosion of their human rights. Viewing the threat posed by the far right solely in terms of the subjective violence of terrorism and hate crime obscures such harms.

None of this is to minimise the threat or horror of far-right political violence. Yet when we turn to consider far-right terrorism proper, the established conceptual framework of so-called 'lone wolf' terrorism is also found wanting, and functions to obscure the social, symbolic and (sub)cultural connectedness of the contemporary far right. Most recent high-profile far-right terrorist attacks have been perpetrated by single actors and described as instances of 'lone wolf' terrorism (see, for example, Gardell, 2021; Hartleb, 2020). Per Hamm and Spaaij (2017), 'lone wolf

terrorism' refers to 'terrorist actions carried out by lone individuals. . . "a person who acts on his or her own without orders from — or even connections to — an organization"' (p. 5). In today's era of livestreamed terrorism, in which supporters encourage and celebrate mass murder in real time, and in which perpetrators take influence and inspiration from each other, referencing prior atrocities in digitally circulated screeds – while also seeking to inspire others to follow in their footsteps – the notion that 'lone wolves' act alone merits problematisation. While perhaps not members of any formal organisation, these individuals are immersed in a shared 'cultural architecture of. . . propaganda and motivation' (Sunde et al., 2021: 272). As Nilsson (2022) notes, although these self-proclaimed 'ethno-soldiers' have 'acted on different continents, *they share the same symbolical universe*' (p. 1, emphasis added).

Although 'lone wolf' is a misnomer, it is also inaccurate to describe most instances of single-actor far-right terrorism as the product of terroristic networks. The contemporary far right is not primarily geared towards the production of political violence, and its networks are not oriented towards offering logistical support for terrorist attacks (although cf. Katz, 2022; Miller, 2022, on the recent emergence of the 'Terrorgram' network). For Berntzen and Sandberg (2014), it is important that we recognise lone-actor terrorists as emerging from broader social movements. Focussing on Anders Breivik's use of rhetoric and narratives drawn from the wider anti-Islamic movement in Norway, they conclude that:

> the metaphor of lone wolves does not reflect a sufficient understanding of the social character of the language and political narrative involved in acts of lone wolf terrorism. Although Breivik operated alone, his ideology, world-view, and narratives emerged from a. . . social movement. (Berntzen and Sandberg, 2014: 772)

It is striking that Berntzen and Sandberg are writing before the 'algorithmic rise' of the alt-right (Daniels, 2018) and the current ongoing wave of chan-inspired mass shootings.[3] At the time of Breivik's attacks in 2011, social media platforms and their recommendation algorithms were undeveloped, and the online far right was largely contained to Stormfront and other message boards (see, for example, Bowman-Grieve, 2009; Perry and Olsson, 2009). The contemporary far-right online subculture – and the techno-social ecosystem that facilitates its ongoing reproduction and occasional violent eruptions into the offline world – remained in its infancy. The implications of such technological developments are explored below. For now, two related concepts are worth considering: stochastic terrorism and scripted violence.

'Stochastic terrorism', in its most popular formulation, refers to 'the use of mass communications to stir up random lone wolves to carry out violent or terrorist acts that are *statistically predictable but individually unpredictable*' (G2geek, 2011, emphasis in original).[4] This is what happens when the use of inflammatory rhetoric by jihadist groups or American right-wing talk show hosts indirectly motivates individuals to violence (G2geek, 2011). Crucially, 'The person who actually plants the bomb or assassinates the public official is not the stochastic terrorist'; rather, 'they are the "missile" set in motion by the stochastic terrorist. The stochastic terrorist is the person who uses mass media as their means of setting those "missiles" in motion' (G2geek, 2011). Furthermore, when people are motivated to violence by their rhetoric '[t]he stochastic terrorist has plausible deniability' (G2geek, 2011). Indeed, the stochastic terrorist may not intend to incite violence but rather may do so out of negligence (G2geek, 2011). First popularised outside of academia, the concept

of stochastic terrorism has now begun to be used more rigorously by scholars (Amman and Meloy, 2021, 2024; Hamm and Spaaij, 2017; Kemper, 2022), although some commentators continue to use the term imprecisely and others have criticised the idea (Cottee, 2022; Kemper, 2022).

The concept of 'scripted violence' refers to 'coded' forms of 'rhetorical incitement' (Berlet, 2014: 304). Berlet writes that:

> The leaders of political or social movements sometimes tell their followers that a specific group of 'Others' is plotting to destroy civilized society. History tells us that if this message is repeated vividly enough, loudly enough, often enough and long enough – it is only a matter of time before the bodies. . . start to turn up'. (Berlet, 2014: 304)

Crucially, leaders 'need not directly exhort violence to create a constituency that hears a call to take action against the named enemy' (Berlet, 2014: 304). Scripted violence is what takes place when a political leader or influencer 'identifies a problem, repeatedly uses inflammatory and dehumanising language, and emphasises the absence of a conventional political solution. They rarely, if ever, tell their followers to commit acts of violence; however, their messages are read as such' (Moore and Roberts, 2021: 174).

The notion of scripted violence seems particularly appropriate to describe the apocalyptic rhetoric surrounding the major animating narrative of the contemporary ethnonationalist far right: the so-called 'Great Replacement' or 'White Genocide' conspiracy theory. This is the idea that ethnically homogeneous populations in European nations are being 'replaced' by people of non-European origin – and that this is being deliberately orchestrated by liberal, left-wing or Jewish elites (see Ekman, 2022; Moses, 2019). Moses (2019) notes how the perpetrator of the 2019 Christchurch mosque shootings – who published a 74-page document entitled 'The Great Replacement' immediately prior to his attack – portrayed his murder of 51 people not as an act 'of aggression but, as he writes, "a partisan action against an occupying force"' (p. 203). The man who murdered 11 people at a Pittsburgh synagogue in 2018, also motivated by the 'White Genocide' conspiracy theory, framed his actions in similar terms, writing: 'I can't sit by and watch my people get slaughtered' (US Department of Justice, 2019). Apocalyptic narratives can promote violence by enabling perpetrators to justify their actions as acts of 'preventative self-defence' (Moses, 2019: 203; see, Presser, 2012; Presser and Sandberg, 2015; Smith, 2005). Here again we encounter the interrelationship between the 'extreme' and the mainstream. As Moses notes, while these ideas seem marginal when 'garbed as neo-Nazi conspiracy theories', the narrative that 'Europe is being swamped by Third World migrants, and especially by Muslims, is mainstream discourse' (Moses, 2019: 211; see for example, Murray, 2017).

Scripted and stochastic terror do not necessarily describe different aetiologies of violence but rather different aspects of the same phenomenon: scripted violence is stochastic in nature. Berlet (2014) writes that while social science has shown that demonisation and scapegoating can and does foment violence, it 'cannot. . . predict which individual upon hearing the rhetoric of clear or coded incitement' will act upon it (p. 304). Similarly for Moses:

> Those advancing an alarmist 'decline of the West' narrative. . . are intellectually equipping those with catastrophized subjectivities to take their proclaimed state of emergency as a green light for desperate measures. If you postulate a cultural and/or demographic 'war', we now

> know all too well that some will take your words literally and arrogate to themselves the role of your words' executor: it only takes one or two. (Moses, 2019: 212)

To summarise, a focus on terrorism functions to obscure the myriad other harms produced and perpetuated by the far right. Furthermore, 'lone wolf' terrorism is a misnomer, since perpetrators of lone-actor far-right political violence emerge from a shared subcultural architecture of motivation: taking influence and inspiration from other 'ethno-soldiers' as well as the broader far right, and seeking to inspire others through their actions. The concepts of stochastic terrorism and scripted violence gesture towards the distributed nature of agency and responsibility in relation to contemporary far right-inspired political violence. The picture is further complicated when we consider how the contemporary far right and its harms are constituted through a complex digital ecosystem of networked and 'weaponized affect' (Ganesh, 2020: 893) – which the second part of this article seeks to address.

Cultural criminology and the contemporary far right

So far, this article has problematised three key concepts from the lexicon of counter-extremism. An alternative framework, one that can usefully inform our understanding of the contemporary far right, and the media environments, beliefs, values and emotions that sustain and reproduce it – and which occasionally motivate its adherents to murderous violence – can be found in cultural criminology (see Ferrell et al., 2004, 2008; Ilan, 2019). Cultural criminology is an approach that 'emphasizes the role of image, style, representation and meaning' in crime, deviance and social control (Ferrell, 2013: 110).[5] Cultural criminology is uniquely suited to apprehending the contemporary far right owing to its focus on subculture and style, its attendance to networked digital media and its foregrounding of emotion and affect. The remainder of this article considers each of these three areas in turn and how they pertain to the contemporary far right and associated harms.

Subculture and style

An emerging body of literature from within and adjacent to cultural criminology has argued that recent formations of jihadism in the West should be understood as a subculture (Jensen et al., 2022; see, for example, Conti, 2017; Cottee, 2011, 2020; Hemmingsen, 2015; Sunde et al., 2021). Jensen et al., for example, note that a subcu ltural perspective:

> opens up for understanding Western jihadism as a. . . response to the. . . experience of racial and Islamophobic othering and renders jihadism intelligible as opposed to a mere irrational manifestation of evil grounded in religious fanaticism. Subcultural analysis also allows a grasp of the aesthetic fascination and cultural pull-factor of jihadism and can be helpful for understanding the styles and symbolic repertoires of Western jihadi subcultures. (Jensen et al., 2021: 431)

Hemmingsen has argued that *also* understanding jihadism as a subculture can usefully compliment other perspectives. 'In addition to being a political project, a religious interpretation and something justifying the use of violence', jihadism, 'is a social phenomenon, an identity, a subculture, a rebellion against restricting traditions and norms, and much more' (Hemmingsen, 2015: 3).

Other commentators including cultural criminologists have discussed the far right as a subculture (see Cottee, 2021; Hamm, 1994, 2004; Larsen and Jensen, 2023; Pisoiu, 2015), and I want to argue that the contemporary far right can be productively understood as such. As with Western jihadism, an analysis of the contemporary far right *as a subculture*, rather than as an irrational manifestation of 'hatred' allows for a clearer understanding of its appeal. Certainly, all the distinctive features of a deviant subculture are present: a value system and shared internal beliefs distinct from that of mainstream culture; a specialised vocabulary; and a shared subcultural style (Muncie, 2001: 296).[6] Let us consider these elements in turn.

Beliefs and values different from that of mainstream culture. The contemporary far right shares a set of internal beliefs. Most obviously there are the beliefs in the biological reality and supremacy of 'the white race', and the cultural superiority of 'Western civilisation'. Other shared beliefs include a revisionist version of history and a conspiratorial, embattled and apocalyptic worldview (see Moses, 2019; Nilsson, 2022). The far right's values – white supremacy, masculinity, social conservatism, nationalism, militarism – also differ from the mainstream, at least in their emphasis and openness. However, following Cottee (2020), it may be more accurate to say that rather than radically opposed to the concerns of conventional society, such values represent 'shadow undercurrents that co-exist within the cosmopolitan liberal order' (p. 775).

A specialised vocabulary. The contemporary far right is steeped in a shared communicative repertoire comprising a distinct subcultural argot, as well as symbols, images, recurring jokes and obscure subcultural references new and old (see Salazar, 2018). This subcultural cryptography has been developed, at least in part, to provide a camouflage of incoherence, irony and plausible deniability, enabling far-right activists to avoid social censure and algorithmic censorship while espousing their worldviews online (social media platforms issue bans for the use of overt racial slurs, but rarely for their cryptic euphemisms) (see, for instance, Greene, 2019; Kennedy, 2022). Jewish people are 'blues', 'you-know-whos' or denoted by (((triple parentheses))) around their names. Other fascists and white supremacists are 'red pilled', 'based' or '/our guys/', whereas their political enemies – depicted as mindless and emasculated consumer drones – are 'bugmen' or 'NPCs' (non-playable characters – automatons). The contemporary far right's ability to produce strange new words in a relentless, 'frenetic churn of slurs [and] in-jokes' is such that terms like 'red pilled' (meaning the ability or willingness to see the world as it really is) have percolated into the mainstream (Lewis, 2020; Tiffany, 2021). Whereas counter-extremists see this vocabulary simply as a cipher to be decoded and rendered legible, a cultural criminological perspective would recognise the performative nature of this argot and the 'sneaky thrills' shared by its speakers in exchanging secret or dangerous knowledge that can only be imparted through clandestine means (Katz, 1988).

A shared subcultural style. While the boots, braces and bomber jacket 'skinhead' style so often associated with the far right (Hamm, 1994; Turner-Graham, 2015) is today largely absent, many of the contemporary far right's adherents nevertheless have specialised ways of dressing. The half skull mask is now synonymous with terroristic 'accelerationist' fascist groups (Hatewatch, 2017; Hummel, 2021). Meanwhile, the 'high-and-tight' or undercut hair style, popular in 1930s Germany, along with 'preppy' khakis and polo shirts – both sported by American white nationalist and alt-right figurehead, Richard Spencer – has been hailed as 'the new uniform of white

supremacism' as a new generation of racists tried to eschew the militaristic style and symbolic baggage of white power skinheads and the militia movement (Hesse and Zak, 2016; Williams, 2011). The far right continues to engage in *bricolage*, appropriating and reconfiguring the meaning of existing styles (Hebdige, 1979; see Hamm, 1994). Perhaps most well-known here is the adoption by US-based fascist street gang, the Proud Boys, of black and yellow Fred Perry polo shirts (see Strübel and Sklar, 2022). Today, the contemporary far right's subcultural style and *bricolage* encompasses music, artwork, propaganda, online avatars and memes as well as fashion. Across this cultural ecology, the contemporary far right displays a repertoire of distinctive styles – borrowing extensively from internet culture, historic far-right imagery and iconography from around the world, as well as new hybrid aesthetics such as 'fashwave' that remix existing symbols and styles, ascribing them alternative coded meanings (Larsen and Jensen, 2023).

Understanding the contemporary far right as a subculture can help us make sense of some of the 'dimensions that draw people toward these milieus', beyond their explicit politics (Larsen and Jensen, 2023: 5). Such dimensions include: the seductive appeal of subcultures – excitement, 'cool', fame; their emotionality; and their role in creating a sense of collective identity (Hamm, 2004; Larsen and Jensen, 2023; Sunde et al., 2021). Furthermore, if the contemporary far right constitutes a subculture, it follows that 'radicalisation' towards it – so often conceived of in terms of vulnerability, risk and contagion – is better understood as *enculturation* (see Holt et al., 2017): the process of learning and adopting the worldview, values, norms, customs, argot and so on of a given (sub)culture.[7] We are dealing here with a process of profound personal transformation. For Munn, writing on individuals' online journeys into the alt-right, this transformation 'occurs at the micro-level of the individual. . . a slow colonization of the self, a steady infiltration of heart and mind' (2019). This process, Munn argues, recalls Foucault's writing on power as something that 'reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives' (Foucault, 1980: 39). Accordingly, we might jettison counter-extremists' bizarrely abstract and clinical language of 'risk factors' and 'recruitment', and epidemic metaphors of 'exposure', in favour of a cultural criminological framework and conceptual language that tends to the subjective, affective, emotional, embodied, communicative, symbolic and political dimensions of social life. In describing 'radicalisation' as a process of *'world-building'*, McDonald points the way:

> [R]adicalisation is not an experience of manipulation or recruitment. . . Rather it is a form of practice or agency best understood as *world-building*. As such, radicalisation needs to be understood as an inherently political endeavour, a form of political action. . . The closer we get to actual experiences of radicalisation the more clearly we see the extent to which this involves *embodied, communicative subjectivity*, where actors produce and are sustained by an 'affective fabric' that is increasingly evident in digital sociality. (McDonald, 2020: 47, emphasis in original)

Today, this process of intimate personal transformation cannot be understood outside or apart from the networked 'medial environments' in which far-right subcultures are inextricably enmeshed (see Munn, 2020).

Networked digital media

By far the most well-known conceptual model regarding the role of the internet in radicalisation – long suggested by counter-extremist organisations, academics and policymakers, as well as the popular news media – posits the existence of a 'radicalisation pipeline' or 'rabbit hole' on YouTube (Ribeiro et al., 2020; see for example, HM Government, 2019; Lewis, 2018; Munn, 2019; O'Callaghan et al., 2015; Roose, 2019; Tufekci, 2018). The 'pipeline' thesis holds that YouTube's personalised recommendation algorithm incrementally nudges users towards viewing more radical content. Tufekci (2018), notes how YouTube appears to recommend more and more radical content regardless of topic. The likely explanation, she concludes:

> has to do with the nexus of artificial intelligence and Google's business model. (YouTube is owned by Google.) For all its lofty rhetoric, Google is an advertising broker, selling our attention to companies that will pay for it. The longer people stay on YouTube, the more money Google makes. . . [YouTube's] algorithm seems to have concluded that people are drawn to content that is more extreme than what they started with — or to incendiary content in general.

This is an inherently difficult claim to assess, since YouTube's recommendation algorithm is 'black boxed' – its complexity and technical opacity functions to obfuscate its inner workings – and can therefore only be indirectly probed by analysing its inputs and outputs (Diakopolous, 2014; see Pasquale, 2015). Until recently, there was little substantial evidence to support this thesis; however, several recent studies have produced damning conclusions (see Yesilada and Lewandowsky, 2022, for a review). In an analysis of over 330,000 YouTube videos and over 72 million user comments, Ribeiro et al. (2020) found that 'users consistently migrate from milder to more extreme content' (p. 131). Whittaker et al. (2021: 2) found that YouTube 'does promote extreme content after interacting with far-right materials'. What is more, far-right activists' self-narratives of their own political journeys often cite the importance of YouTube (Evans, 2018).

That recommendation algorithms on YouTube, and likely other platforms, appear to funnel receptive audiences towards far-right content should be cause for alarm. However, the 'pipeline' thesis is clearly an oversimplification, implying a linear and deterministic relationship between media consumption and political beliefs, denying any sense of agency to internet users. Furthermore, commentary on online 'radicalisation' has tended to focus on these algorithmic 'persuasion architectures' (Tufekci, 2017) to the neglect of a more holistic understanding of far-right social media networks.

A cultural criminological perspective is well placed to remedy such shortcomings. First, a cultural criminological approach can draw attention to the complexity of far-right online spaces and the social networks they cultivate. Cultural criminologists have drawn on the insights of the 'spatial turn' in social theory to develop sophisticated analyses of an array of spaces and their interrelationships with crime, deviance and harm (Campbell, 2012). Hayward (2012) has suggested that this same sensibility should be brought to bear by cultural criminologists studying *online spaces*. If the far-right internet does not assume the form of a linear, unidirectional pipeline, rabbit hole, or funnel, with correspondingly straightforward effects on visitors' political beliefs, what other conceptual models might prove useful? Baele et al.'s conceptualisation of the far-right

internet as an *ecosystem* is instructive here. For Baele et al. (2023), the far-right internet is 'dynamic and multidimensional. . . made of an ever-changing number of different components whose natures and interconnections are in constant evolution' (p. 2). To this we might add that online spaces have a *topography*: an uneven terrain of websites, platforms, servers and apps that serve different purposes, host different kinds of media and interactions, and are more-or-less inward or outward facing, more-or-less hostile or accommodating of far-right speech, and more-or-less secure from the prying eyes of law enforcement, journalists and anti-fascist activists.

Yet a further dimension of complexity is introduced when we consider the diverse online-offline interplay of far-right ideas and practices (Baele et al., 2023: 2; see Fielitz and Thurston, 2019). From strategically coordinated social media campaigns intended to shift the 'Overton window' of acceptable mainstream discourse (see Heikkilä, 2017; Tuters and Hagen, 2020) to invite-only Telegram and Discord chats used to arrange furtive fascist meetups, and from carefully choreographed publicity stunts captured on video for an online audience to livestreamed street clashes and mass shootings – 'the street scripts the screen and the screen scripts the street; there is no clearly linear sequence, but rather a shifting interplay between the real and the virtual, the factual and the fictional' (Ferrell et al., 2008: 123–124). Online spaces have been shown in some circumstances to catalyse and strengthen real-world far-right organising, networking and activism (see for example, Europol, 2020). Elsewhere, it has been suggested that online fora may serve a cathartic function, allowing activists to vent their frustrations and subsuming otherwise potentially violent tendencies (Awan, 2007; Cottee, 2020). Drawing on cultural criminology, Castle and Parsons (2019) have already explored the complex interrelationship between the online presence and real-world activity of far-right vigilante group Soldiers of Odin Norge.

Second, a cultural criminological approach can draw attention to the *lived experience* of participation in online subcultures. Cultural criminologists have examined the online presence of incel (Andersen, 2023; Cottee, 2021), jihadist (Jensen et al., 2022; Sunde et al., 2021) and pro-anorexia subcultures (Gailey, 2009). They have described these subcultures' online lifeworlds, the beliefs, values and emotions that animate them (Cottee, 2021), and how online media help to 'cement a common identity and affective solidarity' through the construction of a distinct subcultural styles (Sunde et al., 2021: 13; see Andersen, 2023). These insights show that contrary to popular conceptions of radicalisation, individuals are not 'groomed' in isolation by 'hate preachers', 'radicalisers' or 'extremist influencers' (Crone, 2016; see, for example, Home Office, 2015). Rather, radicalisation towards, and the maintenance of, a far-right worldview is an intensely social phenomenon (Crone, 2016). The far-right online ecosystem is also an online community: where activists hang out and make friends; watch and comment on livestreams in real time; exchange jokes, memes and gossip; share in each other's rage, fears and anxieties; provide emotional support; cheer on each other's activism; and strategise how best to 'red pill' family members and colleagues. Accordingly, a cultural criminological approach would recognise that the ecosystem described by Baele et al. (2023) is also a 'subjective, affective, embodied, aesthetic, material, performative, textual, symbolic and visual' landscape (Campbell, 2012: 401). Further work remains to be done to investigate the extent to which the two areas described above – algorithmic persuasion architectures and their affordances, and the social and emotional dimensions of online subcultural communities – interact with and modulate one another.[8]

In summary, cultural criminology, with its attendance to networked digital media is uniquely well suited to investigate online spaces and their role in reproducing online subcultures. Rather

than a linear and deterministic 'pipeline' of radicalisation, existing cultural criminological research suggests we might better understand the far-right internet as a complex, multidimensional and dynamic ecosystem, which sustains and animates an online community, and has wide-ranging implications for real-world activism and organising. It is to the emotions and affects that are produced and circulated in and through this online world that we now turn.

Emotions and weaponised affect

Mainstream journalistic, scholarly and policy discussion has tended overwhelmingly to emphasise the role of *hatred* as the animating sentiment behind the far right to the extent that 'hate' has become a reductive metonym for far-right groups and their worldview (see, for example, Collins, 2011; Hope Not Hate, 2022). Meanwhile, NGOs and policymakers lobby the government to designate speech as 'hateful extremism' and far-right organisations as 'hate groups' (Commission for Countering Extremism, 2021; Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, 2019). For its part, criminological research has tended to view the far right through the narrow lens of 'hate crime' (Jacobs and Potter, 1997; Jenness, 2001). Yet conceiving of the lifeworld of far-right activists and organisers solely in these terms only serves to flatten what is, in actuality, a far more complex, nuanced and heterogeneous emotional universe. Hatred is clearly present here, along with its cousins – anger, fear, resentment and disgust (towards racialised Others, as well as women, gender non-conforming people and non-normative sexual relationships) (Moore and Roberts, 2021). Yet many other feelings are also prominent, including the ontological insecurity and alienation of life under consumer capitalism (Kinnvall, 2019) as well as shame, (failed) masculinity and virility, inadequacy and (racialised) sexual anxieties (Moore and Roberts, 2021; see Cottee, 2021; Theweleit, 1987). Several commentators have argued that we should also look beyond 'negative' emotions to consider, for example, feelings of nostalgia, pride, community, solidarity and 'brotherhood', hope, enthusiasm and compassion (Cottee and Hayward, 2011; Doroshenko and Tu, 2023; Leser and Spissinger, 2020).

Ethnographies of the far right have highlighted the importance of emotionality (Blee, 2007; see, for example, Virchow, 2007). Recent research has also examined the interrelationship between emotions and new media ecosystems within the far right (see Kisic Merino and Kinnvall, 2023; Marcks and Pawelz, 2022). Meanwhile, cultural criminology has long sought to capture the phenomenology of crime and deviance: their lived experience, symbolic meaning and emotional intensity, their embodied and affective dimensions, as well as the interweaving of transgression, emotion and identity (Ferrell et al., 2008; see, for example, Lyng, 1990, 2004). Of particular relevance to the present discussion, cultural criminologists have explored the emotional motivations and existential attractions of political violence (Cottee, 2021; Cottee and Hayward, 2011). Cottee and Hayward hypothesise that political violence may be motivated by a desire for excitement, meaning and glory, concluding that:

> Terrorism. . . offers a solution, however partial and ultimately self-destructive, to subjective feelings of existential frustration. What is meant here by 'existential frustration' is *radical dissatisfaction regarding one's moral existence in the world* – an emotional state marked by the feeling that one's life is meaningless, directionless, boring, banal, uneventful, anodyne, soulless, aimless, passive, cowardly. Terrorist organizations. . . not only furnish their members with

> an all-embracing cause and bonds of great intimacy and solidarity; they also open up a world of exhilarating action, violence, intrigue and drama. (Cottee and Hayward, 2011: 978–979, emphasis in original)

More recently, Cottee (2021) has probed the miasma of negative emotions that animate the (online) incel subculture and, occasionally, inspire acts of violent revenge. The incel subculture, for Cottee (2021), is one 'unrestrained in its emotionality', and which is characterised by 'chronic existential misery. . . total abjection and abasement. . . relentless torment and neverending trauma' caused by 'sexual frustration and loneliness' (pp. 99, 97). Indeed, for the young men who comprise this subculture, sexual frustration and the resulting shame, resentment towards and hatred of women that together define their 'inceldom' come to represent a master status – the primary source of their identity (Cottee, 2021; see Merton, 1968).

For the purposes of the present article, Sunde et al.'s (2021) analysis of online magazines produced by Al Qaeda and Islamic State is perhaps the most instructive writing from a cultural criminological perspective to date. For Sunde et al. (2021), jihadists' journeys towards radicalism and political violence cannot be fully understood apart from a 'complex cultural architecture of. . . propaganda and motivation' (p. 272). Through a close reading of jihadist e-magazines – one part of 'a wider [online] ecology of communication and propaganda' – the authors trace the entanglement of subcultural style, emotional experience, identity and politics (Sunde et al., 2021: 281). In particular, the authors point to three prominent themes within the propaganda material they analyse, which they argue 'may appeal particularly to socio-economic excluded youths. . . who perceive themselves to be in a hopeless situation of continuous marginalization and stigmatization' (Sunde et al., 2021: 283). First, the propaganda magazines analysed emphasise the importance of brotherhood, rituals, and belonging, focussing 'on in-group feelings of warmth, togetherness, and solidarity' (Sunde et al., 2021: 276). In doing so these productions frame participation in violent jihad as a 'defense of one's fictive kin' and a means of accessing these affirmative sensations (Sunde et al., 2021: 277, 278). Second, jihadist subcultural media conjure and celebrate 'jihadi cool' (Cottee, 2015b) through their depiction of the masculine, militaristic subcultural style of the *mujahideen*, who embody the persona of the 'badass' (Katz, 1988). Importantly, the jihadi lifestyle is 'presented as well within the reach of readers': the message to aspiring *mujahideen* is that 'violent acts are a route for individuals to obtain recognition and status. . . as cool, rebellious heroes' (Sunde et al., 2021: 279). Third, the e-magazines reviewed frame terroristic violence and murder as transgressive, exciting, intense, self-affirming, emotionally satisfying and pleasurable experiences. In doing so, they emphasise the seductive appeal of jihadism as a form of 'edgework': 'an attempt to achieve a semblance of control within ontologically insecure social worlds' through extreme forms of voluntary risk-taking (Hayward, 2002: 86; Lyng, 1990, 2004).

Clearly, individuals' journeys into these radical milieus are processes of immense emotional depth. While a cultural criminological approach can help us make sense of the contemporary far right *as a subculture*, as well as its interrelationship with and reproduction through a new media ecosystem – it is in foregrounding the role of emotions, experience and identity in motivating participation in deviant subcultures, crime and harm, where cultural criminology already has much to offer. Recent cultural criminological work in this area can be further developed by drawing on the insights of cultural, media and communication studies. Scholars from a range of disciplines have begun to theorise the mediation of emotions and sensations through new forms of digital

communication in terms of *networked affect* (Hillis et al., 2015). The key idea here is that networked online media and communications:

> are not merely about storing and sharing data but also about the spread. . . amplification and dissipation of affective intensities [. . .] As the capacity of bodies to affect and be affected by one another. . . affect cuts across, and joins together, bodies human and nonhuman, organic and machine, material and conceptual. . . These include individual users, more or less emergent collective bodies, human and non-human and thus also devices, platforms, applications, interfaces, companies, files and threads. (Paasonen, 2018: 283)

Data scientists employed by Facebook have demonstrated 'massive-scale emotional contagion through social networks', showing that 'emotional states can be transferred to others' via social media, 'leading people to experience the same emotions without their awareness' (Kramer et al., 2014: 8788). It is this contagion and modulation of emotions, sensations and intensities that the idea of networked affect seeks to explain.

Some scholars have already begun to utilise ideas of networked affect in theorising the contemporary far right. For instance, Ganesh (2020) describes how online far-right influencers make use of the 'participatory culture of immaterial digital labour that platforms built around user-generated content' encourage, to generate and channel what he terms 'white thymos' (p. 900). 'White thymos' refers to a complex of racialised pride, rage, resentment and anger generated by 'informational and affective circuits that create the perception of a loss of white entitlement' (Ganesh, 2020: 894). White thymos, Ganesh argues, is actively *synthesised* – cultivated – both by key influencers in the far-right online ecosystem and through the participatory culture that they help construct, using several strategies, including documenting instances of purported white victimisation (Ganesh, 2020: 899). Once cultivated, white-thymotic rage can be channelled and weaponised by far-right influencers to advance their personal brands and political agendas through coordinated 'raids' to boost specific narratives or through targeted harassment campaigns against their political enemies (see Massanari, 2017).

Conclusion

The 21st Century will be defined by overlapping and escalating environmental, economic and social crises, providing fertile ground for a resurgent far right. It is crucial that we develop the analytical tools necessary to understand the far right's transformation and adaptation, and to challenge and disrupt its growth. Mainstream analysis of the contemporary far right, viewed through the lens of counter-extremism and premised on a series of imprecise, ambiguous and normative concepts is abstract, superficial and uncritical. The project of counter-extremism is tethered to the maintenance of the neoliberal status quo (Boukalas, 2019; Skoczylis and Andrews, 2020) at a time when what is needed is principled opposition to racism and fascism, and an openness to genuinely radical political alternatives (Kundnani, 2014).

This article has brought together existing criminological scholarship, as well as contributions from adjacent disciplines to show how a cultural criminological approach can offer novel insights and better inform our understanding of the contemporary far right. After briefly introducing the contemporary far right and counter-extremism, the article problematised the concepts of

'extremism', 'radicalisation' and 'terrorism'. 'Extremism' as a concept functions to naturalise the status quo while ignoring the interrelationship between the mainstream and the far right. The term conflates different non-liberal worldviews and equates ideas with violence. The discourse of 'radicalisation' further compounds this conflation of ideas and violence, and functions to depoliticise and pathologise non-liberal political thought and activism (including political violence). In doing so, it allows policymakers to sidestep awkward discussions about the political motivations of so-called 'extremists'. A focus on terrorism (a rare occurrence) obscures other commonplace and systemic harms associated with the far right. 'Lone wolf' terrorism is a misnomer since lone-actor terrorists emerge from a shared subcultural milieu. The concepts of stochastic terrorism and scripted violence, which gesture towards the distributed nature of agency in producing contemporary far-right political violence, may prove insightful.

Cultural criminology is uniquely well placed to furnish insights into the contemporary far right owing to its focus on subculture and style, its attendance to networked digital media and its foregrounding of emotion and affect. Cultural criminologists have long studied deviant subcultures. An understanding of the contemporary far right as a subculture can usefully compliment other perspectives, permitting an appreciation of its social, stylistic and symbolic appeals. Cultural criminology's attendance to social and networked media can aid us in understanding the contemporary far-right subculture as one sustained and animated by a complex, multidimensional online ecosystem. Finally, cultural criminology's concern with lived experience, emotion and affect can help us understand the contemporary far right's emotional and existential attractions.

In concluding this article, it is worth outlining several productive directions – a tentative programme – for future cultural criminological research on the contemporary far right. First, there is the ongoing task of monitoring and mapping the shifting subcultural terrain of the contemporary far right – both its offline presence, its online ecosystem(s) and the changing strategies, tactics, dynamics and interrelationships therein. Who are the key influencers, what are the main organisations or factions, where and how are they mobilising, and what does this mean for the wider movement? The interrelationship between online and offline organisation, ideas, practices and narratives also merits further investigation – particularly as it relates to specific socio-political issues, national and regional contexts, and their constituencies.

Second, cultural criminologists should examine individuals' pathways into far-right politics. Routes into the far right have changed. No longer are supporters recruited into an organisation – instead, many are 'incrementally nudged along. . . medial pathway[s]' online, from reactionary videos on YouTube to overtly racist, misogynistic and violent content on fringe platforms (Munn, 2019). A popular topic of discussion in far-right online spaces is supporters' personal recounting of their 'political journeys' – offering a rich seam of data for analysis. The subfield of narrative criminology is particularly well suited to make sense of such accounts.

Third, central to the ascendance of the contemporary far right has been a narrative of 'White Genocide' or the 'Great Replacement' – the alleged ongoing replacement of whites, orchestrated by left-wing elites and/or Jews. This narrative has directly inspired multiple mass shootings around the world (Nilsson, 2022) and is simultaneously creeping into mainstream discourse (Ekman, 2022). Cultural criminologists would do well to interrogate the articulation, strategic dissemination, and emotional and affective appeal of 'Great Replacement' theory and other animating narratives of the far right. Here again, a narrative criminological framework seems

relevant – since, as Presser (2009) notes, '[a]ggregates as well as individuals tell, and act on the basis of, stories' (p. 178).

Fourth, cultural criminologists have long interrogated (sub)cultural productions including music, film, television, comics and video games. The contemporary far right has become adept at cranking out its own cultural productions that blur the line between propaganda and entertainment, including revisionist historical documentaries (Žižek, 2018), fiction and nonfiction books and publishing houses, music (Larsen and Jensen, 2023), artwork and videogames (Condis, 2021) – as well as engaging in its own literary and cultural criticism, publishing review essays of films and music from a far-right perspective. Cultural criminology is uniquely positioned to be able to critically interrogate these (sub)cultural products and furnish students of the contemporary far right with a range of insights.

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Notes

1. This article refers throughout to both the far right and fascism. The far right is an overarching term that describes a range of ideologies, encompassing both the 'radical' right (which is reformist in nature and seeks to use democratic means to achieve its aims) and the 'extreme' right, which is revolutionary in nature, anti-democratic, and sometimes supports or employs violence to achieve its aims (Mudde, 2019; Ravndal and Bjørgo, 2018). In practice, the boundaries between the two are often blurred. Beyond such distinctions, the far right describes a spectrum of political beliefs characterised by nationalist, nativist, racist, authoritarian and reactionary positions. Far-right ideologies, and the organisations, movements and activists that subscribe to them are often also misogynist, homophobic and transphobic. A defining characteristic of the far right is 'A narrative of racial and/or cultural threat to a 'native' group arising from perceived alien groups within a society' (Lee, 2019: 2). 'Fascism' is beset with definitional issues when applied in a 'generic' manner to phenomena outside of Mussolini's regime in Italy between 1925 and 1943 (Griffin, 1991). Perhaps the best-known definition of fascism is that offered by Roger Griffin: a 'palingenetic form of populist ultra-nationalism' (Griffin, 1991: 26). Palingenesis refers to the myth of – or belief in the need for – (national) rebirth and renewal (Griffin, 1991: 32). Populism, for Griffin, refers to a belief that political forces depend on the masses for legitimacy, even if led by small elite cadres or vanguards (Griffin, 1991: 36–37). And ultra-nationalism differs from other nationalisms in its elevation of the nation to a "higher' racial, historical, spiritual or organic reality. . . regarded as a natural order which can be contaminated by miscegenation and immigration' (Griffin, 1991: 37). The 'conundrum' of fascism (Robinson, 1981: 1) and how to define it was by no means settled by Griffin and the debate continues to animate scholars. Paxton (2004), for example, sees fascism as defined by its development 'in action' as a movement rather than as a static ideology (p. 18). For further discussion on defining the far right and fascism see Griffin (1991), Griffin and Feldman (2004) and Mudde (2019).
2. The networked character of the contemporary far right is not a new development *per se*. As early as 1992, Louis Beam popularised the notion of 'leaderless resistance' to advocate for decentralised, networked cell structure among far-right revolutionaries (see Kaplan, 1997). Fascism scholar Griffin (2003) has argued that the post-war far right has long consisted of myriad, minute, ephemeral, 'highly

specialized and largely autonomous grouplets' that together make up an 'amorphous, leaderless and centreless cellular network' that he terms 'the groupuscular right' (p. 27). What is new today is the quantitative and qualitative intensification in the volume and density of far-right actors, groups, networks and interconnections between them both online and offline.

3. 'Chan' here refers to a specific type of online forum: so-called 'imageboards', such as 4chan and 8chan, which share several features such as allowing anonymous posting. Several far-right mass shooters' writings have originally been shared on these forums (see Baele et al., 2021).
4. This term appears to have first been used by Woo (2002) in a discussion of terrorist risk and prediction. Woo uses the term in a 'technical' manner, which differs to the 'non-technical' manner which has become more prevalent (Kemper, 2022).
5. Cultural criminology has responded carefully and attentively to a host of criticisms, including claims that it 'romanticises' crime and places too much emphasis on the 'exotica' of fringe subcultural groupings (O'Brien, 2005; cf. Hayward and Schuilenburg, 2014), and that it is insufficiently critical and material in its analysis (Hall and Winlow, 2007, cf. Hayward, 2016; Ilan, 2019).
6. From the beginning, cultural criminology has been influenced and inspired by subcultural theory (Ferrell et al., 2008). While space precludes further discussion here, the concept of subculture has been used in several different ways to describe and explain crime, deviance and resistance (Blackman, 2014). Post-subcultural perspectives have also argued that the term is redundant and have advanced alternative ideas such as neo-tribe, scene and lifestyle (Blackman, 2014; see for example, Bennett, 2011; Bennett and Kahn-Harris, 2004; Muggleton and Weinzierl, 2003).
7. Several commentators have sought to conceptualise 'radicalisation' as a process of learning (Lee and Knott, 2022).
8. Some cultural criminologists have already begun to point the way (see, for example, Goldsmith and Wall, 2022; Wood, 2017, 2021).

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Tony Karas is a Criminologist whose research examines the far right. Tony's work employs a cultural criminological approach as an alternative to 'counter-extremist' thinking about the contemporary far right, and focuses on the roles of subculture and style, the internet and social media, and emotion and affect. His most recent research analyses British neo-Nazis' first-hand accounts of their political journeys into the far right.