

## Introduction

In the first months of the coronavirus crisis, extreme right groups and figures in Britain were quick to seize on the emerging sense of panic to make a case for their confrontational brand of politics. Some called for the rekindling of the best of British, in characteristically divisive ways. In March 2020, Tommy Robinson uploaded a video of himself remonstrating with a group of young men of colour, who he alleged had coughed at a white couple. He explained that the incident showed that the country's youth had lost its way and needed to rediscover British spirit during the crisis.<sup>1</sup> Others emphasised restoring a sense of community. Britain First uploaded videos of its activists feeding the homeless during lockdown,<sup>2</sup> while the British National Party provided a support helpline for its dwindling band of followers,<sup>3</sup> and Patriotic Alternative developed an alternate online curriculum for home schooling.<sup>4</sup> Conspiracy theories also quickly grew around the implications of the virus and the vaccine, rekindling antisemitic tropes for a new context. Others attacked lockdowns. Nick Griffin's Twitter account, with over 35 thousand followers, argued the restrictions were more damaging than the virus, that people should resist limitations on their freedom, and emergency controls were a power grab by political elites and large corporations.<sup>5</sup> Others emphasised the need for new attitudes to public health, though in typically provocative ways. The British Movement's Telegram page, for example, included a meme depicting the Nazi salute as the most hygienic form of greeting.

While much of this racist extreme right culture has remained on the margins of British society, as is the way with the extreme right's discourses some of its messages also blur and blend into more prevalent criticisms of politics and society found in mainstream debate and discussion. Moreover, such episodes underscore clearly the ways the extreme right sees opportunities in a human catastrophe and can quickly adapt to make itself appear relevant to changing situations.

Focusing attention on the extreme right raises some basic questions. What exactly is the 'extreme right'? Where has it come from and what drives it? Is it growing? Is it a danger? Why are people drawn to such divisive, racist groups? And are violent attacks carried out by someone influenced by extreme right ideas a form of terrorism? To address such questions, and to understand the extreme right today, it is

important to recognise that its current form is rooted in a longstanding culture of political extremism. Awareness of this history is vital for dissecting the contemporary situation. Appreciation of this history also helps reveal the ways the extreme right is far from a singular entity. What can also often be called the far right or fascism is actually a highly variegated politicised counterculture, one generated by multiple groups and individuals that collectively contribute to an ever-changing, and highly diverse, culture. Moreover, what this book will generalise as Britain's extreme right movement is usually marginalised and is not, in itself, primary a danger to liberal democracy. However, its influence is significant. It does pose an ongoing threat to those it targets, most typically people of colour and women, as well as the vulnerable people it draws into its orbit. As this movement threatens people, and at times even poses a risk to life, it needs to be taken seriously by politicians, the police and the wider public.

Taking it 'seriously' does not mean arguing its leading activists, from Oswald Mosley to 'Tommy Robinson', have persuasive arguments, nor does it mean turning a blind eye to racism. Rather, this means recognising the extreme right is something that needs to be comprehended in order to stymie its impact, though in all probability it can never be eliminated without destroying democracy itself. Politicians and society more widely should not dismiss the extreme right as a silly irrelevance, in other words, even if much of what it espouses is racist, offensive and deeply contradictory. Getting to know its leaders and followers is crucial to grasping its appeal, while robustly challenging its positions is a core part of developing a mature, multicultural liberal democracy. The alternatives of ignoring it or even accepting parts of its discourse (both tendencies found all too often in political responses to the extreme right) would mean failing to protect sections of society from cultures that take pride in their prejudices, and on occasion enact violence.

Making the case for taking the British extreme right seriously can be difficult. It is certainly commonplace to find those who dismiss it out of hand, considering it as something not worthy of serious concern. Throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, politicians, academics and a wide range of commentators have regularly made the rather comforting argument that fascism and the extreme right is alien to a British culture, which apparently is by definition moderate, and so the minority drawn to it are mere eccentrics and cranks, best ignored. While it is true to say that the extreme right in Britain has largely been a fringe concern, as is the case in

many countries, it has been a movement that has a real impact and regularly expresses a highly radicalised sense of Britishness and white identity. It sees these as facing an existential threat from various quarters, including from Jewish people, from people of colour, and often women as well, and steeps a call for the defence of race and nation in a highly emotive language.

### **What is the Extreme Right?**

There is no easy answer to what the extreme right is, and it can take many forms. To help explain the phenomenon, it is helpful to locate where the extreme right sits within the wider political landscape. The extreme right is part of a broader phenomenon often called the 'far right', which sits in contrast to the moderate right. In general terms, what makes a politics right wing, as opposed to left wing, can be summarised as acceptance that societies are unequal. While left wing politics tries to overcome inequalities, right wing politics accepts degrees of inequality as inevitable. The extreme right can borrow elements from the left, but as it relates these to exclusionary and racist agendas they cannot be seen as straightforwardly left wing. The 'far right' then, is a catchall term that spans all forms of, 'far', or non-mainstream, right wing activity that sees society as inevitably hierarchical, from those with some illiberal views but who engage with democratic processes, to those who see violence as the answer and carry out acts of terrorism.

Using a framework set out by Cas Mudde, it is helpful to see the far right as comprised of two phenomena: the 'radical right', or those whose politics remains within the bounds of legal activity and seek radical modifications to the existing political system; and the 'extreme right', who ultimately do not want to retain the existing political system, and who often are willing to step over legal boundaries in one way or another to achieve their aims.<sup>6</sup> In reality, this is not a neat distinction, and some groups can sit across this dividing line. Moreover, some forms of the extreme right call for a political and social revolution. This type of revolutionary extreme right politics, one calling for a new era for race and nation, is what academics such as Roger Griffin identify as fascist.<sup>7</sup> Not all forms of the extreme right are fascist, but all fascists are part of the extreme right. As such, fascism can be used in an analytical manner, rather than simply being a pejorative. This book focuses on the extreme right, including fascists, because while there has been much discussion on the impact of the larger radical right in Britain, especially United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP)

under Nigel Farage, there has been less analysis of the extreme right and British fascism. Often what has been developed tends to either focus on the past, or on the present day, and so fails to consider how the contemporary situation has been informed by earlier activism, how it has come from somewhere, and so has not clearly mapped how the fascist past resonates in groups active today.

In terms of the differences between radical and extreme right, the distinction between Farage's UKIP and the British National Party under Nick Griffin helps to clarify the disparities between the radical and extreme right. In the 2000s and especially the 2010s, UKIP developed into an impactful radical right party, styling itself as an alternative form of patriotic politics that contrasted with the traditional right's Conservative Party, which it argued was weak on Europe and issues of immigration. UKIP could attract socially conservative Labour voters as well. Continuity with the economics of Thatcherism, criticism of immigration policies and calling for the renewal of Britain by leaving the European Union were its signature ideas. UKIP was a radical right party as it sought change through electioneering, and by courting the mainstream media, but did not idealise a move away from democracy. The BNP, on the other hand, was founded by John Tyndall, an unashamed neo-Nazi in the 1960s and a man who espoused antisemitic conspiracy theories while leader of the National Front in the 1970s, and the BNP from the 1980s. By 1999 the party had a new leader, Nick Griffin, a man convicted the previous year of distributing material likely to incite racial hatred.<sup>8</sup> Griffin's internal messaging while leader from 1999 until 2014 explained the party needed to gain power to initiate a far-reaching constitutional revolution. While both UKIP and the BNP were nationalistic, the BNP was clear it was an ethno-nationalist party, a party for white people only. BNP activists in the 2000s also engaged in criminal acts, such as Terrance Gavan who in 2010 was convicted of 22 offences related to possession of firearms and collating information useful for terrorism.

While the 'radical right' UKIP sought to play within the rules of the democratic system, the 'extreme right' BNP wanted to change the rules, and worryingly its members regularly engaged in criminality. Nigel Copsey and Matthew Goodwin are two leading academics who also rightly categorised the BNP as fascist.<sup>9</sup>

The extreme right is important to focus on, even though it has limited political impact in comparison to the radical right. Electorally speaking, the BNP has been far and away the most significant extreme right political group in Britain, by 2010

achieving 57 elected local councillors and two MEPs. While this was impressive for Britain's extreme right movement, these results demonstrate it was hardly on the cusp of political power, and soon dwindled to a shadow of its former self. More often, as in the case of the Batley and Spenningsdale by-election of July 2021, its candidates receive fewer votes than the Monster Raving Loony Party. Despite being of limited electoral significance, extreme right activists, past and present, have been more successful in terms of creating a diverse counterculture, one fostered by a bewildering array of groups that draw followers from a range of age groups and classes. These generate a wide range of aggressive material, in the physical world and now often online as well, which can cause offence and injury to those they target. Its internet presence can have a powerful effect on the thinking of a younger generation looking for political agendas that shock, and radically alternate senses of identity to give their lives meaning, lead to issues of racism and extremism in school and other educational settings. Organisations that make up the extreme right engage in a wide range of direct-action activities, which require significant resources to police and manage, sometimes costing hundreds of thousands of pounds per demonstration, and lead to a wide number of hate crimes. These divisive events can also have a damaging impact on local communities and businesses. And a few drawn to it decide to act violently, and even kill.

Such extreme right activism has not emerged from thin air, nor is it likely to go away any time soon. Specific groups often draw influence from earlier times. For example, the neo-Nazi group National Action, proscribed in 2016 under terrorism legislation, idealised Oswald Mosley and his British Union of Fascists and revelled in the memory of American neo-Nazis such as George Lincoln Rockwell, who was active in the 1960s. They even based their logo on the Nazi's mass paramilitary wing, the *Sturmabteilung* or SA. The fascist past echoes into the present day in such affective, extremist material.

Throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, many such extreme right groups have come and gone. Most have been short-lived, of little individual consequence, while a few became something larger. The many small groups that seem to have little public impact, or wider relevance, nevertheless play a crucial role in developing this variegated culture of activism. There is also a wide range of types of organisational styles that comprise the extreme right. Some have wanted to become mass parties. The British Union of Fascists in the 1930s, the National Front from the

1960s and the British National Party from the 1980s are all good examples here. However, others have developed as street protest groups, such as the English Defence League; while others have cultivated a role as publishing houses, like the Britons Publishing Society, and more recently Arktos; and others again conceive of themselves as think tanks, such as the London Forum and the Traditional Britain Group. Some have emerged as cultural networks, such as the Blood & Honour music scene. Some have wanted to be openly violent organisations, such as Combat 18. And some have promoted terrorism, such as National Action.

While mass parties aim for large-scale membership, often extreme right activists know their organisations will hold limited appeal, and so create small, targeted groups (or groupuscules, a term that will be discussed later in the book) that attract specific audiences. With these limited ambitions, they are more successful at achieving their own immediate goals. While this shows acknowledgement of their limited appeal, activists within the movement often understand this can become a strength as well. Those who feel drawn to the extreme right find a multifaceted movement with a wide range of styles of activism to choose from, ranging from groups focused on philosophical speculation to those who offer street protests, from youth groups to those aimed at older activists, and from primarily working-class groups to those aimed at more affluent sectors of society. And if one group falls into decline, there are always others to migrate to.

### **Approach and Structure**

This book has been set out to offer an introduction to the extreme right in Britain, past and present. It is based on over ten years personal experience researching, teaching and advising in this area, and tries to reflect in an accessible way the wide range of academic research that helps us understand the extreme right. References have been kept to a minimum, but the endnotes and bibliography at the end of the book highlight a wide range of work by many leading academics, as well as useful news reports. There is a lot more that has also influenced the writing of this book. Not all who are cited here agree with each other either, and academic reviews of each other's work, as well as Twitter conversations, show this is a lively and heated area of debate among specialists who often differ on how to interpret and understand the extreme right. This is also not a book written by an activist, but rather has been written as a primer to the academic analysis on the extreme right for those who want to know more. Like any

academic text, it is not fully 'objective' and does have a politics. This is necessary to help inform suggestions for responding to the extreme right, and these are essentially based on promoting multicultural liberal democratic values. It has also not been written to demonise the extreme right or sensationalise their activism. The reality is that, like everyone else, extreme right activists are complex, multifaceted people. Acknowledging this does not mean analysis will shy away from drawing attention to the explicit and more coded forms of racisms that underpins this milieu, and while it tries to understand political extremism it does not seek to justify it.

To explore the diversity of the extreme right, the book is divided into two sections, History and Current Dynamics. Both are crucial to understanding the extreme right milieu today. The first part has three chapters, which survey the extreme right's past. Chapter one examines the origins of activism and shows how modern extreme right politics emerged in early twentieth century Britain, assessing groups from the British Brothers League to the British Union of Fascists. It shows there was a diverse, yet largely marginalised, culture of extreme right activism in the country by the 1920s and that more developed in the 1930s. These attracted interest from men and women of different classes, who were able to pioneer a specifically British extreme right counterculture. The second chapter then looks at how British fascists, and more ambiguously extreme right activists, reconfigured themselves after 1945. Some groups were overtly neo-Nazi, that is they took inspiration specifically from Hitler and National Socialism, such as Colin Jordan's National Socialist Movement, others rejected accusations of fascism, such as Oswald Mosley's Union Movement. Many created new links with equally marginalised activists internationally. This chapter also covers the rise of the National Front, a mixture of extreme right neo-Nazi and radical right activists, as well as the British National Party, up to 1999 when it decided to modernise its public image under Nick Griffin. The chapter unpacks the idea of 'groupuscularity', the notion that the extreme right is made up of many tiny groups and organisations that collectively generate an extreme culture. The final chapter of this section looks at the development of the extreme right in the twenty-first century, and introduces the many recently and currently active organisations, large and small, discussed in later thematic chapters, from the English Defence League, to Sonnenkrieg Division, to Patriotic Alternative.

Part two of the book, Current Dynamics, then explores in more detail the nature of the people and organisations found within the extreme right, making links

between the past and the present. Chapter four looks at leadership, and the ways mostly, but not always, it has been men who have headed extreme right groups, attracting around them wider communities of activists who share a sense of mission. A few of these have been ‘charismatic’ leaders of sorts, such as Oswald Mosley and more recently Stephen Yaxley-Lennon whose activist persona, ‘Tommy Robinson’, is drawn from football hooligan culture and is a minor household name. Others remain mysterious, enigmatic figures who exert an influence over a select few, such as David Myatt. Chapter five then gives consideration to the range of supporters of the extreme right, focusing on some of the ethnographic studies of groups that have included activists who have wanted to be interviewed by academics. It assesses how the extreme right has an eclectic appeal amongst those searching for an alternate sense of meaning and purpose, and can also offer them an emotional sense of home. Chapter six then reflects on the gendered dynamics of the extreme right. From hypermasculine ideals that attract disaffected young men, to female leadership, to examples of LGBT forms of extreme right activism, this chapter examines the many gendered dynamics found across the extreme right spectrum.

Chapter seven examines how extreme right activism has found a new home in online spaces. The extreme right was an early adopter of the power of digital communication and has been finding ways to maximise its impact using online tools ever since. This trend has continued into the social media era, where memes offer a novel language for the extreme right, and online platforms have allowed new, decentralised communities to emerge. Chapter eight then explores the extent to which this culture has developed in violent ways. It highlights cases of extreme right aggression, past and present, but also reflects on how such groups often manifest internal brakes on violence as well. Most organisations are far less likely to carry out violence than their aggressive rhetoric may first suggest, yet fringe activists can feel the need to take things further and decide to act alone or develop splinter groups. The final chapter focuses on how Government policies have been developed to respond to the risks posed by the extreme right and considers both ways they have legitimised many of their positions. It also explains how state structures as well as antifascist and antiracist groups can be part of the solution here, while the wider public should also be involved in conversations on how to counter the extreme right.

The book concludes by returning to the central point that the extreme right needs to be taken seriously. While being mindful of not giving small groups that



actively seek attention undue notice, challenging their racism is essential to the dynamics of a mature and multicultural liberal democracy.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://banned.video/watch?id=5e75658292222900a22a5cbb> [accessed 01/07/2021].

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.patriot-campaigns.uk/video\\_britain\\_first\\_helps\\_the\\_homeless\\_of\\_birmingham](https://www.patriot-campaigns.uk/video_britain_first_helps_the_homeless_of_birmingham) [accessed 01/07/2021].

<sup>3</sup> <https://bnp.org.uk/coronavirus-announcement-were-here-to-help/> [accessed 01/07/2021].

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.patriotalternative.org.uk/alternative\\_curriculum](https://www.patriotalternative.org.uk/alternative_curriculum) [accessed 01/07/2021].

<sup>5</sup> <https://jewishnews.timesofisrael.com/twitter-urged-to-ban-nick-griffin-over-lockdown-concentration-camp-post/> [accessed 01/07/2021].

<sup>6</sup> Cas Mudde, *The Far Right Today* (Cambridge: Polity, 2019).

<sup>7</sup> Roger Griffin, *Fascism: An Introduction to Comparative Fascism Studies* (Cambridge: Polity, 2018).

<sup>8</sup> <https://cst.org.uk/news/blog/2009/10/23/i-do-not-have-a-conviction-for-holocaust-denial> [accessed 01/07/2021].

<sup>9</sup> Nigel Copsey, *Contemporary British Fascism: The British National Party and the Quest for Legitimacy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2008); Matthew Goodwin, *New British Fascism: The Rise of the British National Party*. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011).