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## The Dynamics of Mediated Activism: Creative Responses and Counter-Narratives to Right-Wing Populism

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**RIGHT-WING POPULISM AND MEDIATED ACTIVISM: CREATIVE RESPONSES AND COUNTER-NARRATIVES**

# Voices of White Resistance: Democratic Theory and the Task of Contending with White Nationalist Voice

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As white nationalists have come to increasing prominence in recent decades, their presence presents a significant challenge to democratic societies. Motivated by a sense of racial imperilment, and opposed, sometimes violently, to core democratic ideals, white nationalists cannot be meaningfully incorporated into the political life of societies which promote inclusiveness and pluralism without threatening those values. Yet democratic theory, which seeks to offer ideal visions of what democratic societies could look like, provides no means for contending with the active presence of white nationalism in contemporary democratic societies. This article uses the concept of voice to explore these shortcomings in several theories of democracy, including deliberative, agonistic, and empowerment theories. In doing so, it draws on a wealth of white nationalist media, both physical and digital, to demonstrate how attitudes regarding racial imperilment, often articulated in terms of a 'white genocide', foreclose on any possibility of incorporating white nationalist voices into democratic societies. Moreover, an examination of white nationalists' ongoing project to shift the boundaries of what is permissible in popular discourse, a process which is amplified by digital media technologies, suggests that they are nevertheless a pressing problem for democratic societies which should be addressed. In doing so, it is important to move beyond the focus on voice which underlays much democratic theory, exploring instead the experiences of social life to which white nationalist voices speak so that we might gain a better understanding of what motivates white nationalist voice and, potentially, how it might be addressed.

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The increasing prominence of white nationalist groups in a number of democratic societies around the world has become a cause of significant public concern in recent years. Their exclusionist and even exterminationist aims, along with the willingness of some adherents to resort to violence, presents a significant challenge to democratic polities. Motivated by conspiracy theories portending the forced extinction of the white race, white nationalists see pluralism as a threat to racial survival. As such, they refuse ideal notions of inclusive democratic societies founded on rational deliberation and mutual respect. This does not mean, however, that they eschew political engagement altogether. In countries like Greece, Hungary, Italy, and Germany, white nationalists, or parties whose rhetoric mimics their own, have made inroads into national parliaments. Meanwhile, the persistent presence of white nationalist activists in digital space, both on mainstream platforms and their own sites, offers them an opportunity to engage civil society. In doing so, they seek to shift the bounds of permissible discourse to include their exclusivist aims, a strategy many groups refer to as 'metapolitics'. Broadly speaking, metapolitics entail using forms of cultural production like music, art, and memes, along with community-based activism, to shift broader social attitudes over time, particularly among demographics sympathetic to white nationalist ideas. Through the use of digital media and social networking platforms, white nationalists extend this metapolitical advancement of their voices into democratic societies around the world.

The notion of voice in relation to democratic ideals provides us with a useful entry point into thinking through these challenges. From the agoras of ancient Greece to modern conceptions of a deliberative public sphere, the ability to speak and be heard has been central to notions of democracy. As such, democratic theory, whether explicitly about voice or not, has sought to elaborate on how different voices might be empowered to greater participation and prominence in the democratic process. If we follow Couldry (2010), the importance of voice goes even deeper. It is a critical aspect of our humanity through which we assert ourselves as beings that matter in our world.

The same applies to white nationalists, for whom voice is a critical aspect of building and expressing a racial identity, as well as for asserting that identity against

perceived threats to its existence. Such voices crystalize in a network of individuals and small groups, operating in both digital and physical spaces, where they can and do spill over into more 'mainstream' society in the form of larger social movements, electoral blocs, and violent actions. Because these voices advocate for racially 'pure' societies, achieved either through exclusion, forced population transfers, or extermination of those they deem other, they present a challenge for which democratic theory has no answer. Their (potentially violent) rejection of pluralism means that empowering these specific voices risks empowering their larger aims; yet, ignoring or excluding white nationalist voices does not prevent them from attempting to influence politics.

This article draws on research which is a part of a larger study of the historical development and contemporary circulation of the white genocide myth, a conspiracy theory positing a planned extermination of the white race. Key to this research is a textual analysis of several prominent white nationalist digital platforms like *The Daily Stormer*, a neo-Nazi site, and *Counter-Currents*, an 'intellectually-oriented' online magazine published by the North American counterpart to the European New Right (discussed below). The circulation of other digital content, like music and hashtags, is considered as well. A significant part of this study also entails analysis of primary historical documents, comprising monographs, newspapers, magazines, pamphlets, and other cultural material produced by white nationalists dating back to the 19<sup>th</sup>-century. Much of this material is available online in digital formats through both mainstream and white nationalist-managed digital repositories. The rest has been drawn from various archives and special collections at university libraries.

This material, both digital and physical, offers a window into the rich and varied culture which informs white nationalist voice, demonstrating clearly its incompatibility with democratic ideals. Moreover, by considering how contemporary white nationalists endeavor to connect both their voices and cultural material to mainstream discourse—particularly via the circulation of digital content like music, as well as through strategies like trolling—we can better grasp how their metapolitical approach presents a challenge to democratic societies. Democratic theory does not provide us a clear means for contending with this challenge. As such, a more holistic

look at not only voice, but the experiences to which it speaks, may provide a more effective means of addressing the challenge posed to democratic society by white nationalism.

### **Voice and Democratic Ideals**

A primary aim of democratic theory is to articulate how societies might realize, or come as close as possible to realizing, an equitable ideal of democracy which is mutually beneficial for all of a society's constituents. An important element of these democratic ideals is the notion of voice. Popular directives to 'join the conversation' or 'make your voice heard' invite us to get involved while also assuring us that our voices are essential to the democratic process. So too does the tendency in democratic societies to set aside space—agoras, forums, salons, opinion pages, message boards, and comment sections—for voices to come together to discuss issues of concern. These spaces form the backbone of theories following from Habermas's (1991) work on the public sphere, which advocate for a place, separated from outside pressures like the state and economy, where citizens can engage in the building of consensus through rational deliberation. For public spheres to function all voices must be included in the deliberation so that a consensus may be achieved. Empowering voice, then, is at the heart of notions of the public sphere, and of ideal democratic practice more broadly.

Yet, the importance of voice runs deeper than the facilitation of deliberative discussion. It is tied to our ability to understand ourselves as agents in the world. In this sense, Couldry (2010) describes voice as the crucial means through which we provide 'accounts' of ourselves and our lives, accounts which, when taken seriously, give us a sense that we 'matter', that our lives have value and significance. Accordingly, listening is just as important an element of voice as speaking. It is 'an act of attention that registers the uniqueness of the other's narrative' (Couldry, 2010: 9). We must hear others' voices in a meaningful way if voice is to matter; otherwise, we would all simply be speaking to nothing and no one and our stories would vanish as soon as they are uttered.

Understood in this way, voice becomes more than just an aspect of human interaction. It is 'a value', meaning an outlook, 'that appreciates ways of organizing human life that themselves put value on people's opportunities for voice' (Couldry, 2010: 100). This is a crucial observation that simply having voice is not enough; without a form of social organization that ensures voices are shared and heard, voice matters little. Moreover, voices not only need to be heard, but also understood to have made some difference: 'there is no effective voice unless I recognize my act of producing voice in a specific output' (Couldry, 2010: 101). What does it matter, in other words, if we speak and are heard, but we do not feel that our speaking has amounted to much? Our voices must contribute in a way that matters to us and our societies should be organized to reflect that. Realizing this value, for Couldry, is a key task of democratic practice.

We might call this an empowerment theory of democracy in that it seeks to empower citizens to connect their accounts of themselves to the decision-making process and its outcomes. But empowerment only carries voice in democratic practice so far. Not all voices will agree, meaning that not all voices can be realized in a given outcome at a specific point in time. This implies conflict as an inseparable element of democratic practice, something which Mouffe's (2000, 2013) notion of 'agonistic' democracy addresses. Mouffe pushes back against the idea, prominent in theories of the public sphere, that universal consensus is possible, or even desirable. Universal consensus, she maintains, necessarily overlooks the 'political' aspect of human life, meaning 'the dimension of antagonism that is inherent in human relations' (2000: 101). Voices argue as much as they deliberate, so there will always be conflicts, 'antagonisms', and therefore lasting consensus is an impossibility. Indeed, such a consensus risks enshrining inegalitarian, hegemonic structures permanently (2000: 49).

As an alternative, Mouffe advocates for democracy built on perpetual, 'conflictual' relations. In this approach, the harmonious consensus is abandoned and the 'us/them' binaries of antagonism are retained; however, rather than an antagonistic understanding of "'them" ... as an enemy to be destroyed', 'they' are treated 'as an

“adversary” ... whose ideas we combat but whose right to defend those ideas we do not put into question’ (2000: 101–102). The only thing such adversaries need to agree upon is ‘a common allegiance to the democratic principles of “liberty and equality for all”’ (Mouffe, 2013: 7). This ‘conflictual’ arrangement ensures that no one consensus ossifies into a permanent political structure. Instead, any consensus can be challenged by an adversary, thereby assuring that ‘the conversation on justice [is] forever open’ (Mouffe, 2000: 76). Thus, drawing on Couldry, we can think of agonistic democracy as a means of valuing others’ voices and their accounts of themselves, even as we seek to ‘battle’ or exclude them from a given democratic outcome. That the situation is not permanent allows for excluded voices to be included in the future.

What Mouffe does not account for, however, is what happens to voices that lose those battles, especially those who lose more often than they win. For Allen (2004), loss is a fact of life in democratic society. With each decision, some gain and others lose out, and those who lose are asked to ‘sacrifice’ for the ‘greater good’ of their society (2004: 28–29). Democracy, then, is not only a political system for managing who wins or loses; rather, it is also a means of negotiating these sacrifices. It is in the relations between citizens where Allen argues the most important aspect of this negotiation can take place. By fostering social ties with each other, she writes, citizens can develop a political ‘friendship’ informed by ‘a habit of attention ... attuned to the balances and imbalances in what citizens are giving up for each other’ (2004: 134). Concern for others’ sacrifices is thereby necessary to ameliorate the inevitability of loss in democratic society, preventing in the process such loss from developing into resentment or hostility.

The crucial means by which these friendships are established, according to Allen, is the use of voice. Addressing the commonplace maxim ‘don’t talk to strangers’, she insists that, on the contrary, dialogue between strangers is an essential component of democratic society (2004: 48–49). We need to be able to converse with our neighbors, and to hear their complaints, if we are to meaningfully understand their sacrifices or express ours to them. Allen even provides a list of rhetorical guidelines or ‘habits’ aimed at facilitating this process via speaking to each other (2004: 157–158). Here again is a notion of voice as an account of one’s self, alongside a sense of voice as

a value which emphasizes the sharing of these accounts as essential to democratic practice.

These theorists provide a window into how notions of voice contribute to ideal conceptions of democratic life. Yet, while they offer eloquent and compelling visions of vibrant democratic societies, none of them provide a means for contending with the persistent presence of white nationalists within those societies. A closer look at white nationalism and its panoply of voices will help to throw this problem into sharper relief.

### **What Is a White Nationalist Voice?**

The social milieu which comprises white nationalism is a diverse one which is often referred to by a variety of names—white supremacy, fascism, far or extreme right, alt-right, etc. Furthermore, looking at the various and sundry collection of individuals and groups that might be included under the banner of white nationalism, one encounters a considerable degree of diversity in tactics and beliefs. Some groups, like the Pioneer Little Europe movement, advocate separatism (Barrett, 2001), whereas others, like Atomwaffen, urge acts of violence to be carried out by individuals and small groups according to the philosophy of ‘leaderless resistance’ (Joosse, 2017). Religious differences also abound (Dobratz, 2001), with Christian, pagan, esoteric occultist, and even Satanist views informing the outlooks of different groups. Some white nationalists carry the notion of Aryanism all the way to an interest in Hindu culture and religion (Devi, 1958), while others trade in myths of Nazi flying saucers hidden beneath the ice in Antarctica (Goodrick-Clarke, 2002: 128–150).

Key similarities, however, establish an identity that ties together disparate elements within the movement. Perhaps most obvious is an emphasis on some notion of a biological or spiritual white race, which might also be expressed as ‘European’, ‘Aryan’, or, in more mystical terms, as ‘Thulean’ or ‘Hyperborean’. A sense of shared racial origin is a bond which holds white nationalists together and gives them a crucial commonality upon which to construct their identities. Similarly, there is a collective sense of the importance of specific geographic spaces to white nationalists, who insist that such spaces are an inherent part of their racial identity. Thus, when



Richard Spencer, head of the white nationalist think-tank National Policy Institute, declares that 'America belongs to white men' (cited in Mackey, 2016), he is invoking this common connection between race and place. Likewise, the Nazi doctrine of 'Blut und Boden' (blood and soil) emphasized a racial connection between a people and 'their' land, and drew on 19<sup>th</sup>-century German racial nationalist attitudes which asserted that '[f]or each people and each race a countryside ... becomes its own peculiar landscape' (Gmelin cited in Mosse, 1981: 17). Such notions are still common among white nationalists today, evidenced by demonstrators' chants of 'blood and soil' during the Charlottesville rally in August of 2017.

These commonalities are further entrenched by the connectivity of new communication technologies. The affordances of the internet and digital media platforms have fostered the growth of networks which span the globe, linking together white nationalists from different countries and encouraging the exchange of cultural material and ideas between them (Gardell, 2003: 11; Griffin, 2003: 28–29). Of particular import are forums and other digital meeting spaces which provide a sense of community, especially for white nationalists who have difficulty finding like-minded comrades in their offline environments (De Koster and Houtman, 2008). Through these interactions, white nationalists develop a sense of a shared movement—in fact, a sense of nation, meaning 'cultural communes constructed in people's minds and collective memory by the sharing of history and political projects' (Castells, 2010: 54)—which brings together disparate factions in loose associations around a common purpose.

In this sense, white nationalism serves as what Castells (2010) calls a 'project identity'. Project identities link together individuals around a shared commitment to 'seek the transformation of overall social structure' (2010: 8). The adherents of this identity come from a diverse set of perspectives and backgrounds, but they are united by 'an implicit, coherent ... discourse which cuts across various political orientations and social origins' to provide a common goal toward which all can work (2010: 180). For white nationalists, this common concern is the perception of an impending racial extermination which must be resisted. From the chants of 'Jews will not replace us' during the rally at Charlottesville to the racist assertions

that migration to Europe from Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia will erase 'European identity', white nationalist voices regularly exhibit anxieties that the white race is facing an existential threat.

Such anxieties are often expressed through the phrase 'white genocide', a term popularized among white nationalists by the 'White Genocide Manifesto' of David Lane. A member of the terrorist organization The Order, which was responsible for a series of murders and armed robberies in the US during the 1980s, Lane (1999) wrote the manifesto while in prison. Laid out in fourteen 'points', the manifesto suggests that the white race is facing extinction, highlighting a host of supposed causes including 'racial integration' and 'miscegenation', 'Zionist conspiracy', 'affirmative action', 'multi-racial sports', 'abortion', 'homosexuality', and even 'Judeo-Christianity' (1999: 4–5). Lane was not the first to identify these 'threats' to the white race, nor was he even the first to use the term white genocide; nevertheless, his manifesto popularized the phrase as a means for expressing fear of existential threats to the white race. Today, its legacy is evidenced by the regular repetition of the number fourteen in white nationalist symbolism, a reference to the manifesto's closing fourteen words: 'We must secure the existence of our people and a future for White children' (1999: 6). So common are references to the fourteen words that they are a "master frame" in white nationalist discourse (Futrell and Simi, 2004: 18).

If voice is a means to give an account of oneself and one's experience, then the voices of this white nationalist project identity are deeply engaged in providing 'accounts' of this perceived racial genocide. On Twitter, memes linking white genocide to diversity and multiculturalism regularly circulate under the hashtag #whitegenocide. Digital platforms like *Fight White Genocide* make available pamphlets, posters, and other 'educational' material to activists looking to take part in the struggle. Musicians like Komplott, a white nationalist rapper with ties to the Identitarian movement, denounce threats to 'European' (meaning white) peoples in songs and music videos. Social media presences—what we might call a collection of actors who are active on multiple social media platforms under the same banner—like *European Unity 565* translate that video content into a variety of languages and distribute them on platforms ranging from YouTube to Minds, BitChute to Tumblr,

with the express aim of fostering ties between different European ethnic and linguistic groups to resist white genocide.

Such discourse spills over into physical space, as well. In the lead-up to the Charlottesville rally, the websites and platforms which promoted the event used resistance to white genocide as their appeal. Writing for *The Daily Stormer*, Benjamin Garland assured readers that ‘No longer will we stand by silently while our civilization is being destroyed right in front of our eyes. No longer will we just hand over what our ancestors built for us to our racial enemies. Our people will not go extinct. We will not allow it’ (2017a). Similarly, Europe’s Identitarian movement frames their street activism—comprising banner drops, flyering, marches, etc.—as resistance to ‘the Great Replacement’, a ‘process by which the indigenous European population is replaced by non-European migrants’ (Generation Identity, 2018). Such rhetoric does, at times, cross over into violence. The Norwegian white nationalist who carried out deadly attacks in the summer of 2011 writes in his manifesto that ‘what is happening to the indigenous peoples of Western Europe and our cultures ... amounts to a merciless and bloody genocide’ (Breivik, 2011: 398). The end goal of these myriad acts of resistance is to ‘secure the existence’ of the white race against all those who are perceived of as threats to it, including people of color, Muslims, Jews, feminists, LGBTQ people, leftists, liberals, and so on.

Built on this project of resistance, the voices of white nationalism and the identity they express are incompatible with any vision seeking an ideal, pluralist democratic society. In general, the presence of others is deemed a threat to the white race which must, at best, be forcibly excluded or expelled from an ideal white nationalist society and, at worst, are to be exterminated. For this reason, white nationalist voices cannot be integrated into a plural, democratic polity, meaning that their persistent presence in contemporary democracies presents a significant challenge to democratic theory.

### **White Nationalist Voices and Democratic Theory**

Broadly speaking, white nationalist voices throughout history have held a rather dim view of democracy. Guido von List—an early 20<sup>th</sup>-century anti-Semitic Austrian occultist whose influence extends from the Nazis (Koehne, 2014) to postwar white

nationalists like Lane (Lane, 1997: 3)—called democracy ‘an absurdity’ (2015: 108). Houston Stewart Chamberlain, a contemporary of Von List and staunch anti-Semitic racial nationalist, saw democracy as a ‘repulsive’ system that was a direct threat to racial survival (2005: 93–94). Postwar white nationalists carried on this disregard for democracy. Savitri Devi Mukherji—born Maximiani Portas—a devotee of Hitler who viewed him as a religious figure, regularly criticized the egalitarian and pluralist spirit of democracy in her writing, calling it one of several ‘empty yet extremely popular words’ (1958: 293). George Lincoln Rockwell, the head of the American Nazi Party until his assassination in 1967, baldly stated ‘I don’t believe in democracy’ (cited in Haley, 1966). This view of democracy lives on in a new generation of white nationalists. Vincent Law (2017), a writer for *Altright.com*, favorably compares authoritarian states to democratic ones, writing that democracy is an impediment to free speech because it encourages citizens to form opinions which lead them to police the speech of others.

Where some semblance of an electoral system is favored in white nationalist thought, it is often a highly restrictive form of franchise based on exclusion of those who are not white. Rather than democracy, Rockwell favors an ‘authoritarian republic with a limited electorate’ which would not only strip the vote from non-white citizens, but also forcibly expel them or relegate them to ‘reservations’ (qtd. in Haley, 1966). Writing over half a century later, Garland rejects ‘liberal policies based on “equality” [which] are now clearly *destroying* Western Civilization’ (2017b, emphasis original), in favor of the same kind of limited-franchise ethno-state advocated for by Rockwell.

It is hard to see how voices which express these attitudes might be meaningfully incorporated into a functional democratic polity. That these voices speak of their fellow citizens as agents of their impending racial extermination only further highlights this incompatibility with plural democratic societies. In a similar sense, democratic theory, with its aim to articulate ideal goals for democratic development, is not well-suited to an empirical situation in which white nationalist voices are an active component of democratic societies. Universal consensus would seem an impossibility, dependent either on white nationalists forsaking their sense of racial

imperilment—in which case they would likely cease to be white nationalists—or for the various ‘outgroups’ of the desired white ethno-state to accept expulsion, or worse.

So too are theories of democratic empowerment confounded by white nationalist voices. If, as Couldry writes, valuing voice in a democratic society ‘means defending the potential of voices anywhere to matter’ (2010: 9), that would presumably include white nationalist voices. Does this also mean defending the potential of white nationalist voices to be realized in a transformative way, especially when those voices seek the suppression of other voices? Such voices might be excluded from empowerment; however, denying someone’s voice ‘is to treat them as if they were not human’ (2010: 1). The universal scope of Couldry’s theory—‘voices anywhere to matter’—provides an argument for white nationalists to claim subjection to this denial of voice and humanity in explicit terms. Andrew Anglin, founder of *The Daily Stormer*, made exactly this argument following the decision by Google, GoDaddy, and DDoS protection service Cloudflare to cease providing services to the website after Charlottesville, effectively driving it from the web. Referring to himself as an ‘unperson’—a reference to George Orwell’s *1984*, suggesting that his existence had been erased—Anglin (2017) asserted that mainstream society, scared by the growing power of sites like his, was resorting to banning in order to suppress white nationalist voices.

A similar universality in Mouffe’s agonistic theory is also troubled by white nationalist voice. She insists that the ‘domain of politics is not and cannot be the domain of the unconditional’, especially in the sense of an exclusion from achieving consensus on ‘a given hegemonic configuration of power’ (2013: 17). But should our visions of an ideal democratic society ever entertain conditional admittance to politics of white nationalist voices which seek the suppression or extermination of others’ voices? Or, is white nationalism a premier example of an unconditional, exclusionary qualification? Mouffe’s theory denies us this territory, asserting instead that ‘this frontier [of exclusion] is the result of a political decision; it is constituted on the basis of a particular we/they, and for that very reason it should be recognized as something contingent and open to contestation’ (2013: 17). In an effort to undercut the notion of universal values by emphasizing contingency, Mouffe nevertheless

universalizes that very contingency. In doing so, her theory forecloses on a means for dealing with an 'adversary' who will neither accept the 'set of democratic procedures' on which her agonistic model depends nor tolerate the rights and differing values of those they deem other.

Thus, to maintain an ideal, plural democratic society, white nationalists would need to perpetually 'lose' agonistic battles to see their voices recognized in political outcomes. However, if we follow Allen (2004), the question becomes: is it the task of a democratic polity to recognize that loss and sacrifice? Forming bonds of political friendship to foster such recognition risks legitimizing the aims of white nationalist voice, leading to a conundrum whereby the project to 'save' the race and establish an ethno-state is recognized as a valid goal, but one that can never be realized if democracy is to be preserved, and thus is always doomed to fail. Such a disjointed situation would likely only compound the frustration political friendship is meant to alleviate.

Allen does insist on 'criteria for assessing different levels of loss and for distinguishing between reasonable and unreasonable claims' (2004: 45), providing some basis for the judgment of loss. But such criteria are complicated by the disconnect between a society's judgment of one group's loss and that group's own judgment. For the broader public, what white nationalists perceive is lost through white genocide is not very great, given that there is no actually impending white genocide; however, for white nationalists, the perceived loss of the race is the loss of their culture, their community, their very selves. They cannot, in other words, accept this loss; it simply asks too much from them. That others would dismiss this feeling of loss seems to be only a provocation to white nationalists. As an example, in a review of an academic study of white nationalism, Greg Johnson, editor of the digital white nationalist magazine *Counter-Currents*, reacts with hostility to the study's suggestion that the threats facing the white race, and the race itself, are 'imagined'. Denouncing this 'most putrid passage', Johnson (2017) insists that 'it is offensive to refer to one's extended family [the white race] as an "imagined" community. And to refer to the people who have brought epidemics of rape and pedophilia to England, Sweden, and Germany as "imagined racial enemies" strikes me as obscene'.

This leaves us in something of a double bind: acknowledge, and thus legitimize, a political project which must fail in order to preserve democracy, or dismiss that project's adherents and their deeply held beliefs. Either option is likely to lead to increasing frustration on the part of white nationalists. Such frustration, Allen notes, can be a significant threat to democratic societies if left to fester, leading eventually to instability and violent conflict (2004: 98). And, in fact, some white nationalists do resort to violence as an alternative to more traditional politics, evidenced by attacks in Macerata, Italy, in 2018, Quebec City, Canada, in 2017, Charleston, South Carolina, in 2015, Overland Park, Kansas, in 2014, Oslo and Utoya Island, Norway, in 2011, and the Holocaust Museum in Washington, DC, in 2009, among many others.

Finding a way to address this frustration and the violence it might provoke is therefore a critical task for democratic societies, especially if they are to realize something like the ideals promoted by democratic theories. Those theories, however, provide no appreciable insight on how to address this challenge. Mouffe simply states that 'extreme rightwing parties are making important inroads in many European countries' by tapping into popular discontent over a general alienation from mainstream politics (2000: 77). Couldry only writes that 'whether we celebrate it or not, we must assume that new voices can come from anywhere in the political spectrum', including, presumably, the racist right (2010: 137). Such observations treat white nationalism as a problem that may emerge in the future, not a persistent, even if marginal, facet of democratic societies with appreciable white populations.

Because white nationalist voices do exist at the fringes of most societies in which they operate, one might be tempted to dismiss the problem as minor and thus outside the ambit of democratic theory. Deny them media attention and these voices will languish at the margins, hopefully to fade as the journey toward ideal democratic conditions progresses. Such an argument, however, overlooks white nationalists' own agency and the extensive digital and physical culture which they can draw on to promote their voices. As such, it is helpful to think through marginalization a little further, so as to underscore why ignoring white nationalist voices is not an effective strategy for coping with the challenges they pose to democratic ideals and polities.

## Metapolitics at the Margins

In the wake of the Charlottesville demonstration, *The Daily Stormer* has taken to discouraging its readers from involvement in demonstrations, suggesting instead that activists' focus should be on 'normalizing our ideas' by connecting them to the larger culture through the spread of digital media like memes (Anglin, 2018). As part of this process, the site's writers have been promoting its 'book clubs', local offshoot organizations through which readers can meet up in person and form offline communities. These organizations are autonomous—although they have a common set of rules and goals (kept secret from nonmembers) and do coordinate with each other—with their primary purpose being to facilitate this normalization of ideas through community events, flyering, and other acts of focused engagement (Ray, 2018a, b).

This strategy, far from unique to *The Daily Stormer*, has a central place in white nationalist thought, especially since the collapse of mass racist movements after the Second World War. It is the primary political orientation of the European New Right (ENR)—a loosely affiliated collection of academics and scholars who espouse white nationalist ideas through sophisticated philosophical arguments—and its offshoots, including the Identitarian movement and Greg Johnson's North American New Right, who refer to it as 'metapolitics'. In describing the purpose of metapolitics, Alain de Benoist, a French academic largely credited with founding the ENR, draws on the work of Antonio Gramsci to argue that a metapolitical approach seeks 'the transformation of political and socio-historical structures' through 'a vast transformation of values' (2011: 22). Key to this shift in values is a wide-ranging engagement with society through the production and distribution of art, memes, music, and other cultural material, as well as face-to-face conversation and publicity-grabbing events—although, following the bad press of the Charlottesville demonstration, many US-based white nationalists are moving away from planned rallies. Through this engagement, white nationalists seek not only to promote the notion of an impending white genocide, but also to encourage others to understand themselves as part of white nationalism's project identity.



Accordingly, bands like France's Les Brigandes, who have ties to the Identitarian movement, produce and distribute through social media numerous songs which highlight various perceived threats to the white race, ranging from Antifa to democracy. One such song, about migration, is simply titled 'The Great Replacement'. Komplott, the Identitarian rapper from Germany, pursues similar aims through songs like 'Europa', which present the continent and its culture as in decay as the result of migration and multiculturalism. There are dozens of other examples, many of which are further distributed by outlets like *European Unity 565*. Alongside music, similar strategies are pursued in other forms of cultural production like memes, with Pepe the Frog, a character appropriated by white nationalists, as one famous instance.

Trolling also plays an important metapolitical purpose for many white nationalists, who use it to provoke outrage and thereby achieve greater visibility for their worldviews. The hashtag #BoycottStarWarsVII, for example, was used in 2015 to claim that the forthcoming *Star Wars* film promoted white genocide by featuring a multiracial cast. The 'campaign' garnered furious denunciations which kept the hashtag trending on Twitter for days, exactly the outcome sought by the handful of white nationalists who had pushed the hashtag to prominence in the first place (Rouner, 2015). Indeed, the entire purpose of the campaign had been to simply introduce the concept of white genocide to a broader audience while creating the appearance of a greater public base for such views than actually existed (Anglin, 2015).

Thus, even at the margins of democratic society, white nationalists still endeavor to find creative ways to make their voices heard among broader publics. Ignoring them by denying them media coverage will not necessarily impact their ability to continue to develop cultural material on- and offline, nor will it prevent them from engaging in metapolitical activism. To be sure, how effective these efforts are is hard to say, especially over time. Members come and go; old groups disintegrate and new ones emerge as the larger movement's public prominence waxes and wanes. Yet, what stays constant is the presence of this culture and its constituent voices in democratic society, either in the form of activists directly trying to connect their accounts of the world to mainstream discourse, or in bodies of white nationalist

cultural material, itself a crystallization of voice. This latter form has also been greatly enhanced by the affordances of the internet. Specific web platforms like *Solar General* and *Balder Ex-Libris* act as stores of information and repositories for the cultural material produced by white nationalists going back to the 19<sup>th</sup>-century, becoming a sort of archive for curious white nationalists looking to explore the history of their movement. More mainstream sites, like *Internet Archive*, also function as stores of white nationalist voice. Among its collections, one can find text, audio, and video produced by groups as historically diverse as the National Alliance, the ENR, White Citizens' Councils, and the Ordo Novi Templi. Drawing on Griffin's work on postwar racist movements, we can understand both these forms as part of 'a permanent and constantly refreshed reservoir of anti-systemic diagnoses' existing as a 'lurking, ghostly presence within the social and political subculture' (2003: 47).

More often than not, these reservoirs—which often collect white nationalist voice in the form of forums, file repositories, and other digital platforms—may appear marginal and disconnected from mainstream culture; however, they should not be seen as inert. In a study of activist networks which played a key role in the Egyptian Revolution, Aouragh and Alexander (2011) found that these networks also functioned as a sort of parallel substructure to the regime, especially online, where they maintained a strong presence on social networking platforms like Facebook. While the influence of these groups was limited during periods of stability, 'in highly intense moments, either when people are more susceptible to recruitment or when professionals from the media and academia are quoting from these sources ... the impact of these sub-scenes can reach far beyond their usual networks' (2011: 1349). In that sense, social turmoil, media interest, and sympathetic attention from mainstream politicians have the potential to increase the visibility, and thus the reach, of white nationalism's reservoirs of voice. This is not to say that white nationalist groups are on the verge of some sort of revolutionary takeover of democratic society; nonetheless, the persistent presence of these reservoirs suggest that it would be ill-advised to suppose that there is some fixed, upper limit beyond which white nationalism cannot grow. It is difficult to say what the future will bring, so we should not assume that a project like white nationalism, which actively seeks

to connect its accounts of the world to new populations, will always and forever meet with only marginal success.

In curtailing that potential, more illiberal approaches like speech prohibition may seem appealing. Shutting down these reservoirs of voice, blocking access to digital platforms, and prohibiting public demonstrations might seem like an effective means of addressing white nationalist voice. However, in pursuing that end, we have wandered rather far from democratic theory, and thus the scope of our purpose here. Nevertheless, a brief discussion of how resistant contemporary white nationalism is to speech prohibition will serve to highlight the extent to which its panoply of voices is persistent, even in the face of illiberal methods.

In an age of digital communications, white nationalist voices are dispersed through a widespread network that is very difficult, and likely impossible, to shut down. This network forms the backbone of what Griffin (2003) calls a 'groupuscular' movement. He argues that, following the defeats of the Second World War, the broader racist right (he uses the term 'fascism') has been forced 'to adapt to a climate in which large pockets of political space were now unavailable to it' by developing into small, loosely-organized and de-centralized but tightly networked 'groupuscules' (2003: 39). This lack of centrality makes disrupting the overall structure incredibly difficult. Shut down a website or ban a group and its members can migrate through the network to other outlets—indeed, they may have already been members of other groups. Moreover, thanks to the global reach of digital communications technologies, this groupuscular network exceeds the borders of individual nation-states, thereby complicating the efforts of individual governments to contend locally with white nationalist speech. In light of such a flexibly networked, far-reaching groupuscular organization, Griffin notes, the collective white nationalist movement 'has actually achieved an invulnerability to attempts by democracies to destroy it' (2003: 46). Radically illiberal approaches, backed up by extensive policing apparatuses, may meet with some success in limiting or destroying such a groupuscular movement; yet, at that point, we are no longer talking about democracy.

## Conclusion

The openness of most democratic societies provides space for reservoirs of white nationalist voice to accumulate, especially online, while also enabling the efforts of activists to connect those voices to mainstream discourse. Such voices are incompatible with plural, inclusive notions of democracy, meaning that they present a significant challenge to actually existing democratic polities. And, yet, notable theories of democracy seem incapable of addressing this challenge. Voice alone—no matter how much we listen, no matter how much we empower, trust, or value—fails to provide us with a means for addressing white nationalism. But there is still value in considering these difficulties through the concept of voice. By examining the experiences white nationalist voices speak to, we can get a sense of how their accounts are constructed and what social experiences contribute to that construction. This means a more holistic look at voice, not just as an account of oneself, but as a relationship to and with the social space in which it is generated.

Doing so necessitates delving into the social spaces of white nationalism. In his study of anti-Christian attitudes in US white nationalism—the same study which provoked Johnson's ire—Berry writes that 'I find it useful to describe white nationalism as a closed society organized around the mythology of whiteness to form an imagined racial community that the white nationalist is obliged to defend in the face of imagined racial enemies' (2017: 14). There is a potential in this metaphor to suggest that white nationalist outlooks are self-generated from within these communities as they 'organize around the mythology of whiteness to form an imagined racial community'. What can be lost here is the dialectical interrelation white nationalists and their communities share with the broader society in which they live. As such, we have to understand not just how this community is imagined from the 'inside', but rather how it is constructed in deep interrelation to experiences of the larger world.

Theories of voice can be helpful here, also. Couldry argues that contemporary neoliberal capitalist conditions establish 'a particular *illusion* of democracy' whereby the value of voice is sacrificed to economic rationality (2010: 64, emphasis

original). In the neoliberal workplace in particular, 'there is something *distinctively* alienating about contemporary conditions of work which require the entire creative commitment of workers ... in a structure which cedes *control over* that creativity to ... impersonal markets' (2010: 34, emphasis original). The ability to account for one's experience, and to seek the representation of one's voice in political outcomes, is subjected to market forces whose necessitated outcomes take priority, not just in workplaces but throughout neoliberal democratic society. In many countries, this has manifested as a crisis of liberal democracy, where citizens feel their voices are being neglected by managerial technocrats whose priority is the maintenance of the neoliberal capitalist system at the expense of the citizenry (Mair, 2013). The result is 'a deep denial of voice, a deep form of oppression' (Couldry, 2010: 9). How can our voices matter, in other words, if they are passed over in favor of an abstract and distant market rationality?

Already marginalized and 'highly stigmatized' (Vysotsky and McCarthy, 2016: 3), white nationalists, who live and work as subjects of neoliberal capitalism just as the rest of society, experience the same alienation of creativity, control over life, and expression of voice that Couldry identifies. Indeed, denunciations of neoliberal capitalism are a common facet of white nationalist discourse around the world (Sommer, 2008; Varga, 2014). Referring to the broader orientation of the ENR and its offshoots, John Morgan (2017) writes in *Counter-Currents* 'that the way the New Right views the world today is in terms of an enormous conflict between the forces of neoliberalist globalism on the one hand and the forces of tradition, identity, and dissent on the other'. Neoliberal capitalism is seen as a destructive force which upends tradition, challenges racial cohesion, and undermines timeless values. As such, it is regularly cast as a threat to the race, factoring into the narratives of white genocide. Lane himself called capitalism 'a mindless pursuit of money and pleasure while the race dies' (1999: 46).

Far from a recent phenomenon, these attitudes have a long history in white nationalist thought. The *völkisch* movement, a loosely-affiliated collection of 19<sup>th</sup>- and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century German racial nationalists whose work has been influential on racist thinkers from the Nazis to today, regularly denounced the social disruptions

wrought by industrial capitalism as a danger to tradition and racial survival (Stern, 1965; Mosse, 1981). After the Second World War, anti-capitalist sentiment, framed as a threat to race and tradition, featured in the writings of such influential white nationalists as Francis Parker Yockey (2013) and Oswald Mosley (1947). Devi, in decrying modern capitalist life, went so far as to provide a description of its disruptiveness remarkably akin to Marx's notion of the alienation of life under capitalism (1958: 9–10). Similar themes also occupy a central place in the platforms of significant postwar white nationalist organizations like the National Socialist White People's Party (1974: 8), National Alliance (1978: 9), and White Aryan Resistance (2001: 3).

This longstanding hostility toward capitalism, along with anxieties over its threats to racial survival, raises several important questions. Has the social turmoil of capitalist modernity—wars, recessions, periodic remakings of ways of life, and a general experience of social life that seems 'capable of everything except solidity and stability' (Berman, 1988: 19)—played a role in fomenting a sense of racial imperilment among white nationalists? In our contemporary moment, are the anxieties white nationalists exhibit over racial survival exacerbated, or even legitimized (at least in the minds of white nationalists) by neoliberalism's social disruption and denial of voice? And what other anxieties feature prominently and consistently in narratives of white genocide? Pursuing answers to these questions offers the potential to gain a sense of the social material which informs white nationalist voices and the accounts they give. If the alienation and disruption of capitalist life, among other factors, does indeed significantly inform white nationalist voice, then attending to these issues may be necessary if we are to deal constructively with the problem of white nationalist voice. Thus, rather than seeking redress to the problem through empowerment, trust, or agonistic respect, a better understanding of white nationalist voice, and the experiences to which they speak, could offer productive avenues for amending the social conditions which inform these voices.

To be clear, this does not mean legitimizing the anxious interpretations of white nationalists. But if we are to address the challenges of white nationalist voice to the pursuit of an ideal democratic society, we do need to take their anxieties seriously

from an analytical perspective. Listening to and trying to comprehend those voices is a crucial step in that process.

## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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