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On the proximity of the far right and the misuses of the 'mainstreaming' metaphor

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ABSTRACT

A recent body of work has examined the normalization of far-right ideas and political violence. This is often referred to as the 'mainstreaming' of the far right. This article explores some of the unintended consequences of this explanation. I argue that even critical appraisals of mainstreaming – which generally implicate not only the far right, but the mainstream as well – can nevertheless work to ontologize the far right and mainstream as distinct, separable entities. I argue that contrary to the aims of such critical appraisals, this can obscure the proximity the far right has always had to the mainstream. I characterize this manoeuvre as a 'White Reconstruction' (Rodríguez 2021), which discursively portrays the far right as an aberration of liberal society, rather than recognizing it as a continuation of liberalism's foundational logics, including its attendant racism, nationalism, misogyny and white supremacy.

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Introduction

Let us force the deletion into appearance, in order to account for its contribution to these long archives of violence. (Rodríguez 2021, 119)

It is said we are amidst an epoch characterized by the 'mainstreaming' of the far right. The idea, in a sentence, is that the fringes of society, the *literally* 'far' right, have come increasingly to influence the mainstream, which is conceptualized as the core or centre of society. The evidence, according to dominant analyses, is manifold. Commonly cited indicators include the growing success of far-right political parties throughout the liberal west. Here, critics point to the return of political archetypes embodied by figures such as Donald Trump, Boris Johnson, Marine Le Pen, Viktor Orbán and Giorgia Meloni. Indeed, as this article was drafted, Javier Milei and Geert Wilders were elected in Argentina

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and the Netherlands, respectively, and even more recently, Trump was again elected as the President of the United States. These (mostly) democratically elected leaders are said to have normalized *new* modes of political violence, including new forms of racism, nationalism, xenophobia, misogyny, transphobia and more, which are now so embedded that they are understood as being part of the mainstream itself.

Researchers from a plethora of fields have documented this mainstreaming effect and the political violence associated with it. As Aurelien Mondon writes, in recent decades, research on the far right has become ‘a booming field’ (2022, 876). Part of this enthusiasm, however, has seemed to stem from a desire to engage with the far right as a conglomeration of discrete phenomena that can each be individually accounted for and explained, and thereby understood and hopefully mitigated. And there is no shortage of literature that seeks to isolate and address phenomena associated with the (return of) the far right in this parochial fashion. Without impugning any particular authors, I am here thinking of scholarly and journalistic work framed around questions such as ‘How do we deradicalise incels?’, ‘How can we stop the spread of white supremacist conspiracy theories?’, ‘How might we better monitor individuals planning to commit acts of rightwing extremism?’ and so on. It is, thus, commonly accepted that a broad trend is occurring – the mainstreaming of the far right – which is itself composed of an array of phenomena that can be isolated and understood.

While understanding the above phenomena is undoubtedly crucial, in this article, I suggest that recourse to the mainstreaming metaphor can sometimes serve an ideological function that obscures the very conditions of possibility that have allowed them to emerge. This is because depicting the far right as an emerging or resurging trend, comprising distinct phenomena, renders it distant and divorced from the everyday structures of the liberal multicultural west, and the settler- and post-colonial nation-states within which they have thrived. To this end, I argue that the *temporalisation* of the far right – as emerging or resurging – obscures the historical and material continuities that facilitates it, and which remain and have always remained in effect.

To illustrate this argument, this article hopes to build on critical work on the mainstreaming of the far right. I engage especially with the work of Mondon and Aaron Winter, who, writing both individually and together, have influentially theorized how the mainstreaming of the far right has been enabled (Mondon 2013, 2022, 2023, 2024; Mondon and Winter 2017, 2020; Winter 2019). Along with Katy Brown, both have also explored some of the unintended implications of the mainstreaming explanation, much of which relates to its uncritical adoption and reproduction in scholarly research, as well as its entrance into common parlance (Brown, Mondon, and Winter 2023; see also: Mondon 2023, 2024; Mondon and Winter 2020). This is crucial

because, as they observe, the mainstreaming discourse has become ubiquitous such that a significant portion of research on the far right now focuses primarily on attempting to understand ‘the relationship between the far right and the mainstream, and more specifically, the mainstreaming of the far right’ (Brown, Mondon, and Winter 2023, 162).¹ As they note, however, this emphasis on understanding the relationship between the far right and the mainstream is not without its pitfalls. Indeed, it has often led to the reification of the mainstream as a static entity (Brown, Mondon, and Winter 2023, 166), and the conceptualization of the far right and mainstream as inherently distinct. As Mondon explains:

We too often view the far right as an outsider – something separate from ourselves and distinct from our norms and mainstream. This ignores deeply entrenched structural inequalities and forms of oppression core to our societies. (2023, n.p.)

Mondon elaborates that this tendency fails to appreciate that ‘the processes of mainstreaming and normalisation of far-right politics have much to do with the mainstream itself’, because ‘there can be no mainstreaming without the mainstream accepting such ideas in its fold’ (Mondon, 2023 n.p.). From this, Mondon concludes that we ought ‘to reckon with the crucial role the mainstream plays in mainstreaming’ (2023, n.p.).

In this article, however, my contention is that *even the very framing of this injunction*, ‘to reckon with the crucial role the mainstream plays in mainstreaming’, can itself potentially circumscribe the far right by constructing it as something theoretically separable from the mainstream. In this formation, the far right is depicted as something that, *while enabled at least by the mainstream*, has come to infect and inflect it, but which nevertheless remains distinct and removable, like a pathogen. Indeed, this idea is conveyed implicitly by the very notion of ‘mainstreaming’ itself, insofar as the verb form denotes *a process* through which one distinct thing comes to influence and/or inhabit another, regardless of which is to ‘blame’ for this, and to what extent. My argument, however, is that by ontologising *both* the far right and mainstream in this way, that even when deployed critically, the mainstreaming discourse runs the risk of not only failing to see, but of actively obscuring the underlying structures that in-and-of-themselves function as the very conditions of possibility for far-right political violence to emerge.

In pursuing this argument, I hope to take up Mondon’s critique of the ‘epistemologies of ignorance’ upon which much of the field of far-right studies has been built (Mondon 2022, 576). To this end, it is hoped that this article will make a conceptual contribution that ameliorates the accidental reliance upon, and reproduction of, such epistemologies via the mainstreaming explanation—even when presented in its more critical form. To elucidate this argument, the article will proceed in three main parts. In Part 1, I examine

the mainstreaming discourse as the prominent metaphor through which contemporary far-right violence is conceptualized and archived by those working in the field. Here, I do not seek to map the mainstreaming discourse comprehensively, but, instead, aim to survey and critique some of its defining features. I also consider some existing critiques of the mainstreaming discourse, including in particular the work of Brown, Mondon and Winter (writing both together and individually).

In Part 2, I attempt to show how the mainstreaming discourse – especially as popularly understood – can impede our ability to adequately conceptualize the discursive origins, foundations and structures that have allowed the phenomena that have come to be designated ‘far right’ to emerge. I argue the mainstreaming metaphor can paradoxically exceptionalise far-right violence, albeit covertly and ironically, by temporalizing it and portraying it as something that is *only now* becoming *un-exceptional* (that is, mainstream). It is here that I depict the mainstreaming discourse as a subtle but nevertheless significant mode of what Dylan Rodríguez has called ‘White Reconstruction’ (2021), a phenomenon that names the technologies of self-narration and present tense archiving through which liberal multicultural nations reproduce and invisibilise the racial-colonial logics of white supremacy that ultimately sustain them. In the context of the mainstreaming discourse, I contend, White Reconstruction works by positing the ‘bad stuff’ – such as racism, ethnic nationalism and misogyny – as originating from outside of the mainstream, be it ontologically, epistemologically and/or temporally. To support this reading, I draw parallels to Charles W. Mills’ notion of the racial contract, albeit to assert that the mainstreaming discourse can constitute an inversion of Mills’ original formulation, whereby rather than *invisibilising* white supremacy, the mainstreaming discourse instead *purports to visibilise it in the present*, while nevertheless simultaneously invisibilising aspects of its origins and conditions of possibility.

In Part 3, I discuss some amendments that could be made to the mainstreaming explanation for the waves of far-right violence that have seemed to sweep across the liberal west in recent decades. Rather than conceptualizing this violence via terms that explicitly invoke notions of distance, such as in reference to supposedly ‘extreme’ or ‘far’ right actors, I maintain that we might instead counter-archive prevailing white supremacist violence in terms of its proximity to the very ontologies and epistemologies that sustain the liberal multicultural west.

In concluding, I highlight some implications of my critique of the misuses of the mainstreaming discourse. If the far right is not an exceptional phenomenon that has infiltrated and corrupted an otherwise good centre (qua the mainstream), then attempts to rehabilitate the latter by pushing the former back to the fringes from whence they supposedly came are bound to fail. Although the mainstreaming discourse can be wielded in a way that obscures

the origins of far-right political violence, it does not *necessarily* do so by default. I therefore offer a brief reflection on the role those working in the field can play to avoid participating in such obfuscations. By offering a framework through which the present can be counter-archived, this article hopes to contribute to understandings of the historical, material, political and ideological continuities that exist between the so-called far and extreme right and the mainstream. As the very language and concepts through which antiracist struggles are conducted are themselves discursive sites of struggle, it is hoped that this article contributes to the resignification, if not reterritorialisation, of the domains to which the field of far-right studies is applied.

Mainstreaming as discursive reification

Since at least the year 2000, ‘research on the far right has been a booming field’ across a range of disciplines (Mondon 2022, 876). Much of this enthusiasm has seemed to stem from a desire to ‘solve’ the problems of the far right, which are frequently conceptualized as discrete problems. Examples of this include phenomena such as online radicalization, rightwing extremism, the return of white supremacist neo-Nazi organizations and the rise of incels and the manosphere and so on. A shortcoming of such approaches, however, is that they effectively aim only at symptoms of the underlying structures that enable them. While specificity is crucial, so too is establishing connections between seemingly discrete phenomena. Making such connections is precisely what the mainstreaming discourse seeks to do insofar as it situates a range of far-right phenomena within a broader trend of normalization and tolerance, if not acceptance (Krzyżanowski 2020a, 2020b). Commenting on this, Aristotle Kallis claims that we are currently ‘witnessing a lethal “mainstreaming” trend ... that involves previously taboo ideas, frames, and practices becoming the new “common sense”’ (2013, 221).

Despite its pervasiveness, the mainstreaming discourse is not without known issues. Some of these are terminological, leading Mondon to claim that substantial aspects of the sub-field of far-right studies, are built upon ‘epistemologies of ignorance’ that centre populism as mainstreaming’s primary modality, rather than focusing on the role of racism and whiteness (2022). As Mondon elaborates, this is a curious lacuna for a field that tends to be obsessed with ‘lively definitional debates’ and terminological reinventions (2022, 876). Elsewhere, Brown, Mondon and Winter note that whereas subtle distinctions are often drawn between terms like conservative, far right, radical right and extreme right, the term mainstream itself typically remains uninterrogated or taken for granted, more ‘often defined by what it is not, rather than what it is’ (2023, 164). Along similar lines, Kallis concludes that the concept of the mainstream ‘is deployed in everyday and academic discourse with a laxity that is uncharacteristic for our analytical, definition- and

classification-obsessed modern mind' (Kallis 2015, 6). This lack of definitional clarity can work ideologically to mask the contingency of the mainstream through 'the assumption that it is common sense to know what it signifies' (Brown, Mondon, and Winter 2023, 166). Through such assumptions, the mainstream is effectively reified as an assumed background, which exists ontologically and ahistorically, and is imagined to be always-already *there* for the far right to enter and influence. For Kallis, this is problematic because it obscures the extent to which the so-called 'extreme' and 'mainstream' exist relationally, and derive their meaning from one another (Kallis 2015, 7).

Several further issues stem from this terminological starting point. One of these is that the uncritical reification of the mainstream can lead to its portrayal as a 'moderate, legitimate or positive' entity that is both passive and objective, rather than itself hegemonic and contingent (Brown, Mondon, and Winter 2023, 163). For Brown, Mondon and Winter, this positing of the mainstream can lead to the conceptualization of mainstreaming as a primarily 'unidirectional' process, whereby the far right influences the mainstream, but not vice versa (163). This position leads to what Kallis calls 'the contagion thesis' (Kallis 2013), whereby the far right supposedly 'infects' the mainstream unidirectionally by acting as a contagion upon it. Brown, Mondon and Winter critique this thesis insofar as 'the framing of "contagion" places the mainstream in a position of object, or even victim, rather than subject' (2023, 168). As they elaborate, this positioning portrays the mainstream as something that is 'simply being infected by and reacting to the far right, rather than having control and agency over mainstream public discourse' (168). Thus, the issue with the contagion thesis is that it obfuscates and elides the possibility of multidirectional flows through which the mainstream and far right come to influence one another and perhaps even function symbiotically.

To ameliorate these relatively reductive interpretations of contagion and unidirectionality, critical scholars such as those discussed immediately above have enlivened the possibility of *multidirectional flows*, whereby the margins and mainstream can influence one another in both directions (for an overview of some of this recent scholarship, see Vitek 2024). Mondon and Winter's groundbreaking work, *Reactionary Democracy* (2020), deploys the eponymous concept to demonstrate that democracy and liberalism (qua the mainstream) not only at times fail to act as a buffer against the far right but rather can become conducive to it. More recently, Mondon has argued that the idea that influence flows unidirectionally can prop up what he calls 'the bulwark fantasy' (Mondon 2024), in which liberal elites and conventional political actors are portrayed as providing a defence against the far right's attempts to infiltrate the mainstream. This conceptualization, Mondon suggests, obscures the extent to which 'really existing liberalism has been a more or less active enabler' of the rise and return of the far right (Mondon 2024, 2).

Resisting this fantasy, Mondon instead seeks to reveal how ‘rather than acting as a bulwark against the resurgent far right ... the liberal elite has facilitated the process through which the far right has become a growing threat’ (6). In general terms, this approach articulates with Krzyżanowski’s work on ‘normalisation’ (Krzyżanowski 2020a, 2020b), which describes the multistep processes through which liberal elites either knowingly or unknowingly work in tandem with far-right actors to effectuate discursive shifts that legitimize far-right ideas. In both approaches, ‘The mainstreaming of the far-right is ... conceptualized as a two-way street, with its success hinging both on the efforts of far-right actors as well as their liberal democratic adversaries who willingly cede political and cultural ground’ (Vitek 2024, 8).

While the above critiques of the mainstreaming discourse are nuanced, and vital, I am interested in taking their problematization further. Indeed, I aim to show how these critiques of the discourse can themselves even work to subtly reproduce its pitfalls. In particular, I want to take the thrust of their critique further by noting that just as the notion of *unidirectional* flows discursively reifies the mainstream as a static entity that is merely acted upon, that so too, the notion of *multidirectional* flows reproduces an ontology in which the far right and mainstream are, at least originally or potentially, distinct from one another. (Indeed, this is implied by the notion of flows going in multiple directions, as well as via the invocation of a ‘two-way street’). Thus, while the accounts above avoid essentialising the relationship between the so-called margins and mainstream, they nevertheless still reify both as separate and/or separable entities. The critique thus reproduces some of the same assumptions upon which the uncritical version of the mainstreaming discourse is predicated: namely, the notion that the fringe and mainstream are distinct entities that have come in recent decades to increasingly interact, especially such that the former has been accepted into the latter, regardless of who or what is to blame.

By contrast, for reasons elucidated below, I instead want to problematize the idea of flow between objects. Indeed, I want to challenge the notion of the separability, and perhaps even the coherence, of the mainstream and the margins. To do this, I will critically interrogate the mainstreaming metaphor by revealing the way it works to ontologically, epistemologically and temporally circumscribe the suite of phenomena that have come to be associated with the far right, and the extent to which this very process is implicated in the mode of political storytelling through which modern liberalism both articulates and thereby discursively constructs itself.

Mainstreaming as discursive reconstruction

When it is deployed uncritically, the mainstreaming explanation for the rise or return of the far right can work to subtly posit an anterior scene, or prior state

of affairs, when the far right was not *already* proximate to the centre.² This is because the idea that the fringe has come to infiltrate and corrupt the centre – via mainstreaming – implies that originally it did not influence it. So too, it implies that a distinct and novel process, or set of processes, must have occurred, or begun to occur, at a definable point in time.³ This temporalisation of the far right's influence, I contend, reveals a covert investment in the mainstream insofar as it implicitly purifies – and at worst, possibly romanticizes, or provides an alibi to – the mainstream, by portraying it as being *separable* from the influence of the far right – including its racism, ethnic nationalism and misogyny – which supposedly *only now* pervert it.

The stakes of this obfuscation are readily apparent in settler- and post-colonial contexts where the mainstreaming discourse predominates, such as in the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. In these contexts, the discourse of far-right contagion that underpins the mainstreaming metaphor paradoxically works to purify the settler- or post-colonial nation of its own history, reconstructing that by which it is constituted – normative white supremacy – as something that has merely entered the frame, or returned, in recent times. This temporalizing gesture effectuates a colonial politics of innocence that fits with Rodríguez's framework of 'White Reconstruction', which he defines as the 'historically persistent, continuous, and periodically acute *logic* of reform, rearticulation, adaptation, and revitalization' of white supremacy Rodríguez (2021, 3). As Rodríguez elaborates:

Contrary to reductive ... formulations of white supremacy as an exceptional, irrational (hateful), and/or reactionary/extremist political subjectivity, a rigorous definition of the term encompasses the deeply historical, normalized relations of gendered anti-Blackness and racial-colonial violence, evisceration, and denigration that have characterized the emergence of Civilization and its coercive iterations of global modernity in the long post-conquest epoch. (2021, 7)

When invoked carelessly, the mainstreaming explanation can participate in White Reconstruction by portraying the phenomena it purports to articulate – namely, those associated with, or labelled 'far right' – as newly emerging or resurging. However, to say far-right racism has been 'mainstreamed' – i.e. that the periphery has infiltrated the otherwise good centre – is to imply that the far right originates from outside of the mainstream from the beginning. Indeed, even the term 'far right' itself works to dissociate phenomena labelled as such from the mainstream, which operates as a shifting signifier for society, culture, nation, or something comparable. By depicting the far right as something that migrates *into* the mainstream – be it ontologically, epistemically, or temporally – those who deploy the mainstreaming metaphor run the risk of failing to appreciate how these phenomena have always-already been

generated *from within* anything that could be called ‘the mainstream’ from its inception.

Positing a ‘fringe’ that mobilizes towards the centre invisibilises what Kanjere calls the ‘patterns of similarity between the rhetoric of overt, explicit white nationalism and that of normative white supremacist power’, the latter of which can be understood as ‘[encompassing] techniques of colonising, bordering and governing white settler colonial nations’ (2023, 236). To state this somewhat differently: to say white supremacy has only *recently* been mainstreamed in the liberal west is to disavow how the liberal west itself was founded and has been maintained. There can be no United States, Britain, Canada, Australia or New Zealand without empire and settler-colonialism, which themselves depend on white supremacy. Here, the foundational and foundationally violent declaration ‘*terra nullius*’ is exemplary.

When the mainstreaming discourse temporalizes far-right violence – be it intentionally or unintentionally – it works to obscure the prevailing logics of white supremacy. When this occurs, the discourse reproduces the ‘strange fiction’ Rodriguez has identified through which it appears as if ‘the operational logics of anti-Blackness and racial-colonial violence have been decisively displaced from their sturdy and readily identifiable housing in official state and juridical regimes’ (2021, 112). This is because although the mainstreaming discourse identifies anti-Blackness and racial-colonial violence, *the very mode of that identification*—that of articulating the process of ‘mainstreaming’ – can invisibilise the extent to which those operational logics have *always* been essential to the formation and maintenance of racial-colonial nations, and their ‘ecosystem of white supremacy’ (Kanjere 2023, 236). The temporalisation of the far-right – the claim it is in the process of emerging, returning, and/or becoming normalized – can thus paradoxically *exceptionalise* the far right even *as* it is acknowledged as being in the process of *becoming* unexceptional.

Several important implications, both conceptual and political, stem from the paradoxical White Reconstruction of the far right. The first, is that portraying the normalization of the far right as a disruption of mainstream norms obscures the extent to which the far right is merely a symptom of the mainstream itself (as encapsulated by Mills’ notion of racial liberalism, discussed below). Second, is that the idea the far right has been mainstreamed implies, conceptually, that the process could be reversed: that far-right nationalism, racism, misogyny and transphobia are alien to, and separable from, the mainstream such that they could be isolated and expelled to restore or reinstate the ‘good’ society, culture or nation. Politically then, the idea the far right has been mainstreamed can lead to a game of insides and outsides, where the bad thing corrupts the good thing, which could be made good again if the bad thing were to be expunged. This approximates Julia Kristeva’s notion of abjection (Kristeva 1982), where that which the subject finds

intolerable about itself is projected upon the Other such that it is expelled from the body – in this case, the body politic – to make it good again. The far right ‘contagion thesis’ (Kallis 2013) alludes precisely to the abject insofar as the idea of contagion implies a foreign body that comes to infect the familiar.

The idea that ‘bad stuff’, such as racism and ethnic nationalism, have been brought into a formerly good nation, *which could be made good again*, buys heavily into liberal mythology (Mills 2008, 2017). Mills’ idea is that although liberalism explicitly disavows racism through its tenets of universality, equality, justice and the individual subject, that nevertheless, racism is not an aberration or anomaly to liberal society, but instead, a constitutive part of it. Mills seeks to reveal this through the related concepts of ‘racial liberalism’ (Mills 2008, 2017) and ‘the racial contract’ (2019). In the memorable opening line of *The Racial Contract*, Mills states that ‘White supremacy is the unnamed political system that has made the modern world what it is today’ (2019, 1). He elaborates that the legacy and continuities of this unnamed political system are disavowed in the present through liberal narratives of modernity and progress which attempt to locate racism only in the past.⁴ As Stuart Hall reminds us, however, race and racism are ‘the centrepiece of a hierarchical system that produces differences’ (Mills 2017, 33), and it is precisely this production, for Mills, that liberal mythology seeks to disavow and invisibilise via its own narration of itself.

In *Reactionary Democracy*, Mondon and Winter provide a detailed exegesis of the relationship between illiberal and liberal racism (2020, 51–106). They explain that the relationship is not one of straightforward opposition because liberal racism, and liberalism itself, can paradoxically co-exist with, if not sustain, overt racism. Consequently, ‘the mainstream in liberal democracies is not immune to far-right politics, nor will it necessarily act as a bulwark against them. In fact . . . the borders between the two are fuzzy and movable’ (Brown and Mondon 2022, 149). Building on this, my perhaps paradoxical claim is that when deployed carelessly, the mainstreaming discourse itself can work to (re)produce liberal mythology by exacerbating the ‘fuzziness’ Brown and Mondon have identified. At first this appears counterintuitive, because at the very centre of the mainstreaming explanation is the admission that racism has not been overcome, but rather, is in the process of resurging. Despite this, the mainstreaming discourse can reproduce liberal mythology in an ironic way that varies slightly from Mills’ formulation, which is that rather than depicting racism as an *old* problem society has supposedly overcome (*à la* liberal mythology as originally conceived), instead, the mainstreaming metaphor depicts racism as a *new* problem that has recently emerged or resurged. Thus, whereas liberal mythology confines structural racism to the past, the mainstreaming discourse, when deployed carelessly, can work to confine it to the present. However, to follow this line of thought, and to diagnose white supremacy as entering the mainstream with the emergence of figures like

Trump, Wilders, Pauline Hanson, Brexit, the Proud Boys (and so on), is to buy into a version of liberal mythology that obscures the larger and longer histories that have made and continue to make far-right political violence possible.

The temporalisation of white supremacy – whether confined to the past or the newly arrived present – is a calling card of White Reconstruction as elucidated by Rodríguez, who, referencing racism in the context of the abolition of slavery, Civil Rights and the prison industrial complex, observes that:

A critical problem for the contemporary moment entails the prevailing *periodizations* of epochal racial power/violence that reify the past tense as the temporal container of history's severest forms of systemic racism. Such archival manipulations have the effect of narratively sterilizing the contemporary ongoing period of White Reconstruction as if it is a comparatively more enlightened, benign, or simply less violent globality of racial power. (2021, 111)

When used clumsily or applied too broadly, the mainstreaming discourse can function as one such sterilizing modality. That is to say, perhaps counter-intuitively, that the very *mode* through which the existence of 'mainstream' racism and misogyny are admitted can simultaneously serve to circumscribe these phenomena – ontologically, temporally and/or morally – by portraying them as deviations from, or aberrations to, the liberal society within which they are seen to merely occur, rather than originate. And this is but a further example of the way liberal mythology is constantly in the process of surreptitiously reconstructing liberalism's image (*of itself*) through present tense archiving.

If the argument so far is taken seriously, then we are not faced by an old problem that 'we' have supposedly overcome. Nor are we faced by a new problem that has supposedly only recently arisen. Instead, we are faced by an old problem that is always in the process of renewing itself through its own narrative self-effacement (that is, through its storytelling and mythmaking). In light of this, in the following section I shift to consider how we might articulate far-right phenomena more effectively.

On racial-colonial nationalism

How can far-right phenomena be articulated with specificity in the present without simultaneously invisibilising the underlying structures, legacies and continuities, be they ideological, material, symbolic, or affective, that have served as their conditions of possibility? And how might we situate those phenomena in relation to the everyday workings of the 'mainstream' without simultaneously circumscribing and temporalizing them through our attempts? Although a work in progress, one approach I have found helpful

is that of foregrounding the underlying structures of racial-colonial nationalism. To begin to elucidate this, I start with the central idea that all forms of western nationalism, whether they are designated extreme, far right, radical or banal – and perhaps even when they go entirely unnoticed – posit and idealize the nation as a unitary whole, that either exists and should be preserved, or that otherwise, should be aspired to. For far-right nationalists in liberal democratic contexts – those who are commonly said to be in the process of being mainstreamed – this image of the nation is explicitly articulated in reference to whiteness. Put simply, for them, the unitary, authentic nation is, or should be, racially pure (Bhatt 2021; Feola 2020; Hage 1998; Moreton-Robinson 2015). Hence, the term ‘white nationalism’.

An ‘extreme’ example of this national idealization can be found in the neo-Nazi maxim known as ‘the 14 words’, as originally conceived by David Lane, who founded the neo-Nazi group ‘The Order’. The maxim goes as follows: ‘We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children’. Here, we find an explicit articulation of the anxiety that the nation’s (racial) singularity, purity and wholeness are being diluted by the racial other. This same anxiety can be found in racist conspiracy theories that have proliferated throughout liberal democratic contexts, such as those relating to the so-called ‘Great Replacement’ or ‘white genocide’ (Bhatt 2021; Feola 2020; Ghumkhor 2023; Gillespie 2023; Gillespie and Ghumkhor 2024). A far-right version of the same idea can be found in the Australian political party ‘One Nation’, which was founded by Pauline Hanson, and propagates a range of racist, Islamophobic, anti-Asian, anti-Black and anti-Indigenous policies (Moffitt and Sengul 2023). When the name ‘One Nation’ is paired with these policies, that to which the name refers becomes abundantly clear: a racially pure, singular nation, that is whole and unambivalent, and always-already reconciled with itself.

While such calls are emulated by a plethora of far-right ethnic nationalist groups and formal political parties across a range of contexts (Gillespie 2021), the act of positing and idealizing the nation as a unitary whole is not unique to extreme- and far-right nationalism. It is a common feature of conservative and (so-called) left nationalisms as well, including those which espouse multiculturalism. A cringey but well-known version of this can be found in a long-running Australian advertisement that features a choir of children singing the following nationalistic words: ‘We are one/But we are many/And from all the lands on earth we come/We share a dream/And sing with one voice/I am, you are, we are Australian’. While these lyrics purport to convey a ‘feel-good’ multicultural message – a celebration of Australia’s alleged unity in its diversity – it nevertheless constitutes an alternative version of Hanson’s ‘One Nation’ insofar as it celebrates the imagined existence of a singular dream, voice, land and nation. If we reflect further on this message of unity, a disturbing romanticization if not White Reconstruction can be

detected: namely, that of a nation founded and sustained by colonialism. 'We are *one*/But we are *many*/And from all the lands on earth we come'. The banality of this example illustrates how racial-colonial nationalism works to reproduce racial liberalism by mythologizing and fabulating the nation's origins in the present. Here, we see violent, ongoing colonialism archived in the present as a feel-good multicultural origin story. Such moments are a clear manifestation of what Rodríguez calls 'multiculturalist white supremacy' (2021, 2), and they are decidedly not exceptional.⁵

While only painted in broad strokes thus far, the above examples provide a sense of the violence the nation and nationalism necessarily entail. While it is well-known that overt nationalism attempts to preserve the nation through exclusion (Anderson 1991; Hage 1998, 2004), such as via white supremacy, so too 'liberal' and 'progressive' nationalisms – which usually attempt to mask their violence – seek to preserve the nation through exclusion as well, even if this exclusion sometimes masquerades as (conditional) inclusion, such as that which is predicated on national values, citizenship tests, preferential immigration and so on. Here, Rodríguez's discussion of 'multiculturalist white supremacy' (Rodríguez 2021, 2) is again instructive, and can be drawn upon to critique the notion that exclusionary far-right ideologies have only recently come to contaminate previously welcoming liberal nations *à la* the mainstreaming metaphor.

A reason for the inherent violence of nationalism is that national inclusion is necessarily predicated on exclusion (Anderson 1991). As Benedict Anderson famously elaborates, the nation is:

inherently limited ... because even the largest ... has finite, if elastic, boundaries, beyond which lie other nations. No nation imagines itself as coterminous with mankind ... nationalists do not dream of a day when all the members of the human race will join their nation. (1991, 7)

Writing in a similar vein, Sivamohan Valluvan argues that the nation is always defined first by what it is not, rather than first by what it is (Valluvan 2021, 34–36). This is because nationalism is predicated on the figure of the outsider against which the nation comprehends itself:

Nationalism, as opposed to being a claim premised primarily on active belonging, is principally a wager of non-belonging, an assertion of the nation's 'constitutive outside' ... This is less a question of being moved by desires about who we are and more a question of being agitated by concerns about who we definitely are not. (Valluvan 2019, 36)

This theory of nation and nationalism is problematic for the mainstreaming discourse because if we understand nationalism in this way, then it cannot be, *per the crude version of the mainstreaming metaphor*, that exclusionary, rightwing forces have infiltrated an otherwise welcoming and inclusive centre (qua the multicultural nation). Nor, however, can it be, *per the more*

sophisticated version of the mainstreaming metaphor, that exclusionary, rightwing forces have been brought into an otherwise welcoming and inclusive centre via liberal elites who have ‘willingly [ceded] political and cultural ground’ (Vitek 2024, 8), thereby effectuating a series of discursive shifts that have resulted in far-right normalization. Instead, on this account the centre is always-already exclusionary from the beginning, and moreover, must remain so in perpetuity insofar as by definition its maintenance is predicated on keeping the outsider outside.

By understanding exclusion as originating from the centre, we can detect a structural affinity between supposedly exceptional forms of far-right violence and those that sustain the nation. Take for example the range of white supremacist conspiracy theories that have increasingly proliferated throughout the liberal democratic west in recent years. Typically, these articulate an anxiety that the racial outsider not only wants to get in, but moreover, *is actively conspiring to do so* (be it via the Great Replacement, a silent white genocide, a trojan horse strategy and so on). While these conspiracy theories might appear ‘extreme’, the conspiratorial logics that underpin them are common to the social, cultural and political formations that seek to preserve the nation (Gillespie and Ghumkh 2024). So too, they bear a resemblance to state-based practices and securitization techniques which subscribe to precisely the same ontology: that of positing outsiders who want to get in (Ghumkhor 2023).

The ontologies of white supremacy and the state are thus homologous. Both are characterized by a gaze that seeks to secure the nation by looking inward and outward simultaneously. Ghassan Hage calls this phenomenon ‘paranoid nationalism’ (Hage 2004), the hallmarks of which can be detected in the racialized and militarized border protection regimes that look outward to incarcerate migrants, refugees and asylum seekers (Giannacopoulos 2011, 2013; Loughnan 2019; McKinnon 2020) and inward to surveil, securitize and incarcerate Black, Brown and Indigenous peoples (Cunneen et al. 2016; McKinnon 2020; Porter and Cunneen 2020a, 2020b) via what Rodríguez has called ‘domestic warfare’ and the logics of counterinsurgency (Rodríguez 2021). As Amangu Yamaji scholar Crystal MacKinnon observes, these outward and inward looking gazes, and the material practices in which they manifest, are not distinct phenomena, but rather, constitute ‘the carceral continuum of ... settler colonialism’ (McKinnon 2020, 693) which sustains the racial-colonial nation. Adding to this, we might say that just as the state’s practices of looking inward and outward are connected, that so too the logics of normalized white supremacy are connected to those of their overt counterparts: namely, those typically labelled ‘far right’. Understanding this connection reveals the irony of responding to the far right by inaugurating new police powers and modes of criminalization. After all, such powers have ultimately functioned, both historically and contemporarily, as vectors

through which race and racialization have been produced and reproduced *as such*. Moreover, far-right actors have not only consistently appealed to such powers but have also actively sought to harness and weaponize them *for themselves*, in their capacity as de facto paramilitary, against the racialized populations they target.

The practices that constitute the ‘carceral continuum’ of normalized and overt white supremacy are by definition fundamentally *unexceptional*. They are what sustains the racial-colonial nation. And yet, these practices bear a structural affinity to those of the far right, which the field of far-right studies typically diagnoses as only recently resurging and *becoming* mainstreamed within western liberal nations. Here, we could remind ourselves of Patrick Wolfe’s well-known claim that colonialism ‘is a structure rather than an event’ (Wolfe 2006, 390). However, in light of the above problematization of the mainstreaming metaphor and its attendant notions of ‘normalisation’ and ‘contagion’, which ontologize white supremacy as originating from outside of the mainstream, we might add a minor revision. While colonialism is a structure rather than an event, it is nevertheless a structure *within which* discrete events *seem* to occur, and in which those events and phenomena are frequently dissociated from their very conditions of possibility: namely, the racial-colonial structures of the nation that make them possible.

Conclusion: implications for ‘far-right studies’

Research on the far right is booming. Researchers from a range of disciplines appear enthusiastic about analysing far-right nationalism, extreme nationalism and rightwing nationalism. However, their emphasis seems to fall almost exclusively on the former of the two terms: the far right, the extreme, the rightwing. The second aspect, the nation and nationalism, are often neglected: mentioned incidentally but without emphasis, or said, but not *thought*.

Noting these silences, Mills’ *The Racial Contract* begins with a line worth repeating: ‘White supremacy is the unnamed political system that has made the world what it is today’ (Mills 2019, 1). Similarly, others have written about the way race and racism function as an ‘unspoken grammar’ (Jenkins 2021) of the supposedly ‘post-racial’ liberal west (Goldberg 2015; Valluvan 2016). In this article, I have argued that although the mainstreaming explanation of far-right violence purports to acknowledge the existence, scope and severity of racism and white supremacy, that nevertheless, when drawn upon carelessly it can paradoxically work to temporalize and circumscribe the far right by portraying it as an aberration of the liberal multicultural nation, rather than an expression of its foundational logics. That is to say, the mainstreaming metaphor’s very mode of identifying white supremacy can serve to invisibilise and obscure its

origins – such as by positing and ontologising the existence of a moderate and modern liberal centre, which was supposedly always-already ‘there’ to begin with, and has only later come to be contaminated and infiltrated by the far right. This manoeuvre replicates liberalism’s arc of self-narration and resonates with Rodríguez’s concept of White Reconstruction, which, when instituted, works to keep the unnamed political system unnamed, and its unspoken grammar silent. This is because although the mainstreaming discourse *purports* to acknowledge the prevalence of political violence, it nevertheless simultaneously obfuscates the very origins of that violence by attributing them solely to actors that have supposedly only recently migrated into the mainstream. Understood in this way, the problems of normalized white supremacy are cordoned off and attributed only to far-right actors, while the (racial-colonial) nation itself is exonerated and provided an alibi.

In this article, I have attempted to raise awareness of the potential pitfalls of the mainstreaming explanation for contemporary far-right political violence. In doing so, I have suggested that the mainstreaming of the far right should be thought in relation to the racial-colonial nationalism by which it is underpinned. I have argued there is a structural affinity between so-called ‘extreme’ and ‘everyday’ nationalism, and that the former is not merely incidental or coincidental to the latter, but fundamental to it, insofar as both are predicated on logics of exclusion, even if that exclusion sometimes disavows or invisibilises itself, and even if it masquerades as inclusion.

The implication of the foregoing discussion for those working in the field of far-right studies – which ultimately is an extremely broad interdisciplinary field, which is only loosely defined (Ashe et al. 2020) – is that we would be well placed to *not* take up the study of far-right phenomena as if they are distant objects whose presence is surprising and novel, and in need of being accounted for *as such*. Instead, a high degree of critical reflexivity is required (Vaughan et al. 2024; Winter 2023), and researchers in the field may benefit from considering their relationship to, and perhaps their investment in, both the objects they purport to be studying, *and* the very distance they posit between themselves and those objects. To what extent might such an evaluation reveal the discursive operations of White Reconstruction at work?

Notes

1. As they elaborate, this proclivity has dominated since at least 2000, when Paul Hainsworth’s influential collection, *The Politics of the Extreme Right: From the Margins to the Mainstream* was published (Brown, Mondon, and Winter 2023, 176; see also: Hainsworth 2000).
2. I am here emphasizing the phrase ‘*when deployed uncritically*’ to distinguish the critical and reflexive way that authors such as Brown, Mondon and Winter use

the term, from the innumerable ways it is deployed more casually, not only by other researchers, but also now frequently in journalistic, political and popular discourse.

3. One of the dominant accounts of this has been described above in reference to Krzyżanowski's work on normalization (Krzyżanowski 2020a, 2020b). For a concise overview of other such accounts, see Vitek (2024).
4. For further reading, see Domenico Losurdo's *Liberalism: A Counter-History* (2011), which provides a counter-archive of liberalism's reliance on colonialism and racial-colonial violence.
5. Indeed, similar origin myths can be found throughout the US, UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, where stories of 'pioneers' and the 'discovery' of previously 'undiscovered' and 'uninhabited' lands abound.

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