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ARTICLE

Explaining Far-Right Thinking and Its Surge in the United States

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Abstract: *This paper offers a relational conceptualization of the far right that is applicable across space and over time. Far-right thinking is conceptualized as adaptable to diverse socioeconomic and demographic groups relative to diverse targets of resentment and hatred. It pivots on a linkage between casteism and replacement theory, the latter being the affective register of the former. The recent surge of far-right thinking is a matter of movement not from the fringe to the mainstream, but rather from implicit to explicit status within the mainstream, where it has always resided yet shapeshifts between covert and overt. Focusing on the US context, this article critiques three salient frameworks that explain the surge of the far right and imbricates pertinent points from each relative to the conceptual framework. All have merit, but alone their recommendations for countering the far right are mainly short-term. The article concludes with an agenda that connects with the conceptual framework and calls for research to document and examine the evolving spread of explicit far-right thinking and practices across institutions, sectors, and nation-states.*

Keywords: far right, casteism, Great Replacement conspiracy theory, electoral politics, emotion, media

The ascendance of the far right in the United States and around the world and the repercussions in physical and subjective violence to minoritized populations have left many groping for an explanation, as well as clarity regarding what precisely the "far right" signifies. I write from the vantage point of the United States to provide an in-depth discussion of the far-right surge in one national context, paying attention to the role of ordinary people in far-right movements that crystallize in formal governance.

To situate the US case, the first section presents a general conceptualization of the far right that is intended to be useful across contexts, and it offers brief examples of how general trends touch down differently across space relative to local histories. In-depth comparative international analysis and examination of far-right transnational linkages are important but are beyond the scope of this article. The next three sections explain the surge of the US far right by critically engaging salient modes of analysis and their explanations, each of which has merit but is insufficient in isolation. These include 1) a materialist framework through the lens of electoral politics that prioritizes

economic precarity in analysis, 2) an affective framework that highlights emotions, and 3) a socio-technical framework that focuses on media and internet use, especially social media. I recognize another framework that focuses on global conjunctures (e.g., Hart 2020; Saull 2023a, 2023b; Saull et al. 2015; Worth 2019), but this type of analysis tends to prioritize the political economy of the formal political sphere in a global context and lacks attention to bottom-up processes in specific far-right contexts, the focus of this article. The three frameworks are cast neither in totalizing nor additive terms; the intent is to imbricate pertinent points of the three perspectives, treating them not as competitors but as complements within the overarching conceptual framework.

Conceptualizing the Far Right

I begin by addressing why the far right is difficult to define, and I specify my approach, which centers on inequalities given by an allegedly natural hierarchy combined with an affective channel for the tensions of difference that flow from that hierarchy. I then develop a conceptual framework to explain the far right's embrace of a natural hierarchy, which is presented in terms of casteism. Casteism is not an ideology but rather an epistemology—a lens through which subjects understand the world. This epistemology is grounded in daily life through a preoccupation with fear of replacement in the societal hierarchy by designated Others, which is presented in terms of the Great Replacement conspiracy theory. The conceptualization is adaptable across space and time while recognizing context-specific processes in particular places. At the end of this section, the entwined concepts of casteism and replacement theory are placed in the context of US history to argue that the far right is long-standing and has shifted over time between being implicit and explicit in formal governance. The three ensuing sections critique and imbricate the materialist, affective, and socio-technical frameworks while grounding points from the conceptual framework developed below.

The Thorny Problem of Defining the Far Right

Salient approaches to defining the far right include who they are—their demographic composition—and where they live; their targets, including Jews, Muslims, feminists, members of the LGBTQ+ community, immigrants, persons of color, and the differently abled; and their ideologies. All these approaches are helpful but also introduce problems.

The Diversity Issue

A focus on demographic composition and location can be misleading because the far right is internally diverse, and the nature of its diversity varies from one place to another within and across nations. One common portrait of the MAGA base is white men who are unemployed or underemployed and living in the industrial heartland where generations of manufacturing workers once held middle-class jobs that eventually

became outsourced or transformed into low-paying, less-than-full-time contract work. The demographic-regional narrative embeds a story of insecurity due to a lost life, along with anger regarding downward mobility, fear that an insecure life may become more insecure, and resentment of Others outside the narrowly defined demographic-regional group because they allegedly overrun local jobs, schools, and neighborhoods, and more generally because they are seen as destroying a lost life that has been idealized. This portrait and its problems are elaborated in the section on the materialist framework.

The diverse MAGA base is dispersed throughout the nation in rural and urban areas alike, and its Others vary depending on the location and its demographic composition. Televised scenes from the January 6 insurrection vividly captured the diversity of the US MAGA base, notably regarding class and location. Although about 60 percent of the insurrectionists fit the common image of the Capitol rioters—unemployed and without white-collar job experience—a full 40 percent were "credentialed"—CEOs, shop owners, doctors, lawyers, information-technology specialists, and accountants (Pape and Ruby 2021). As elaborated in the section on the affective framework, upper-class and working-class American men may share the same anger because they feel entitled to the American Dream, which they have supposedly been unable to achieve because Others are replacing them, and they are outraged by what they consider to be the sponsorship of this tragedy by the government (Kimmel 2013). The composition of the insurrectionists reveals a cross-class alliance despite different material circumstances. Moreover, the common assumption of a tidy geography separating the working and credentialled classes is challenged by the fact that 39 percent of the arrested insurrectionists came not from "Trump country" but from battleground counties (Pape and Ruby 2021). The spatial dispersion of the MAGA base is consistent with the spread of local MAGA Republican legislatures throughout the nation and the attendant anti-DEI legislation on the books or in the works.

As discussed in the section on the materialist framework, persons of color were increasingly drawn to the far right during the 2024 presidential election, especially men who share with white Christians some of their targets of resentment. In their public rhetoric, neither Vivek Ramaswamy, an Indian American who ran in the primary for the Republican nomination, nor Mark Robinson, a Black American who became the Republican nominee for governor of North Carolina in March 2024, identifies with their racial/ethnic group; both self-identify to the American public as "American first" (Bendery 2024a; Qin 2023). Ramaswamy has argued that America's strength is found not in its diversity but rather in its unity (Davis and Khalid 2023). Persons of color in the United States, especially Hindus who embrace far-right thinking, have connected with whiteness on the grounds of racial purity (Ashutosh 2023; Dutta et al. 2024). Ramaswamy has direct connections with Hindutva, India's Hindu counterpart to MAGA thinking, and its party, the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) (Savera 2024). Both the Hindutva movement and the BJP embrace anti-Muslim exclusionary laws, segregation, and vigilante violence akin to US Jim Crow–era policies against Black Americans

(Varshney and Staggs 2024). The connection between white Christian supremacy in the United States and Hindu nationalism in India is palpable (Ashutosh 2023; Olmstead 2023). Robinson indicated in 2020 that he would like to return to the days when women were denied the right to vote; he also is pro-Nazi, anti-Muslim, advocates arresting trans citizens for using bathrooms (Bendery 2024a), and dismisses the reality of racism. (Bendery 2024b). Ramaswamy, Robinson, and many ordinary citizens of color overlook the general far-right antipathy toward racial and ethnic Others and instead connect along dividing lines other than race, such as misogyny, islamophobia, antisemitism, and homophobia.

The far right is replete with otherwise unlikely alliances, including a new, internally diverse evangelical movement. The new evangelicalism is a nondenominational, charismatic form of Christianity that surged in the United States in the 1990s. "Charismatic" Christianity has two meanings: the "Christian belief and practice that emphasizes the supernatural dimensions of Christian experience" (Taylor 2024, 3), and the vesting of authority in the magnetic personalities of apostles as opposed to centralized institutions as in denominational Christianity (Weaver 2016, 116). The new evangelicalism has been dubbed the New Apostolic Reformation (NAR), and it constitutes an important component of the far-right base, even as it is under the radar in part because it is heterodox, recruiting from established denominations to accomplish the unlikely feat of a coalition between conservative Catholics and Protestants (Ebin 2024; Taylor 2024).[1] The NAR's locus of authority outside institutions also helps clarify how this movement has remained under the radar (Weaver 2016, 116). Significantly, the new evangelicalism embraces the "Seven Mountain Mandate," the aim of which is to reach into every corner of life by controlling seven major societal domains: family, religion, education, media, arts and entertainment, business, and government (Bolinger 2022; Gagné 2024; Taylor 2024).

The spread of the NAR across the United States reflects the extensiveness of local MAGA legislatures, and it is crucial to grasp the role of the states in the diffusion of far-right thinking (Diamond 1995). MAGA legislatures have implemented the NAR agenda through state bills to define daily life, largely through the education sector by regulating curricula and what is speakable by law.[2] The plan is to undo liberal education

1 "New Apostolic Reformation" was coined by C. Peter Wagner, the "intellectual godfather" of the NAR, who became "a top-tier leader in global evangelicalism" by the 1980s (Taylor 2024, 13, 56). The global dimension of the NAR is the result of its mandate to spread the new evangelicalism through missionization, a destructive colonial enterprise that has subjugated indigenous peoples, often in partnership with the US government (Diamond 1989; Weaver 2016).

2 The *Chronicle of Higher Education* has developed a DEI Legislation Tracker, an ongoing report of bills in red states that curtail liberal education. Bills differ across states and include a variety of mandates, from the closure of DEI offices and initiatives to the dismantling of tenure, the regulation of curricula, and restrictions on what is speakable (Chronicle Staff 2025).

in primary and secondary schools, and in colleges and universities, to inculcate far-right values among children and adults alike. Education has never been free from bias and politicization (Loewen 2018), but what distinguishes the new evangelicalism overall is the weaponization of religion to achieve political power. The sector has found a partner and mouthpiece in Donald Trump, who recognized the scope and power of the NAR in his first administration (Ebin 2024; Gagné 2024; Taylor 2024). Irrespective of whether Trump shares new evangelical religious beliefs, he nonetheless operates with the NAR to securitize a "natural" hierarchy, with white Christians at the apex. The strategy is to stoke fear of replacement by minoritized Others, especially by immigrants from the "Global South."

The Problem with Ideological Definitions and Specification of an Alternative Approach

Ideology also is commonly used to define far-right thinking. Ideologies and practices listed by political scientist Cas Mudde (2019) include treating inequality as "natural," using violence as a form of power, ethnocracy, fascism, nativism, authoritarianism, and populism. He divides the far right into different groups: Extremists are revolutionaries who embrace fascism, whereas radicals are reformists who embrace democracy, albeit illiberally, for native groups only. Cynthia Miller-Idriss (2020) offers a more fluid list, recognizing a spectrum of beliefs among the far right, which she defines ideologically in terms of antigovernment and antidemocratic practices and ideals, exclusionary beliefs, fixation on existential threats and conspiracies, and apocalyptic fantasies.

Mudde's matrix of ideological extremists versus radicals is problematic because "democracy" is more a complex process than a static result of voting, as elaborated in the communicative model of democracy focused on public deliberation and reasoned outcomes (Habermas 1984).[3] Ideologies such as nationalism and nativism also are problematic as conceptual hinges for the far right because they can imply minimal transnational activity due to "insurmountable differences of opinion" among far-right activists in different nation-states (Mudde 2019, 65); yet far-right activists routinely overlook nationalist and nativist interests to collaborate on common concerns (Ettlinger 2025).

One problem with any list of ideologies is the lack of attention to the *relation* between ideologies. Consider, for example, Julia Ebner's (2021, 21) point that stories transmit far-right thinking. From this vantage point, the conspiracy theories or apocalyptic fantasies in Miller-Idriss's list are more vehicles for far-right thinking than underlying ideologies; my section on the socio-technical framework elaborates this point.

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3 See also Young (2000) for an example of a Habermasian model of democracy extended to consider issues of difference within communities.

Whatever the ideological list, problems arise in using ideology as a defining feature of far-right thinking because an ideology is unable to accommodate variation across contexts regarding which group dominates a "natural" societal hierarchy and which group is at the bottom, as well as variation among targeted outgroups. Lists of ideologies suffer from problems similar to those of the demographic-locational approach. As Ebner (2021, xx) argued, "hatred and extremism have no ideological colour or political direction. Ideology is in fact interchangeable. The constant is the shape that narratives and identity transformation dynamics take."

My operative definition of far-right thinking is epistemological to capture how subjects understand inequality, both regarding the idea of a natural societal hierarchy and how to interpret tensions wrought by the inequalities given by the hierarchy. From this vantage point, far-right subjects experience daily life not with a fixed ideology but rather an acceptance of natural inequality along with the perennial fear that designated Others at the bottom of the societal hierarchy will replace them. My approach can accommodate variation across contexts regarding which groups are at the apex and lower rungs of societal hierarchies, which groups are considered threats, and which stories are told to recruit and incite.

One might raise the question whether inequality is too broad a concept to define the far right. After all, capitalism, which undergirds the global economy, is built and sustained on inequality. However, inequality manifests variously along a continuum, with naturalness and fixity of inequality on one end, and fluidity that permits upward and downward mobility at the other end. Both poles can, and commonly do, occur in a single context. In the United States, individuals from minoritized populations can ascend to political power and wealth, but such achievements may or may not be recognized by those on the far right who reject power relations outside a predefined hierarchy. For example, Obama became the first Black president of the United States, but once in office, he had to work without even a modicum of respect and collaboration among the proto-MAGA Tea Party caucus. Ordinary citizens from minoritized populations can be hired into formerly homogeneous workplaces, but they may be treated and evaluated differently from their coworkers while being subjected to daily microaggressions. Similarly, schools may be "desegregated" in terms of a diverse student body, but they commonly are segregated internally in extracurricular activities and in formal curricula that reserve honors education for the privileged. Parents resenting co-location of diverse students, even in the absence of curricular and extracurricular integration within schools, often opt either to homeschool or send their children to private or charter schools that are free from federal regulations.[4] From the vantage point of the far right, children are

4 The homeschool movement in the United States was developed by white Christians. By 2016, 1.7 million children were homeschooled, two-thirds of whom were religious (Du Mez 2021, 188–89). Private school initiatives began in the wake of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) (Du Mez 2021, 39);

"the next generation cultural warriors" (Du Mez 2021, 191), and they must be raised to ensure that outcome. When formal governance entails laws that explicitly render discrimination illegal, an allegedly natural hierarchy and the inequalities it mandates can only be sustained through assiduous strategizing. I turn now to elaborate, first, on casteism's concept of hierarchy, which accommodates the simultaneous operation of fluidity within structured "natural" hierarchies; second, on fear of replacement; third, on the powerful entwinement of casteism and fear of replacement: and last, on how far-right thinking figures in US history through the present.

Inequality Given by a "Natural" Hierarchy: Caste Broadly Construed

Broadly construed, caste is not a specific feature of Indian society as commonly represented but rather, according to Isabel Wilkerson (2020, 70), it signifies structured inequality. The word caste originated in Portugal as *casta* and was applied to Indian society when Portuguese traders observed Hindu divisions in India, but caste as a concept and regime of practices has a much longer history throughout the world (67). As conceptualized by Wilkerson, the concept is not, however, totalizing because it pays attention to context-specific processes. *Mechanisms* of division vary from one context to another. For example, physiognomy in the United States has been central to the construction of a racialized hierarchy, whereas caste divisions in India are evident in surnames as well as in a myriad of behaviors and practices.[5] In the UK, fixed notions of class are indicated by dialect. References to "white supremacy" in the ensuing sections focused on the United States therefore are intended as context specific. Every context is constituted by multiple dividing lines (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religion, abilities, age, etc.). Accordingly, caste as a structure and a system of ranking is amenable to the societal ordering of difference along multiple axes (70).

The concept of caste is relational insofar as it is not only about power held by those high in a societal hierarchy; sustaining positions high in the hierarchy also depends on holding down designated Others. Caste is conceptually similar to "racial capitalism" (Du Bois 1992; Robinson 1983). As W. E. B. Du Bois argued, slavery was foundational to US commerce and industry. "The resulting color caste founded and retained by capitalism was adopted, forwarded and approved by white labor, and resulted in subordination of colored labor to white profits the world over" (1992, 30). He showed that capitalists in the North and South alike acted to preserve the right to exploit workers by opposing Black suffrage and maintaining fundamental inequality. Caste operates in sync with racial capitalism because it "is the investment in keeping the hierarchy as it is in order

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they have been supported by the second Trump Administration and local MAGA legislatures through the charter school movement.

5 Some individuals proactively change their names in protest of casteism.

to maintain your own ranking, advantage, privilege, or to elevate yourself above others or keep others beneath you" (Wilkerson 2020, 70–71).

Casteism and racial capitalism do, however, differ insofar as the former encompasses the latter—that is, race is one of multiple societal "dividing lines." As Wilkerson (2020, 19) put it:

> Race, in the United States, is the visible agent of the unseen force of caste. Caste is the bones, race is the skin. Race is what we can see, the physical traits that have been given arbitrary meaning and become shorthand for who a person is. Caste is the powerful infrastructure that holds each group in its place.

Attentive to multiple dividing lines, Wilkerson casts racism in the United States as "one manifestation of the degree to which we have internalized the larger American caste system." More generally, "Caste is fixed and rigid. Race is fluid and superficial, subject to periodic redefinition to meet the needs of the dominant caste in what is now the United States" (19, 70–71). Subjects have agency, and under contingent conditions, they can be socially, economically, and politically mobile to seemingly escape the shackles of a fixed hierarchy. Yet such fluidity does not counterbalance the cumulative effects of discriminatory practices that explain problems such as the wealth gap in the United States between Black Americans and those with white privilege or the disproportionate number of persons of color in prison.

As a relational conceptualization of difference, caste is valuable because it is adaptable across space and over time, defining structures of inequality along multiple axes of difference depending on context. Yet "structures" are not actors; people are. Structures of inequality in far-right thinking are driven and sustained by emotions, notably fear of downward mobility among those in privileged positions. The apparent fragility of the "natural" hierarchy given by casteism generates fear of replacement, which fuels resentment that can evolve into hatred, even rage.

The Great Replacement Conspiracy Theory

The emotional mix of far-right anger, resentment, and fear is articulated in the conspiracy theory of the "Great Replacement," the idea that those at the apex of a natural hierarchy will be replaced by an inferior, often non-native, population. In the current global context, replacement theory is particularly relevant to the dramatic increase in international immigration resulting from political, economic, and environmental catastrophes, and the tensions that have emerged in destination cities and towns. Key to replacement theory is the feeling of victimization, which drives the anger, resentment, and fear. Fear of replacement prompts a sense of urgency to eliminate Others to prevent the upward mobility of purportedly inferior people. In the context of cultural politics, "elimination"

is a process, not a result; the goal is to decapacitate Others, which can occur in various ways, from physical to subjective violence (Bratich 2022, 9–10).

Replacement theory is understood to have originated in France in 2011 with the far-right theorist Renaud Camus's book *Le Grand Remplacement* (The great replacement), which warns of an impending takeover of French, and more broadly European, society by immigrants, notably Muslims. Renditions of the theory later appeared in Germany and Sweden (Ekman 2022), and more generally, the theory often has been imported wherever a majority population is considered threatened.

There is, however, a longer history of replacement theory. Camus dedicated his book to the French novelist Jean Raspail and the British politician Enoch Powell. Raspail's apocalyptic novel *The Camp of the Saints*, published in 1973, told a tale of the end of European civilization wrought by an invasion of immigrants from India and Africa into France. The title draws from Revelation 20:9 and refers to Christians besieged by invaders, a fear highlighted by Steve Bannon and Stephen Miller regarding immigrants to the United States (Donahue 2019, 123; Garcia-Navarro 2019). Raspail created a political myth that resonates with far-right anti-immigrant sentiment and islamophobia in Europe and the United States; Camus's book represents the transformation of Raspail's fiction into replacement theory (Stan 2024).

Enoch Powell is famous for his 1968 "Rivers of Blood" speech that expressed alarm about the increasing number of immigrants in England and the supposedly imminent replacement of native English by immigrants. In the speech, Powell declared, "It is like watching a nation busily engaged in heaping up its own funeral pyre." He claimed that the English now "found themselves made strangers in their own country" as immigrants took up residence, their children filled schools, and immigrant workers were treated better than the native English in workplaces (Ghosh 2011).

Other scholars have traced replacement theory even further back in history. Alexander Barder (2021) traced fears of racial Others threatening white supremacy to the Haitian Revolution that resulted in Haiti's independence at the turn of the nineteenth century. Colin Bossen (2024) also recognized the long history of replacement theory, although he emphasized the secularization of the theory in legal systems—from medieval papal bulls, which were significant beyond religious matters as "Rome's most formal but also most common medium for political communication" (Meserve 2021, 9), through to US property law. Bossen further argued that notions of Christianity and whiteness merged into white Christianity with the so-called discovery of the Americas and became naturalized at that time.

Du Bois's account of Reconstruction sheds light on early instances of fear of replacement in the United States. He found that the economic precarity following the Civil War triggered fear among white workers that former slaves posed

competition and would replace them. Reflecting on the white mob mentality, he commented:

> Back of the writhing, yelling, cruel-eyed demons who break, destroy, maim and lynch and burn at the stake, is a knot, large or small, of normal human beings, and these human beings at heart are desperately afraid of something. Of what? Of many things, but usually of losing their jobs, being declassed, degraded, or actually disgraced; of losing their hopes, their savings, their plans for their children; of the actual pangs of hunger, of dirt, of crime. And of all this, most ubiquitous in modern industrial society is that fear of unemployment. (1992, 678)

Economic precarity in the above scenario defines a particular context, which does not include other possible concurrent dynamics such as cross-class alliances. But it is the fear of slippage in the societal hierarchy combined with the notion of replacement by those at the bottom that explains scapegoating behavior and acts of violence; economic precarity alone cannot explain the regularity of maiming, lynching, and burning at the stake. The sense of victimhood is powerful, especially when this feeling is shared. As elaborated in the ensuing sections on different explanatory frameworks, material factors such as economic precarity and affect are most compelling when imbricated with other frameworks.

While casteism articulates the epistemology of a natural structured inequality, replacement theory produces an insecure landscape of fear. Emotions that underscore replacement theory run through wide-ranging contexts, exemplified in Camus's book, Raspail's novel, Powell's "Rivers of Blood" speech, interpretation of the Haitian revolution, legal systems over time, and in Du Bois's account of Reconstruction following the Civil War.

The Power of Replacement Theory and Casteism in Tandem

I link casteism with replacement theory to capture the relationship between far-right epistemology—the subject's perception of inequality rooted in a natural hierarchy—and the emotional mix unique to the far right that is encapsulated in fear of replacement. Casteism creates the landscape of uneven power relations, while replacement theory generates a sense of intense precarity by cultivating the idea of perilous victimization by Others. In turn, the anger and resentment accompanying the fear of replacement (re) invigorate actions to sustain the hierarchy. Subjects on the left also may subscribe to caste, but an idealized memory of something elusive like democracy does not generate the toxic mix of emotions like fear of replacement, which governs thought and behavior in daily life. This point is elaborated in the sections on the affective and socio-technical frameworks.

Casteism and replacement theory serve different yet interrelated purposes, and they operate along a similar relational logic. As previously indicated, casteism is not just about one group exerting power over another but rather oppression to sustain one's privilege. Replacement theory operates with the same relational logic, although in the reverse direction: The dominant population lives with fear of being replaced by another population that will dominate to create its own privilege.

Casteism and replacement theory also share adaptability. Caste structures society relative to multiple dividing lines, and it does so in a way amenable to the binary "us versus them," in which "them" represents diverse Others, while replacement theory is the affective register channeling fear of the Others who will replace "us." The constitution of "them" (Others) and "us" (the dominant population) varies across contexts, but the structure of the power relation is the same, as is the affective response among the dominant population.

Crucially, the entwinement of casteism and replacement theory helps explain a sense of unity among far-right subjects despite their diversity and diverse targets. Distinct groups find unity in imagining their victimization and in nostalgia for an idealized past, fueling a sense of urgency for a "return" (Pruden et al. 2022). Previously mentioned alliances exemplify the diversity-in-unity of the far right over time: the cross-class alliance between poor and wealthy whites against Black workers after the Civil War to preserve white privilege—what Du Bois (1992, 700–701) called the "public and psychological wage" of whiteness (see also Inwood 2019; Kellogg 2020; Roediger 1991); the cross-class alliance at the January 6 insurrection between the stereotypical MAGA base—un- or underemployed men—and the "credentialled"; the acceptance of some persons of color in MAGA politics and culture; and the coalition of conservative Protestants and Catholics in the New Christian Right (NCR). Chelsea Ebin (2024, 11) argued that the sense of victimhood underscoring the NCR enabled the Catholic-Protestant alliance under the umbrella of single-issue politics that "were predicated on a fundamental friend-enemy distinction."

Another useful example of unity-in-diversity is the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, in 2017. The sense of victimization and fear of replacement was encapsulated in the main rally chant, "Jews will not replace us," even though the prompt for the rally was the removal of a Confederate statue, which reflects racism against Black Americans, not Jews. The expression of fear of replacement in antisemitic terms is intelligible in terms of a paradoxical unity of distinct hatreds and fears. Historically, Emma Green (2017) argued,

> Hatreds became universalized through common archetypes. Jews were seen by white supremacists as capitalists undermining local businesses. Black Americans fleeing the South in the Great Migration were seen as taking away crucial labor. Catholics were seen as immigrants stealing American jobs.

Currently, hatred of Jews "easily flickers between the universal and the particular, melding with the similarly particular hatreds of blacks and immigrants and other minority groups." This affective melding of resentments and fears renders antisemitism "a Rosetta Stone that can easily translate animus toward one group into a universal hate for many groups" (Green 2017). Unity-in-diversity, whether in the case of persons of color being drawn into the far right or the otherwise unlikely rally chant in Charlottesville, is achieved through the common ground of fear of replacement and a generalized Other, enabling a fluid diversity and capaciousness on the far right.

The Long-Standing Presence of Casteism and Replacement Theory in the US Mainstream

The entwinement of casteism and replacement theory in US history through the present prompts the question of the place of the far right in US governance over time. As commonly represented and presumed in the three frameworks, the far right has moved from the fringes of American society to the mainstream (Mudde 2019). However, this approach raises the question of how the internal diversity of the US far right evolved. How has it become so pervasive and diffuse? More generally, we might argue that the far right has waxed and waned over time, but this descriptive approach lacks explanatory power. As explained below, the far right has been in the US mainstream all along: Sometimes it has been explicit in formal governance, while at other times it has been implicit, as organizational strategies work around formal governance that constrains open far-right practices.

By "formal governance" I mean the institutionalization of far-right thinking—inequality given by a "natural" hierarchy combined with fear of replacement—through laws that pervade society. Historically, slavery and Jim Crow laws exemplify this sort of governance because they both articulated the notion of a natural hierarchy, and as Du Bois showed, their implementation operated on the basis of fear of replacement. Following the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Republican Party's "Southern Strategy" overtly embraced a return to Jim Crow norms (Maxwell and Shields 2019). Far-right thinking also became institutionalized in private organizations such as the John Birch Society (JBS), which was founded in 1958 in the context of the Cold War abroad, virulent segregationist sentiment at home following *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), and the post–World War II migration of Black Americans from the rural South to northern cities. The fear prompting the launch of JBS was twofold: the threat of communism and, in the United States, the threat posed to white Christians by Black Americans (Diamond 1995,13, 52–58). Currently, far-right thinking in the United States is explicit in the Republican Party, as well as in legal institutions and in statehouses across the country dominated by MAGA

politicians who have developed legislation to frame local life with white supremacist NAR values.[6]

Following the 1964 Civil Rights Act, Democrats arguably adopted an implicit version of far-right thinking in colorblind liberalism, which veiled policies sustaining inequitable conditions with a discourse of equal rights. US critical legal scholars who developed Critical Race Theory (CRT) in the 1980s demonstrated that Jim Crow was abolished in name but neither in thinking nor practice (Crenshaw et al. 1995). Critical Race Theory highlights the implicitness of far-right thinking during and following the civil rights era, consistent with caste systems that "live on in hearts and habits, institutions and infrastructures" (Wilkerson 2020, 74–75), despite the abolition of laws that once explicitly defined and formally institutionalized them. More generally, the post–Jim Crow legal system provided a vehicle for white supremacy and racial capitalism that has enabled appalling injustices despite laws abolishing explicit discrimination, from the perpetuation of regimes of exclusionary housing (Coates 2014; Safransky 2020), environmental racism (Pulido 2015), and mass incarceration of persons of color (Alexander 2010; Gilmore 2007), to dehumanizing and undemocratic policing strategies encompassing militarized and digitized tactics targeting innocent and unarmed Black Americans (Tulumello and Iapaolo 2022; Jefferson 2020). In the new millennium, Ruha Benjamin (2019) called attention to "the new Jim Code"—the various ways Jim Crow–era biases have become baked into the algorithms that govern our lives in the digital era. Racial capitalism has remained embedded in wide-ranging societal institutions to enable the perpetuation of white supremacy (Pulido 2000), even if implicitly disguised by liberal discourse.[7] One unique feature of CRT is the focus on an implicit/explicit distinction in the governance of racial capitalism in the United States. It calls attention not to "the far right" but to the persistence of the racialized system begun in the United States during slavery. I make use of CRT's useful distinction to draw attention to far-right governance broadly, recognizing that racism is central to US governance, yet one of many dividing lines. The second Trump administration has solidified an explicit overall will to "other" at the federal level and through local legislatures.

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6 A recent investigation that includes narratives from sixty of the Department of Justice's former attorneys showed the entire department has been turned into "Trump's personal law firm" (Bazelon and Poser 2025).

7 Following Melamed (2011), Pulido (2015, 811) indicated that *neo*liberalism veils racial capitalism. Alternatively, drawing from Foucault's (2008) analysis of the relation between liberalism and neoliberalism, I suggest that liberalism veils racial capitalism while neoliberal practices perpetuate inequalities. Foucault examined liberalism as a mentality that is predicated on equality, producing discourses that lack grounding because equality has never existed in practice; in contrast, neoliberalism is a mentality predicated on inequality and operationalized in actual governance. From this vantage point, neoliberalism and casteism intersect.

The common explanatory frameworks for the recent surge of the far right that I critique below lack due attention to the longevity of far-right thinking, yet they all offer important points that are complementary within the frame of casteism and replacement theory. I begin with the materialist framework.

A Materialist Framework Through the Lens of Electoral Politics: The Role of Economic Precarity

Many scholars who marked the rise of the US far right by Trump's surprising victory in 2016 have focused on the seismic shift in US voting patterns in the last decade among Democrats and Republicans. According to this view, white working-class voters in declining rural areas, such as the industrial heartland, shifted to the Republican Party and largely constitute the MAGA base, while the credentialled, who are wealthier, more formally educated, and work in growth sectors in cities, once Republican, shifted to the Democratic Party. Democrats still appealed discursively to their traditional blue-collar base, yet unsuccessfully because corporate strategies such as post-Fordist outsourcing, coupled with crowdsourcing in the digital era, have engendered a production system with diminishing capability to deliver secure living-wage jobs (Ettlinger 2016). The Biden administration's policy to restore the industrial heartland by establishing computer chip factories fell short because employment in these facilities is skewed toward higher-skilled labor (Wallace 2021), a problem that also characterizes data centers and a slew of other issues (Kneese and Woluchem 2025; Anselmi 2026).

The above explanatory picture is compelling, but the Democratic/Republican binary is limited because it homogenizes the electorate overall and the MAGA base itself while ignoring important contextual details. For example, in the 2024 presidential election, independents and the "undecided" figured prominently in electoral results. Further, the framing of change in voting patterns at the regional scale and in terms of an urban/rural binary overlooks diversity in US suburbia, which is highly segregated racially. Disaggregating urban voting behavior reveals different patterns, especially among Black and white suburban precincts.[8] Although white suburban voters turned out in higher numbers for Biden in 2020 than for Clinton in 2016, the share of white democratic turnout nonetheless declined while the turnout in Black suburban precincts increased (Rastogi and Jones-Correa 2023), and it did so across class lines and education level, especially among Black women (Laurison et al. 2022). The five deciding Midwestern states in the 2016 presidential election may best be conceptualized not as a container of the MAGA base but rather as fertile ground for the development of a movement that

8 Asian and Latino suburban precincts turned out for Biden but to a lesser extent than Black precincts (Rastogi and Jones-Correa 2023).

has become increasingly diffuse. Place matters (Lizotte 2019), but not as an internally homogeneous territory with fixed boundaries.

Marxist scholars interpreting the shift in electoral patterns agree generally on the material basis of change, specifically that MAGA supporters are concerned about being replaced by Others in their jobs. However, as reflected in Matthew Karp's (2023) critical response to Dylan Riley and Robert Brenner in *New Left Review*, arguments vary regarding whom the MAGA base opposes or from whom it wants protection. Focusing on class divisions and overlooking the cross-class alliance of the far right, Karp argued that the class battle is the same as in the past—the working class against the ruling elite—except with a flip-flop in party attachment and a regional focus. For Karp, fear of replacement in jobs figures prominently, but anger is directed at the government for permitting if not sponsoring the challenge to white working-class livelihoods. This view connects in part with Lawrence Rosenthal's (2020) view of a far-right transnational movement as an expression of resentment against perceived cultural elites in government, Hollywood, universities, big cities, and the mainstream media; in part, however, it diverges from Rosenthal's recognition of fears that are based in race and ethnicity, not class, and directed against a common Other, namely immigrants and refugees. For Riley and Brenner (2022, 23), resentment is aimed not at elites but rather at immigrants and persons of color. However, they argued against a racialized interpretation, reasoning that white workers' efforts to keep immigrants out and persons of color down pertain little to "identity" and prejudice; rather, the caste dynamics represent a rational strategy to preserve their jobs. Riley and Brenner separated fear of losing a job from fear of the people (Latinos) allegedly taking those jobs, and they did so based not on interviews with far-right subjects but rather as a matter of inference.[9]

Karp's and Riley and Brenner's materialist framework lacks recognition of the discursive nature of subjects' fear of replacement, and cannot account for anti-immigrant sentiment among the working class where immigrants constitute a small percentage of localities. In the industrial heartland, notwithstanding small numbers, the Latino population has been increasing, arguably triggering nationalist and racist reactions among the economically insecure white population (Oberhauser and Krier 2022), especially given that the Midwest leads the country in racial segregation and thus isolation (Farley 2019). Yet data for the 2016 election in Iowa showed that the most significant shift from Democratic to Republican voting occurred in counties that were almost entirely white, reflecting an immigrant threat that is more imagined and symbolic than material (Oberhauser et al. 2019; Oberhauser and Krier 2022, 238; Rodríguez-Pose 2020; Rodríguez-Pose et al. 2023).[10] The sense of victimhood that drives

9 Jardina (2019) shares this view. Based on national polls, she argued that resources are finite, and therefore white in-group solidarity is strong as a matter of self-protection, not hatred toward outgroups.

10 This point appears supported by a national survey of rural consciousness, which found that rural

the perceived threat of encroachment on jobs in the US Midwest results in blame-game politics that ignore an evolving production system in which living-wage jobs have been diminishing over time, irrespective of the demographics of the labor market.

The apparent oddity of increasing numbers of persons of color supporting Trump, mostly men, has received relatively little attention and calls for explanation. Trump's support among persons of color suggests to some that class is more important than race (Karp 2023). Others have called attention to the diversity among persons of color. In the case of Trump's support among Black Americans, political scientists Udi Sommer and Idan Franco (2023, 926) argued first that some Black Americans internalize "a self-derogation of inferiority" inculcated through white laws and daily regimes of practices, and second, that this sense of inferiority can drive an embrace of individualistic principles communicated through the discourse of the American Dream. Black American men who support Trump tend to be anti-feminist and are drawn to the image of masculinity and strength projected by Trump and the MAGA base more generally (Dent 2022). However, intersectionality requires attention. Recall the multiple resentments of Vivek Ramaswamy and Mark Robinson discussed in the previous section. The elasticity of Wilkerson's concept of caste applied to divisions among groups is well suited to an examination of a multiplicity of divisions and intersectional combinations of axes of difference (gender, religion, sexuality, class, age, etc.) within groups, relative to context. Framing MAGA support among persons of color in terms of casteism rather than economic precarity, as in the materialist framework, is helpful because precarity in an intersectional context goes well beyond economic, material matters. Crucially, as highlighted in the case discussed by Du Bois regarding white workers' fear of losing jobs to Black workers after the Civil War, opposition to Others is driven by fear, not just of losing jobs, but of being replaced by "inferior" Others in those jobs; in this way, decapacitating those who would replace you becomes the mode of resistance to economic precarity.

In sum, material insecurity in the context of fear of job loss is an important contextual feature of far-right dynamics, but it is partial. As explained in the next section, its significance lies not in explanatory independence but rather in its entanglement with immaterial issues. A singular focus on jobs leaves unanswered why the white, rural working class harbors anxieties about job replacement by Others in places where losing jobs to Others is not imminent, why persons who belong to minoritized populations support overtly racist politicians such as Trump, and why poor or otherwise downtrodden white Trump supporters embrace policies that run counter to their material interest, an

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consciousness matters politically along symbolic, as opposed to material, dimensions (Trujillo and Crowley 2022). However, segregation, which was unaccounted for, matters. The same study found that moral traditionalism better explains the symbolic link between rurality and partisanship than racial resentment. See also Shelley (2022) regarding the importance of cultural values in rural versus urban places. Attitudes about race are part of "culture."

issue that Arlie Hochschild (2016) has called "the great paradox" (see also Béland et al. 2022; Oberhauser and Krier 2022).

An Affective Framework for Interpreting Far-Right Culture: The Role of Emotions

Hochschild's (2016) field research in Louisiana, one of the poorest states in the nation and home to extreme industrial pollution, focused on how white Trump supporters in this place *felt*. "The great paradox" in Louisiana pivoted on government regulation; everyone hated it, and they hated the government for it despite the potential for environmental regulations to save land and lives. The firms guilty of poisoning the environment provided jobs, which people assumed would be eliminated by regulation despite evidence to the contrary (285). People working for polluting firms whose job entailed complicity in pollution accepted their lot and generally remained silent, except when encouraged by employers to oppose environmental regulation.

Hochschild discovered a culture of differentiated citizenship, as some regulations were considered acceptable—specifically those that control women and Black men (68)—a considerable qualification of the anti-government stance. The MAGA folk with whom Hochschild talked believed in a natural hierarchy, a fundamental element of casteism; they were misogynistic, racist, nationalist, and anti-immigrant. Her white Christian interviewees believed that designated Others were "line cutters," people intent on replacing them by butting ahead of them to deny them their American Dream—a humiliating tragedy permitted by liberal government. Hochschild's focus on emotions is useful in demonstrating how fear of replacement is the affective register of casteism. The people she interviewed hated politically correct liberals telling them how they should feel about Others they believed were lazy, abused financial assistance from the government, or were overpaid in government jobs (281–84). They loved Donald Trump because they perceived he *felt* the way they felt. The title of Hochschild's book, *Strangers in Their Own Land*, is reminiscent of the lament in Enoch Powell's "Rivers of Blood" speech that people "found themselves strangers in their own country." The book's title is apt because white subjects in Louisiana felt culturally marginalized, cancelled, and held in contempt by remarks like Hillary Clinton's claim at a September 2016 fundraising event that half of Trump voters belonged to a "basket of deplorables." Trump emerged as a politician who spoke their language, made them feel good about themselves, their resentments and animosities, and moreover, affirmed their superiority over Others. For a change, they felt represented by someone. Hochschild concluded that amid economic precarity, the people she interviewed were materially resilient; their distress, she argued, was emotional, rooted in cultural alienation.

Yet the material nonetheless is entangled with the nonmaterial. Economic precarity can exacerbate emotional distress stemming from nonmaterial matters, blurring the boundaries of problems and helping to connect alienation at a cultural scale with material predicaments that many confront in daily life. Material and personal problems

commonly intersect because persistent difficulty in supporting one's family and reaching or holding onto the American Dream exacerbates a history of personal failures, a clear finding in Hochschild's next ethnographic study in Kentucky, *Stolen Pride* (2024), and in Michael Kimmel's *Healing from Hate* (2018). Lost pride morphs into shame, and from there, blame-game politics prevails (Hochschild 2024). Scholars focused more on personal than cultural alienation and attendant emotions explain hatred and rage with reference to a history of personal failure and need to blame Others, often in combination with a need for love and connection with a community. A sense of personal failure can be precipitated materially by economic precarity resulting from un- or underemployment following deindustrialization (McDowell 2003), as well as by a history of failed goals and a long line of rejections in social and sexual relations (Kimmel 2013, 2018). In this context, angry white men's fragile subjectivities in the wake of shame and emasculation can explode into blame and violence (Kimmel 2013, 2018). As Joshua Inwood (2019) pointed out, economic distress intersects with fragile masculinities and white supremacy. Ebner (2021, 76) has argued that fear morphs into rage against Others and government alike. According to Kimmel (2013, 2018), violent men on the far right expressing rage typically have struggled with being "a real man" (see also Du Mez 2021; Miller-Idriss 2020).

Being "a real man" encompasses physical attractiveness, and deviations from far-right standards of virility cast members as undesirable. White supremacist Andrew Anglin, head of the neo-Nazi website the *Daily Stormer*, prepared men for the Charlottesville rally by mandating a "uniform" of khakis and white polo shirts. He warned: "We need to be extremely conscious of what we look like, and how we present ourselves. That matters more than our ideas. . . . If people see a bunch of mismatched overweight slobs, they are not going to care what they are saying." Anglin indicated that fat people were welcome to participate in a rally, on the condition that they commit to losing weight because "[c]ontinued obesity should not be tolerated" (cited in Conti 2017). Men's bodies should be "ripped"—a sign of strength and ability to excel in physical violence to protect against Others. In this vein, Banu Gökarıksel and her colleagues (2019) cast the imaginaries of far-right subjects as "fever dreams" emanating from fragile masculinities and fear of demographic apocalypse.

Muscular bodies represent an embodied expression of the far-right's mission to eradicate weakness. For example, Miller-Idriss (2020, 97) identified a gym in East Nashville, Tennessee, the Vengeance Strength Kvlt gym, which in mid-2017 posted on its website that weakness is "a sickness which rapidly degenerates the quality of body and mind." The gym's approach to "'proper training' requires purging weak people from your life and the 'burning away of everything and everyone which does not benefit you.'" Protests resulted in changes to the website, which then advertised its engagement with activities of religious organizations and fitness centers and indicated "a commitment

to no trends, no mercy, and no surrender."[11] Bodybuilding and religion overlap in the muscular Christianity of "chiselled chests paired with bible verses" (Woolley and Luger 2023, 151) that provides the fitness and discipline to navigate the apocalyptic phase of the Great Replacement (Miller-Idriss 2020, 103). Gyms and fight clubs have become important meeting and recruiting grounds for far-right men while enabling class fluidity as upper- and lower-class men engage in the same activities in the same places for the same reasons (Woolley and Luger 2023, 148).[12]

Women are also subject to the regulation of attractiveness. Women know they are assigned an SMV (sexual market value)—how desirable a woman is in the eyes of men—even if they lack access to the exact scores (Ebner 2020, 53–55). The *M* in SMV signifies that women are commodities for sale and men are buyers in the heterosexual market (55). Women therefore self-govern to continually increase their SMV to improve their marketability. The overt emphasis on patriarchy and misogyny reflects the disturbing ways women are regarded and treated, but crucially, women are key players in far-right dynamics.

Far-right women are expected to "stand by their men." Although most accounts of MAGA demographics focus on the statistical majority—white Christian men, who constitute a little over 60 percent of the MAGA base—forty per cent nonetheless are women (Blum and Parker, n.d.). Large numbers of women who are attracted to openly misogynistic far-right groups support a return to traditional gender roles and obedience to a gendered hierarchy—the "tradwife" movement (Mattheis 2018/19, 2021). The idea of *returning* to traditionalism presupposes a lost authenticity that can be regained to provide clarity, certainty, and a sense of security while drawing a boundary between "them" and "us" and contesting modern liberal culture (Benczes et al. 2020). Feminists who question male superiority, and moreover deny MAGA men the sex to which they understand they are entitled, require silencing. Along with SMV, STFU (Shut the Fuck Up) is another core concept among committed "red-pilled" women because it speaks to women's role as supportive of, not challenging to, the men to whom they belong (Ebner 2020, 58). For tradwives, seeking power is out of the question; instead, women, in this binary view of gender, should be "protective" and

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11 Vengeance Strength Kvlt has since apparently closed, and its website and Facebook accounts are defunct. Its self-description appears on at https://www.allbiz.com/business/vengeance-strength-kvlt (accessed October 14, 2026).

12 By 2010, around seven hundred mostly white evangelical churches in the United States had adopted mixed martial arts (MMA) as an outreach strategy (Du Mez 2021, 188). By 2020, a new, decentralized network of fight clubs was launched called "Active Clubs" that mixed MMA with white supremacy. This network grew just over 50 percent between April and August 2023 in the United States, from 30 in 17 states to 46 in 34 states (Ritzmann 2023, 9). Crucially, while brick-and-mortar Active Clubs are growing rapidly, the Active Club network is transnational (Ritzmann 2023) and operates online as well as offline; in the United States, individual clubs owned 53 Telegram channels by 2023 (O'Connor et al. 2023, 4).

"instinctual" to complement their men (Mattheis 2018/19, 2021). These women know that at any time, in public, their husbands may hit them to enact and broadcast their roles in the gendered hierarchy (Ebner 2020; Miller-Idriss 2020). Such assaults typify the intersection of white male privilege and notions of male victimization that justify violence (Pruden et al. 2022).

Yet not all MAGA women conform to the tradwife image. The "natural" far-right gender hierarchy permits fluidity. For example, there are the celebrities in politics and media such as Fox News who perform masculinist roles of toughness in leading positions while living up to the brutal far-right beauty standard (Skolnik 2025). There also are women who "just wanna have fun"; these women, who also conform to MAGA beauty standards, do not want to hear messaging to women by the likes of Charlie Kirk. They support Trump not for his policies but more generally for his embrace of political incorrectness and "freedom to offend" (Godfrey 2025). Despite apparent factions, women remain unified in their support for a caste system that positions them as privileged while othering minoritized populations.

Significantly, the affective dimension of the far right works on several levels at once, tying daily practices to broad narratives. The designated function of women in far-right visions illustrates connections between the tradwife movement, white supremacy, misogyny, and racism. The regime of gendered practices, for example, conditions women to embrace their reproductive role in a new American future through what they perceive to be a eugenics process whereby attractive white women out-procreate Others (Mattheis 2018/19). As feminist geographers have underscored, white women have long been central to the perpetuation of white supremacy through their role in biological reproduction, as well as social reproduction in spaces of home, neighborhood, and school (Bonds 2020; Domosh 2017). The male ideal of sculpted bodies speaks not only to men's capacity to fight and protect but also to their capacity to attract women for their personal pleasure, sense of manhood, and duty to perpetuate white supremacy (Conti 2017). These norms are found in places of fraternalization like gyms and fight clubs that produce masculinity on a larger scale (Woolley and Luger 2023). Power relations pivot on an assemblage of "isms" that bind casteism to fear of the Great Replacement, reinforcing the capaciousness and diffuseness of the far-right movement. As Sara Ahmed (2004) pointed out, hate has no location but rather is diffuse while binding diverse subjects with different targets to create a collective coherence. Similarly, Seyward Darby (2020, 35) argued that hate is a social bond that constructs belonging among dispersed, alienated individuals.

Angered and rendered insecure by their perceived inadequacies, men and women alike grope for an acceptance that far-right communities, constituted by like-minded people, provide and nurture. Love within communities is the other side of hate between them, a point elaborated in the next section. The sociality provided by far-right groups, from parties and casual social gatherings to fights, offers emotional support. As Kimmel (2018, 23) has argued, ideology alone has little to do with the power of the far right;

rather, it is the *sharing* of an ideology flowing from the victimhood expressed in conspiracy theories that forms the glue. Women and men commonly are drawn to the far right in search of belonging, often in the context of a history of dysfunctional family life (Darby 2020; Kimmel 2018, 20). Ebner (2020, 59) observed that many women come to the far right in search of love following the loss of someone close, and argued that the love search is pivotal in radicalization. An independent focus on emotions related to personal trajectories can overlook or downplay structural problems, including casteism, but love and hatred nonetheless help explain how emotions, even when stemming in part from economic distress, plug into a history of casteism linked with replacement theory.

However, two unanswered questions remain. First, neither casteism nor massive economic and emotional distress is novel, either singly or in combination. Why, then, has explicit far-right thinking, coupled with far-right dominance in formal politics at the federal level and in Republican-governed states, burgeoned and become explicit now? Second, the entanglement of material and nonmaterial problems renders the attraction to far-right thinking and associated groups intelligible, but enabling connection among diffuse lone subjects presents a serious challenge. Gyms, fight clubs, and places of education, recreation, and worship represent important meeting grounds, yet the capacity of these sites for massive recruitment is limited because they require that individuals seek out such spaces. How do far-right groups reach distressed, alienated individuals scattered across space? I suggest the answers to these questions are found in the socio-technical milieu of the digital era.

A Socio-Technical Framework for Explaining the Far-Right Surge: The Role of Media in the Digital Era

The normalization of explicit far-right thinking in the new millennium coincides with the emergence of digital media. The digital environment encompasses news and commercial websites, online forums, blogs, video games, and of central importance, social media. Like other infrastructures, media have not caused change but rather have enabled and cultivated actions and new regimes of practices, including novel modes of recruitment and radicalization (Devries et al. 2021). Departing from technological determinism, I recognize a complex and multidimensional milieu, but this view does not signify that technology is neutral; rather, values are embedded in technology to enable a host of problems, including the means to produce and rapidly spread disinformation in the form of conspiracy theories.

Whereas the static Web 1.0 developed in the 1990s and early 2000s permitted users to view information on web pages created by a few content creators, Web 2.0, the communication infrastructure of the early twenty-first century, introduced the novel affordance of content creation by users as well as the development of online social networks and the sharing of content across the evolving ecosystem of social-media platforms. Far-

right radio hosts of the twentieth century were instrumental in maintaining the viability of the far right, but the affordances of Web 2.0 have enabled far-right subjects to move from passive listeners to engaged "digital soldiers" (Donovan et al. 2022, 249–52; see also Rothschild 2021), constituting a unique participatory culture that helps explain the robustness of explicit far-right thinking in the twenty-first century in the United States and around the world.

Scholarship on *digital* cultural politics has emphasized different affordances of the media environment for the left and the far right, casting the former as relatively ineffective. First, the left also is internally diverse, encompassing the "credentialled" as well as younger voters, minorities, workers in union-heavy trades, and activists spread across diverse issues such as BLM, #MeToo, abortion, green energy, and gun control. Yet unlike the far right, the left lacks a unifying narrative like the Great Replacement that tugs at subjects' emotions in a way that is easily shared across diverse groups. A rallying cry such as the left's warning of threats to democracy, especially given the popular understanding of democracy in terms of once-in-a-while elections, is disconnected from daily life and ineffective. Accordingly, left messaging tends to be more within than across groups (Freelon et al., 2020). Second, differences in the informational frames of reference for the left and far right affect prospects for coherence. Those embracing explicit far-right thinking in terms of casteism and fear of replacement share the same informational frame of reference, relying on social media as a main source of information (including conspiracy theories), entertainment, and news. Further, far-right social media is supplemented by the mainstream Fox News and other more fringe outfits like Newsmax and One America News Network, which promulgate the conspiracy theories raging on social media. As indicated by Hochschild in her Louisiana study, Fox was the source for her interviewees' information about Others. In contrast, the left tends to draw information from mainstream news that is based on fact-checking (Freelon et al., 2020). Significantly, the left's reliance on *documented* injustices on social media cultivates dependence on gatekeepers of information with the requisite skills and resources, a top-down dynamic. In contrast, MAGA subjects have become angry based on unsubstantiated narratives that anyone can make up or share within a particular group or across groups and platforms; opportunities for active participation abound. With the above in mind, I turn now to specific affordances of twenty-first-century media for the far right, which productively make use of media's top-down revenue models to enable and nurture the in-group love / out-group hatred that is downstream from alienation and fear of replacement.

Affordances of the Top-Down Revenue Model

Mainstream social-media platforms operate with a revenue model based on advertising rather than user fees.[13] With a click, users agree to platforms' terms and conditions,

13 The social-media ecosystem includes far-right fringe platforms that operate with a different revenue

permitting platform companies to store their personal data on platform servers, manipulate their data to examine their behavior, sentiments, tastes, and preferences, and sell their personal data to other companies, which target advertisements to users whose data indicate their potential attraction to specific products and services. The revenue model operates through artificial intelligence (AI), specifically machine-learning algorithms that examine user data and predict their interests. Firms exploit users' personal data to microtarget advertisements, personalize notifications, and recommend books, restaurants, clothing, pictures, gyms, friends, and clubs, enabling users to shape their networks.

The revenue model is significant for user engagement because companies develop mechanisms to attract users to their platforms and keep them occupied (Paasonen 2016), maximizing exposure to advertisements. Choice architectures also encourage online lingering because having more choices encourages users to spend more time examining choices and making decisions (Sullivan and Reiner 2021, 418). Sorting algorithms ensure that the most engaging and provocative posts—those that are outrageous, emotional, angry—will be seen first, effectively relegating less provocative posts to obscurity and cultivating resentments and hatreds (Chun 2021; Donovan et al. 2022; Kosmidis and Theocharis 2020; Lim 2020).

The media environment also includes mainstream news wherein apparently left-leaning news anchors and journalists inadvertently complement those on Fox News insofar as the revenue model governing their operations is analogous to preferential treatment of extreme posts on social media to garner attention; news anchors and journalists thereby capitalize on sensational news to maintain ratings (Manucci 2017; Phillips and Milner 2021; Tanguay 2022). Accordingly, the mainstream left-leaning media implicitly disseminates far-right messaging by constantly providing free airtime for MAGA activity, conspiracy theories, and figureheads.[14] Gatekeepers of left media may criticize the objects of their reporting, but they rarely pay attention to those who are victimized (Phillips and Milner 2021). Consequently, these gatekeepers unintentionally accentuate MAGA stories while neglecting those affected, their condition, and the implications.

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model based on user fees to preserve privacy, and in turn, to enable the most extreme posts (Baele et al. 2023; Freelon et al. 2020; Kasimov 2021). These platforms often are formed in response to regulatory actions on mainstream platforms (Daly and Fischer 2021). For the sake of space, fringe platforms are not within the scope of this paper.

14 For example, during the Trump-Vance campaign in 2024, Vance's declaration that Haitian immigrants in Springfield, Ohio, were eating people's pets was intended, as Vance later admitted, to center immigration in the news; the truth of the claim was unimportant to Vance (Sullum 2024). The left media might have decided against covering the story and giving free airtime to Vance's absurd claim, which had negative consequences for immigrants in Springfield and elsewhere.

Far-Right Solidarity Through Bottom-Up Affordances of Social Media

While the revenue models of mainstream news and social media operate through top-down processes, the affordances of social media nonetheless provide scope for bottom-up participatory engagement in constructing and sharing content. As Mike Kesby (2007) theorized in the context of fieldwork, participation can be empowering; in the case of alienated subjects attracted to the far-right, participation signifies the sociality and acceptance for which so many on the right yearn. Personalized advertisements and notifications render social-media platforms familiar, welcoming "places" in cyberspace, ensuring that users will linger and return (Papa and Ioannides 2023). Liking, sharing, and commenting are the affective currency of the dynamic social-media environment in which individuals express and circulate their feelings (Lim 2020, 189). Beyond microtargeting individual users, algorithms target collectives of users by way of filter bubbles based on subjects' personal data, sorting users into homophilic communities—groups constituted by like-minded people. Filter bubbles in turn produce echo chambers, where users see only information that echoes their beliefs and feelings (Lim 2020), enabling distressed individuals to feel comfortable expressing themselves with authenticity (Shifman 2019). The socio-technical affordances of the social-media environment build walls around communities, mirroring and utilizing the feelings of far-right subjects, notably love within communities and fear, resentment, or even hatred toward Others outside their communities (Chun 2021; Lim 2020). As Zeynep Tufekci (2018, 7) commented, "When we encounter opposing views in the age and context of social media, it's not like reading them in a newspaper while sitting alone. It's like hearing them from the opposing team while sitting with our fellow fans in a football stadium. Online dynamics operate in tandem with the emotionally charged and hyper-segregated on-the-ground world."

The new media communication ecosystem provides easy access to far-right messaging that draws in diffuse subjects vulnerable to radicalization as they look, even if relatively passively, for places of connection and purpose. The online manosphere complements and considerably expands on-the-ground places of recruitment and radicalization such as fight clubs and martial arts centers, providing a virtual home for misogynistic messaging and the escalation of rage (Fowler 2025; Rothermel 2023). Incels—men with a history of rejection by women and therefore involuntarily celibate—find empathy and a place in cyberspace where they can build self-esteem (O'Malley and Helm 2023). Women looking online for hair and clothing tips encounter videos on platforms such as YouTube created by tradwife influencers who lace beauty tips with inviting far-right messaging (Zahay 2022). Politically encoded video games draw in subjects and guide them in *enacting* violence against Others. Games such as Angry Goy II, produced by Wheel Maker Studios in 2018, normalize hate while providing far-right messaging, such as pro-Nazi speeches, between levels of gameplay (Brett 2021).

Memes, which take an image or piece of information, decontextualize it, and then recontextualize it to change the meaning, have become a major avenue by which subjects express their emotions and share their messaging both within and across online communities. Memes can be texts, slogans, and videos; among MAGA users, they are overwhelmingly images. In contrast, left memes commonly have written content; as the the alt-right slogan puts it, in comparison to the far right, "the left can't meme" (Ebner 2019, 169; Freelon et al. 2020). Interestingly, this left / far right dichotomy in meme practices changed with the surge of support for Kamala Harris in her campaign for the presidency in 2024, as the strong desire to ensure Trump's demise as a politician united the left's disparate groups, temporarily. This brief turnaround illustrates the importance of a common referential anchor—the Trump-Harris debate—for rallying diverse subjects (Ebner 2019; Freelon et al. 2020). Directly following the debate, left subjects broke from their dependence on gatekeepers to participate in online meme warfare. In contrast, a bottom-up dynamic has been long-standing in MAGA digital culture whereby ordinary people develop and circulate images. This engagement has empowered subjects through participation to sustain the explicit far-right momentum and enable continual recruitment and expansion.

The continual decontextualization and recontextualization of memes, as well as mechanisms such as tagging that link memes with mainstream news, have provided the far right a broad referential infrastructure to help socialize new members, concretize narratives, and open channels among groups for possible cooperation (Armstrong 2021; Freelon et al. 2020; Stall et al. 2023). Explicit far-right memes commonly are derisive if not hateful and often re-present other memes and real-world events to circulate information filtered through far-right experience, values, and emotions (Stall et al. 2023). The far-right online ecosystem is complex, accommodating both diversity and unity. Some far-right memes are group-specific and function as identifiers of groups, reinforcing the familiarity of specific online collectives. However, other memes, such as Pepe the Frog, initially the smiling Feels Good Man created by Mat Furie in 2005, have become a common banner across MAGA groups as a symbol celebrating racism. Such unifying memes readily crosscut MAGA groups because they plug into the common fear of replacement to enable a diverse audience and intergroup solidarity. The MAGA base has organically become adept at digitalized communication across groups and strategic utilization of its internal diversity. A case in point is the organization and recruitment behind the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, in which different types of memes and related propaganda were deployed for different MAGA audiences to cater to their specific predilections (Ebner 2019, 171).

As communicators of conspiracy theories, MAGA memes are intended to challenge and cast doubt on left narratives, not to convince supporters of truth but to maintain forward momentum (Murphy 2023), and they accomplish this goal by being entertaining and engaging. MAGA memes often are deployed with humor and

are highly symbolic to provide a puzzle that only insiders can decipher (de Wildt and Aupers 2024), in turn empowering users by rendering them insiders as they figure out the messaging. The humor and the puzzle-like nature work alongside the social-media revenue model to ensure vulnerable subjects linger online as long as possible (Ebner 2019). As in video games and social media, elements of casteism and replacement theory gradually seep into subjects' psyches to facilitate radicalization and remind them of their targets (Munn 2023). MAGA Web 1.0 sites complement this dynamic by providing fake news that assumes legitimacy through mimicking the formatting and aesthetics of mainstream news (Murphy 2023). Commercial sites sell far-right material culture such as survivalist food products and especially hip hate clothing that mimics the meme aesthetic of symbolic messaging (Miller-Idriss 2020). The online commercialization of far-right material culture connects with online meme culture to expand on-the-ground MAGA activity, creating online gateways to recruitment and radicalization while also uniting supporters (Koch 2022) and funding MAGA organization and activity (Miller-Idriss 2020).

Socio-technical analysis reveals the affordances of effective internet usage on which the far right has capitalized. Far-right internet practices have enabled the organization of numerous communities in cyberspace, accommodating and nurturing diverse interests, resentments, and hatreds; simultaneously, they have enabled communication across communities to cultivate unification around an embrace of casteism's apparently fragile "natural" hierarchy, from which fear of replacement and the toxic mix of emotions flow. Recognizing the power of effective internet use, Jodi Dean (2021, xi) has argued that the left needs to beat the far right at its own game:

> The political question is thus the extent to which the Left will be able to recognize that its task is to energize its supporters and to reach those likely to become supporters, not to persuade an imaginary public sphere. There is no everybody. There is us and them and politics is about building an us that is big and strong enough to defeat them.

Yet I step back from this "us versus them" view. I am unconvinced that the struggle between the left and far right is one of good versus evil, respectively, or that the left warrants support because it is "less bad" when it enacts casteism, albeit implicitly by appropriating liberal language (Chatterjee 2021) and neoliberal practices that deepen inequalities. I conclude below with thoughts for an agenda.

Conclusion: Requirements for Agenda Building

I suggest that an agenda should be based on an explanation of problems; otherwise, it addresses effects rather than causes. The agenda I embrace recognizes the omnipresence of casteism and its affective register, the Great Replacement conspiracy

theory, which are operative across contexts, parties, and other markers of division. What is novel in recent years is not the movement of the far right from the fringe to the mainstream but rather its movement within the mainstream from implicit to explicit.

The entwined concepts of casteism and replacement theory present problems that are entrenched and have multilevel effects that can be interpreted as secondary or tertiary causes. Multilevel effects of long-standing problems are important because they offer a context for examining how a general problem can take on various forms and directions across societal sectors and spaces, but each requires linkage to the general problem. The three frameworks for explaining the surge of far-right thinking are downstream from casteism and replacement theory; they have merit and require attention, but an agenda based on any one of them or in combination that lacks connection with the frame of casteism and replacement theory will fall short. Examples of agenda items that derive from the three frameworks without, however, connection to a broader conceptual frame include relieving economic distress through various means such as the creation of jobs; deradicalization of individuals who have adopted far-right thinking and alternatives for vulnerable subjects not yet recruited; education about mis- and disinformation from online sources; and regulation of AI and internet usage. All these efforts are worthwhile, yet as solutions they are partial. Job creation to relieve economic distress may work until the next round of displacement (consider, for example, unemployed coal workers channeled toward coding jobs that generative AI then makes redundant). A respite from economic insecurity is unlikely to address a fundamental fear of displacement that morphs easily into the desire to assign blame, transforming possible *dis*placement into a matter of perceived *re*placement. Relieving economic distress is welcome, but given the diversity within the MAGA base and its cross-class alliance, material precarity can only be a partial explanation, and the overall framework leaves unattended fundamental problems that rip society apart. Regulations that would reduce mis- and disinformation and bias in AI would be wonderful, yet they are unlikely because government in the United States depends on big tech, whose revenue models in social media entail mechanisms such as ranking, sorting, and filtering algorithms that cater to the oppositional politics and explicit anger endemic to MAGA culture. Further, regulations commonly treat secondary or tertiary causes but not root problems. Regulation of tech lacks analysis of power relations and assumes that online behaviors can be separated from the on-the-ground dynamics they mirror and elaborate, and which require attention.

Wicked problems require a change in consciousness (Coates 2014). As a counter to the far right's creep into the education sector, education needs to extend far beyond mis- and disinformation to expose how caste works in various contexts and alert people to the potentially destructive relation between tensions of difference and emotional distress. The regular presentation of difference through histories,

stories, and interpretations of current events in classrooms from early childhood through adulthood would at least offer windows into other worlds and alternative routes—windows through which to reach subjects rendered vulnerable by material and immaterial problems producing emotional distress. This type of strategy is desperately needed, even if it is an uphill battle where anti-DEI legislation has been passed and would require activist counter-educational movements in families and communities. Further, an educational strategy would require complementary mitigation strategies for related effects of casteism, such as segregation within schools that impedes *experience* in classrooms with those who might be subjects of study; situated knowledges matter (Haraway 1988).

Beyond the call to connect specific strategies with the entwined problems of casteism and replacement theory and to incorporate critical discussion of these problems continually in education, research is needed to clarify how explicit far-right thinking is spreading and materializing in regimes of practices. As indicated, the reach of the far right into the education sector at all levels is clear. The far right's Seven Mountain Mandate coupled with the Caesarism of the second Trump administration should be met with research to document and examine the spread of an explicit far-right agenda into diverse institutions in the United States and around the world.

Research on transnational far-right linkages and their consequences also is needed. Ebner (2019) has argued that an important component of efforts to counter the far right is clarity regarding its support base, and that an adequate grasp of the extent, dynamics, and consequences of transnational linkages is germane. The strategic use of memes, hashtags, and propaganda in social media by the MAGA base to reach specific groups and message across groups strengthens already existing connections across national borders and fosters new transnational linkages (Ebner 2019; Froio and Ganesh 2019). Beyond the terror of explicit far-right formal and informal governance anywhere, at stake is the globalization of far-right thinking and a new geopolitics fueled both by the increasing number of autocrats around the world and the powerful bottom-up dynamics that sustain and expand the MAGA base in the United States and its counterparts abroad. Trump and other autocrats around the world may come and go, but as I have argued, far-right thinking is persistent and requires our most critical attention.

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