

## Mapping the Enemy – The far right in Irish politics

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On the surface, the far right seems to be organised around a jumbled mess of reactionary ideas. While their views are certainly reactionary, there is a sinister and coherent logic underpinning them, centred on their desire to preserve the ‘purity of the nation’ - both biological and ideological. One aspect of this, is their insistence that the complex social, political, and economic crises currently being caused by capitalism are re-interpreted as symptoms of a deeper crisis, involving a perceived loss of the ‘nation’.

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Recovering this lost national purity is the ultimate goal of the far right globally. They never envisage a world without borders, or without security apparatuses, or without hierarchies based on gender, race, and class. Instead, they hope for an ‘imagined community’, a ‘traditional world’ in which they secure the wealth of the state for a clearly defined national group – as the elites throughout capitalist history have defined it.<sup>1</sup>

The far right identifies with the structures of the system and attempts to convince working people to follow suit, regardless of the class-based conflict inherent within capitalism. Elites, in their efforts to extract wealth from the earth and its people, create social hierarchies based on whatever

characteristics they can weaponise to divide the working class – whether that be skin colour, gender, sexuality, nationality, and so on. In Ireland and elsewhere, the views of the far right mirror the state’s most conservative views on such issues and lessen the likelihood for unified action by working people.

That said, the far right in Ireland is still in the novel stages of its political development, having largely been absent from the political scene until the Covid-19 pandemic. Before this, there existed several extremely marginal groups who campaigned around single issues – such as Immigration Control (anti-immigration), Youth Defence (anti-choice on abortion), and so on, but none of whom had any tangible effect on Irish politics. What distinguishes these groups from the contemporary far right, is the formation of a clear ideology and strategies to accompany it. The Irish far right is by no means a totally homogenous movement. There are various groups with slightly different ideas and tactics, however, they all share ‘core’ ideas which define them jointly as far right.

First among these is nativism, often known as ethnonationalism, in which membership in a nation is defined solely by biological

features. The second is authoritarianism, which is characterised by antagonism to inclusive democracies and their policies in favour of leader-centred and identity-based policies.<sup>2</sup> We can see different manifestations of this in the two main Irish far-right parties: the Irish Freedom Party (IFP) and the National Party (NP). The NP does not attempt to disguise its preference for authoritarian structures, as demonstrated by their lack of internal democracy, donning of branded uniforms, and most importantly, the centrality of Justin Barrett as leader and figurehead of the party.

Their policies also reflect their authoritarian preferences. They favour deportations of immigrants and the reintroduction of the death penalty for ‘serious crimes’ that would likely stretch to their political opponents if they ever won state power. The IFP, on the other hand, attempts to disguise their authoritarianism behind a thinly-veiled commitment to ‘democratic principles’. But this commitment to democracy, only extends to those who agree with their politics, and thus excludes those who do not fit their racist, socially conservative conception of the ‘Irish’. The IFP favours a system of ‘ethnopluralism’ wherein they claim to see all ethnicities as equal but believe in separating them into their respective

nation-states. This is nothing more than thinly veiled racism and an endorsement of “non-violent ethnic cleansing” through what they term as ‘remigration’.<sup>3</sup>

In this context, it is worth remembering that the shift from biological to cultural racism was a tactic developed by the New Right in France during the 1970s in a bid to move in from the margins. With the ideas of biological racism so thoroughly discredited by the Nazis during World War Two, the New Right changed tack – opting for cultural difference as their excuse for racial exclusion rather than biological superiority.

### **A nation under threat – Great Replacement Theory**

A third feature of the Irish far right is familialism. This may be defined as “a form of biopolitics which views the traditional family as the foundation of the nation and subjugates individual reproduction and self-determination rights [of women in particular] to the normative demands of the reproduction of the nation”.<sup>4</sup> Natalism (or pro-natalism) is the term that some far right groups use to describe their deeply conservative familialist positions. Crucially, familialism is rooted in nativism, that is, in the ability of the ‘nation’ or ‘race’ to reproduce itself within ‘fixed’ biological boundaries that are seen as fundamental to

the survival of the native community.<sup>5</sup> Ethnically ‘pure’ women and children are seen as symbols of the nation, making it morally unacceptable and anti-national to either have intercourse with, or bear the children of, someone of a different race or ethnicity.

Threats to the survival of the nation include ‘ideologies’ which are seen to limit reproduction rates by morally ‘corrupting’ women, such as feminism, ‘homosexuality,’ and gender-nonconformity, as well as ‘corruption’ of the ‘purity’ of the nation’s bloodline through miscegenation (sexual relations among different ethnic groups).

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The centrality of familialism to far right ideology and the fetishisation of ‘purity’ and ‘innocence’ – usually of women, children, and bloodlines – is rooted in nativism and can be traced back to fascist ideology.<sup>6</sup> Familialism is often posited as the solution to the imaginary ‘threat’ of a ‘great replacement’ of the ‘national’ population by immigrant populations. The Great Replacement Theory (GRT) is a conspiracy theory posited by French far right writer Renaud Camus which uses crisis narratives to convince people that there is a concerted, elite-driven conspiracy to ‘wipe out’ the ‘white race’ through migration and ‘anti-natalist ideologies’.<sup>7</sup> The GRT allows far right groups to

consolidate nativism with familialism and authoritarianism, by simultaneously gendering the nation and adopting authoritarian, anti-liberal positions on bodily autonomy and gender non-conformity.<sup>8</sup>

Proponents of the GRT believe the solution to the imaginary threat is to maximise the ‘white’ birth-rate by imposing traditional, biologically essentialist gender norms on people, banning reproductive rights such as abortion, banning anti-natalist ‘ideologies’ such as feminism, ‘homosexuality,’ and gender-nonconformity, and limiting the rights of ‘non-nationals.’<sup>9</sup>

Aside from banning anti-nationalist ideologies, proponents of the GRT believe that maximising white birth rates is necessary to ‘defend’ the ‘future’ of the nation by ensuring there is always a white majority – a logic which Burnett and Richardson label ‘competitive fecundity’ and ‘racial-reproductive futurity’.<sup>10</sup> ‘Defending the future’ through competitive fecundity (high fertility rates) is a prominent idea on the Irish far right and can be seen in much of their rhetoric, particularly that of the National Party.

It is vital to acknowledge the role that anti-LGBT politics have also played in

buttressing racial arguments made by the far right. Their emphasis on ‘cultural’ racism has been accompanied with an increased essentialisation of gender. The natalist position reinforces the idea that a womb is the most vital measure of womanhood, and that masculinity must be defined along the narrow lines of the patriarch. As such, transgender and gay people whose very existence defies this conception of gender, have been subject to mounting discrimination across the spectrum. In Ireland, transphobic ‘radical feminists’ have found allies in the far right in arguments to protect women and children from encroaching ‘gender ideology’.

In April 2023, a library in Swords, North Dublin, was protested by individuals who claimed that LGBT materials were ‘pornographic’ and harmful to children. This is part of a worrying global trend, from the increasing number of ‘drag bans’ across the United States, to the recent ‘anti-homosexuality’ bill in Uganda, which includes the provision of the death sentence. These ideas thus have a dual function for the right. On the one hand, they serve to buttress the ideals of a racially pure community. On the other hand, they serve to secure the subordination of women within this racially pure community – one that reproduces traditionally conservative views of men, women, and the family.

Another means of ‘defending’ the existence of a white majority is the forced deportation of people who do not fit the far right definition of a member of the ‘nation.’ ‘Remigration’ is a term frequently used by the far right to describe the forced deportation of minorities from their ‘nation-state.’ Remigration avoids using the overtly racist language of white supremacists while seeking to achieve the same result - ‘nations’ separated into their respective ‘nation-states.’ Ebner and Davey describe ‘remigration’ as code for “non-violent ethnic cleansing” in which the legal and bureaucratic instruments of the state are used to enforce strict controls around citizenship and borders. <sup>11</sup>

### **The far right in Irish politics**

A defining feature of the far right in Ireland is its development of a set of ‘enemies’ or political opponents, which reveals much about their function within Irish capitalism. The far right has clearly identified their main opponents as socialists and the left in general, along with organisations which campaign for equality, such as LGBTQ rights groups and anti-racist groups, which they describe collectively as ‘NGOs’. This should come as no surprise, as fascist movements of the past – which have largely inspired the far right today – saw the left as one of their primary targets for

violence and eradication.<sup>12</sup> Of course, they also view people of colour, immigrants, queer people, and others who do not align with their views, as opponents and targets for violence. The far right in Ireland is also heavily critical of Sinn Féin on the grounds that it has ‘betrayed the nationalist cause’.

This is indicative of the long-running competition within Irish nationalism between the left and right and their varying interpretations of what constitutes the ‘nation’. Left nationalists – in the tradition of James Connolly and Jim Larkin, view the Irish nation as primarily a political association which should be defined in opposition to British colonialism, capitalism, and all forms of inequality stemming from this, including racism and sexism. Connolly famously argued that the Irish elites were just as capable of oppressing Irish workers in an independent state, as the British ruling class had oppressed them through colonialism.<sup>13</sup>

Right-wing nationalism views the nation as primarily a biological association between ‘ethnically pure Irish’ people: people with white skin and other features which they believe are the defining features of Irishness. Contrary to their left wing counterparts, right nationalists historically offered no criticism of the political economy of imperialism and colonialism.

They had no critique of the political hierarchies and class dynamics of British rule – they merely wanted to replace the British elites with Irish elites, thereby transferring power from a ‘foreign’ to the ‘native’ ethnic group, while maintaining the system of capitalist exploitation which continues to exploit working class people in Ireland today.

Sinn Féin has long attracted Irish nationalists with both progressive and conservative views, but the party has alienated some of its more radical right elements over time. These include former Sinn Féin executive member Gerry McGeough, who left the party in the early 2000s on the basis that it had been ‘overrun with Marxists’ and who went on to assist the European Parliament election campaign for Justin Barrett in 2004.

Another example is former Sinn Féin TD, Peadar Tóibín, who left to form the anti-choice party, Aontú, after Sinn Féin adopted a pro-repeal position in the run-up to the Referendum in 2018. Anti-Sinn Féin sentiment is prominent within the Irish far right precisely because redefining Irish nationalism as a primarily ethnic category is the core issue for the far right and eliminating all other (political and civic) interpretations is a means to that end. Interestingly (though perhaps

unsurprisingly) the far right is also more vocal in its opposition to the left than to the government or the ‘establishment’ more generally, despite espousing anti-establishment views. This can be explained by their desire to build a mass movement, which is precisely what distinguishes the far right from other right wing parties, which typically organise in a ‘top-down’, elitist manner. Happy to abuse ideas regardless of their truth content, the far right routinely claims that the left is part of a ruling establishment that seeks to disenfranchise white, straight, Irish men, in favour of women, immigrants, queer people, etc.

This identity based narrative serves to distract attention from the root causes of socio-economic issues - capitalism - and directs anger towards minorities and marginalised groups rather than the economic elites responsible for decision-making. Taking inspiration from the ability of the Irish left to build mass mobilisations, the far right has also adopted and adapted some of the anti-establishment symbols of more progressive forces including their attempted appropriation of republicanism and the legacy of the Water Charges movement.

### **Pseudo-left demagoguery**

Another tactic is to take an issue of real concern for working class people – the housing crisis for example – before presenting it as a problem of race or immigration. The Irish don’t have houses because immigrants have them; the Irish can’t get hospital beds because foreigners are taking their place. These ideas are used to divide the working class despite the fact that domestic Irish elites decide how many houses are built, and many immigrants live in dreadfully poor accommodation. Foreign nurses are also the backbone of many hospitals, but the far right is not interested in the truth, they are interested in attacking minorities as a way of solidifying their racist ideology.

This is clear in the solutions they put forward, which always involve rationing public services so that Irish people get them; never about making demands for extra public services for all. As such, we argue that their alleged concern for economic justice is nothing more than pseudo-left demagoguery. An attempt to bolster their (largely unpopular and nonsensical) racist and xenophobic views with a facade of concern for material issues such as housing provision and hospital waiting lists.

Despite their anti-establishment rhetoric, this ensures that the far right acts in parallel to the state. It responds to cues from the government, the Gardaí, and other elites, and serves the ultimate function of reaffirming the state's core right wing ideals in place of potential left wing alternatives. These mechanisms become more pronounced in times of systemic crisis when capitalism and its elites face an existential threat. Just like fascism in the 1930s, the far right has emerged in a period of prolonged and severe crisis for the capitalist system.

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Since the emergence of neoliberal policymaking in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, individual states have delegated power around economic decisions 'upwards' to the international level in order to appease capitalism's need to globalise. In Ireland, funding and responsibilities were taken from local councils and 'centralised' in government departments, before being partially delegated to private companies through what David Harvey terms 'public-private partnerships', and what we may know as 'semi-state bodies'. In short, public power was privatised, removing the ability of members of the public to have input into how their local communities were being governed. The contradiction between delegating economic decisions 'upwards' to international bodies – while leaving

decision-making on social and cultural issues at the national level – has created a general perception that states cannot provide for their people and that necessities (such as housing and healthcare) are in short supply.

Instead of people understanding that capitalism has engineered scarcity for higher profits, it seems like a natural limit which the far right reinforces by framing it as a problem of immigration. They also express racist and xenophobic views which cannot be openly expressed by the state and use violence which cannot be used by the state as long as democratic procedures still exist. All of this strengthens the power of domestic elites and weakens the unity of the working classes.

For example, the state's abandonment of non-Ukrainian (i.e., mostly black, and brown) refugees regarding provision of accommodation in the early months of 2023 has added fuel to a growing far right anti-immigration movement, by tacitly supporting the far right's claims that there are "too many" asylum seekers in Ireland and that accommodation is therefore limited. More importantly, the state has – knowing that Direct Provision centres have been attacked by far right activists many times in the last number of years - opted to leave asylum seekers exposed on the streets

instead of increasing efforts to provide the protection which they are legally obliged to provide.<sup>14</sup>

This is a conscious decision by a right-wing government which is ideologically opposed to increasing public spending on the needs of the public, regardless of nationality or skin colour. Capitalism cannot provide for the homeless or asylum seekers because it is the very reason such phenomena exist. As such, the mobilisation of violent far right groups poses only a minor threat to the state in comparison to the more useful role it plays in chipping away at the idea that the state can, and should, provide for all people in need and in attacking the left. While the revolutionary left poses a fundamental threat to the capitalist state, the far right aids its consolidation and attacks its opponents.

### **How do the far-right organise?**

Over the past decade, the global far right has demonstrated a shift in its tactics. Whilst traditional organisations, such as formalised political parties, remain key platforms for building national far right projects, a new phenomenon has emerged – a series of looser, online networks as vital avenues for disseminating the ideas of the far right. This combination of forms allows both groups and individuals to collaborate

on disparate issues, and to converge in particular moments. The far right have shown great adeptness and speed in utilising the internet, from mainstream platforms to messaging apps, to spread their ideas and penetrate into individuals' social networks. However, it would be wrong to characterise the far right as simply 'keyboard warriors'.

This online activism has increasingly moved off the web and onto the streets. Though dangerous, the sporadic nature of these manifestations proves that the organisation of the far right is not infallible, but it raises questions around how the left organises in the post-Covid period to avoid ceding common sense to the right.

Much has been made of the far right's ability to utilise social media not only to whip up fear, but also to make its ideas more relatable to a broader audience. Most recent studies of the far right in Ireland have focused on this aspect of its development. Long gone is the image of far right 'trolls' lurking in the darkest corners of the internet, on forums such as 4chan. Now, the ideas of the far right are being broadcast to wide audiences over the most mainstream of social media platforms, often without the deliberate intention of the sharer. It is vital to note that this strategy does not emerge from a single,



organised group. Rather, we have seen the simultaneous growth of influencers, and of encrypted messaging apps, as the main sources of the far right's online presence. These phenomena tend to bolster one another, though they have specific characteristics to examine.

### **Right wing influencers**

Mainstream platforms, such as YouTube, Twitter, and Twitch, have paved the way for prominent far right activists and influencers to gain a following. These platforms have created networks that lack formal leaders but are easier to join than traditional routes into political activity. Individuals can participate by watching and sharing videos, networking on forums, and taking part in chat services. Though arguably more ephemeral, this type of activism, has a much lower social cost than canvassing and door knocking, distributing leaflets, and attending meetings.

Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, the growth of the influencer figure has afforded the ideas of the far right a new relatability. Far right influencers utilise the tactics of 'brand influencers', but rather than selling a product to their audience, they spread ideological content. Examining the growth of 'Alternative Information Networks' on

YouTube, Rebecca Lewis has identified two key currents in the far right's use of social media platforms.<sup>15</sup>

Firstly, influencer figures establish an alternative sense of credibility and authenticity to mainstream media sources through their videos or posts. In contrast to television or print media, social media allows content users to engage more readily with these core influencers, primarily through comments. This engagement can foster parasocial relationships between the influencer and the viewer, wherein the viewer feels connected to the influencer without any direct communication between the two figures.<sup>16</sup>

Viewers are more likely to take what they are seeing or hearing at face value because of a perceived trustworthiness built upon this relationship. They are not listening to a representative of the establishment, but to someone seemingly like themselves.<sup>17</sup> This type of parasocial relationship makes it easy for audience members to be gradually exposed to, and to come to believe, more extremist positions. Abstract yet dangerous concepts, such as nativism and familialism, are made palatable by being posed as informal conversations among friends, or behind the veil of 'concern'.

Also noted by Lewis, another tendency of far right influencers is to cast themselves into a countercultural or underdog role.<sup>18</sup> Genuine scepticism towards the mainstream media, particularly towards newspapers and news channels, is weaponised to great effect.

The refrain ‘why isn't anyone talking about this’ is frequently used to introduce loaded concepts such as racialised crime rates, access to housing, or the ‘realities’ of abortion, whilst also reframing the issue as subversive to the ‘establishment’ media. Drawing on references to ‘cancelling’, far right figures frame the broad left as ideologically intolerant and as capable of suppressing their views in workplaces, education institutions and in society more generally, as well as online. This countercultural appeal draws the online communities built around these figures closer, and more thoroughly convinces audiences of far right positions.

There is a third component to the far right’s use of social media, which demonstrates the culpability of the platforms themselves in the spread of these ideas. Recent studies, such as Jesse Daniels’ ‘The Algorithmic Rise of the Far-Right’ and Safiya Noble’s ‘Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism’, have uncovered the in-built propensity of search engines and social media platforms

to recommend extreme right content to viewers.<sup>19</sup> A user who views a video of an apparent racialised attack, or a discussion of women’s ‘safety’, will likely be recommended further content of this nature, regardless of whether it has been searched for. Even more benign video topics such as heavy metal music and anti-establishment movements such as Occupy Wall Street yield similar results.<sup>20</sup> Similar studies, such as a 2021 Twitter algorithmic report, also revealed the propensity of the site to recommend more right wing news sources than left.<sup>21</sup>

Part of this is driven by the algorithms of these sites looking to sustain users’ attention by directing them towards ever more scandalising ‘clickbait’ content. However, the latent bias towards far right content remains concerning. For instance, a report by the *Irish Examiner* in January 2023 revealed that at least seven Irish YouTubers were able to monetise livestreams of racist, anti-refugee rallies in Finglas, though this is firmly outside the guidelines of the site.<sup>22</sup>

It is not accurate to speak of a deliberate suppression of left-wing sources, though it is well-known that they tend to receive less airtime across mainstream outlets. Presently, computer-generated algorithms are honed around mass data sets and developed to increase engagement with the

given site. However, these data sets can be skewed or made unrepresentative of the audiences they serve. The biases of the engineers who build these models is also an implicit influence. It is worth remembering that behind the algorithm are human computer engineers, equipped with their own prejudices and experiences.

Irish far right influencers remain tiny in comparison to the United States, though they remain a steadily growing group. Nevertheless, they have utilised a combination of perceived authenticity and connection with their audiences, alongside a deliberate positioning of themselves as the present counterculture, to carve out a space for themselves online. In this way, the opportunity for far right ideas to be presented as ‘common sense’ and digested by broader audiences has increased. In addition, the connected nature of the online far right has allowed for messages to be picked up from one context and spread to a wider, global audience, which often blurs the lines between politician and influencer.

For instance, on 11 May 2023, the chair of Britain First, Ashlea Simon, retweeted a video of Boyne Street in Dublin, with the tag ‘Diversity is Not Our Strength’, in reference to the apparent unkempt nature of the road.<sup>23</sup> At the time of writing, Simon has almost 18,000 followers. Previously,

this video had mostly been circulating among much smaller Irish accounts, such as Gearóid Murphy, or on more fringe platforms such as Bitchute, Telegram and Odysee. Even more concerning, an attack on a camp of homeless refugees in Dublin the same day was filmed and shared across the Irish far right online space, before being picked up by Andy Ngô, an American influencer with over a million followers.<sup>24</sup> In the tweet, Ngô highlights a violent assault on an activist defending the refugees, though he is careful to avoid explicitly endorsing it. When picked up by a popular account, a local image or claim (no matter how dubious) can be shared by like-minded people across the globe as ‘evidence’ of their cause. It can also serve to bolster people to act on the streets.

### **From apps to action**

The aspect of online far right activism which has been most directly connected with mobilising people onto the streets is the growing use of messaging apps to organise. Compared to mainstream social media platforms, messaging apps are less subject to content moderation, and allow for organisational choices to be made in real time. These apps are usually tied to groups or individual influencers, such as Murphy or Rowan ‘Grand Torino’ Croft, who both have active Telegram channels

associated with their public profiles. These services strengthen the connection of participants with far right ideas and allow them to mobilise effectively.

Joining a messaging app associated with a far right figure is a step beyond consuming and engaging with the content they produce on public platforms. These channels allow individuals to communicate, promote content, spread disinformation, and mobilise. Particularly where a channel was joined from an influencer's public platform, people who take part are likely to already have a sense of community or common purpose with other chat members. The Institute of Strategic Dialogue (ISD) has conducted the most comprehensive analysis of how the messaging app Telegram has been used in the Irish context.<sup>25</sup>

It is important to note that, though useful, such studies can become quickly outdated owing to the flexibility of the groups to dissolve and reform, and to migrate between platforms. ISD found 34 Irish-based groups on Telegram, with the largest one consisting of some 5,400 members.<sup>26</sup> The case studies in their report suggest that, aside from sharing images and videos, far right actors are using these apps to orchestrate information campaigns as entry points to push wider racist and homophobic conspiracies.

One of the most egregious examples of this was the activity across Irish Telegram channels in the wake of the fatal shooting of George Nkencho by Gardaí in December 2020, though similar tactics have been utilised surrounding the 2020 Balbriggan house fire and the homophobic slur campaign against TD Roderic O'Gorman.

The ISD reported that in the days and weeks following Nkencho's killing, activity in the Telegram groups increased. A few hours after the news broke, a list of instructions was posted across Telegram channels that discussed how to react to the shooting. Followers were told to avoid going to protests or getting into discussions with people about the incident. Instead, they were told to, 'stay home... make memes, dig up stats, turn on your VPN and get trolling'.<sup>27</sup>

In the following weeks, an effective campaign of misinformation was conducted, drawing upon racist stereotypes to discredit Nkencho. In particular, false claims alleging that he had '39 convictions' and that he had beaten up his girlfriend with a hammer and 'robbed numerous other people', as well as threatening Gardaí with a machete, were circulated.

These claims were all found to be false, as reported in a fact-check by *TheJournal.ie* and elsewhere but had already spread widely online and even in discussion on mainstream media platforms.<sup>28</sup>

The fact that these claims were coordinated and effectively pushed far beyond the reaches of Telegram demonstrates the capability of the far right to infiltrate and shape popular debate. Most concerning, videos of unrelated events (such as an attack on an Everton fan in 2019), migrated from Telegram into social WhatsApp groups, being forwarded hundreds of times throughout unaffiliated social networks.<sup>29</sup> Misinformation, which began in far right messaging groups, spread into family and social WhatsApp groups, making the messages much harder to counter.

More recently, far right figures are increasingly using livestreams from popular platforms, including Twitter and Instagram, as a rallying point for their physical activity. In addition, figures such as Murphy, and the Twitter user ‘Bleakhouse12’, have increasingly used Twitter to attempt to identify (or ‘dox’) individuals shown in videos in order to intimidate them. These posts are generally compelled to be more cryptic to avoid removal, though they are bolstered by previous coordination in messaging apps.

In reference to the recent attack on the homeless refugees in Dublin, Philip Dwyer, a Dublin-based figure previously expelled from the National Party, made a series of tweets referring to going live from a ‘secret location’ before broadcasting an attack on a group of homeless refugees to tens of thousands of viewers.<sup>30</sup> Several activists and refugees were attacked with iron bars as a result of this coordination, and videos of the assault were shared globally.

This culminated with the burning of the camp where the refugees had been sleeping, all of which was livestreamed to multiple Twitter accounts. These groups have also gradually begun to ‘protest’ at the homes of political figures, such as People Before Profit TD, Paul Murphy.<sup>31</sup> Though this is not a new phenomenon, it is an intimidation tactic exacerbated by the far right’s ability to coordinate effectively through social media.

The far right has utilised social media and messaging apps to permeate mainstream political discourse with escalating rhetoric, and to make these ideas more relatable to a broad audience. Though they remain relatively small, the Irish far right is linked online with a global movement and is becoming more adept at mobilising its forces. This raises the question of why people are drawn to far right platforms and influencers in the first place. What compels

people to take part in the sharing of overtly discriminatory or untruthful material online? Most vitally, why are the far right experiencing success in winning people to their ideas?

### **Why people turn to the far right**

The question of why people are being won to far right ideas is linked to the wider context of Irish capitalism. Many of those becoming active are from working class communities that have not only been failed by the state, they have also been denigrated by it. As a result, working-class people are increasingly seeking sources of legitimacy and community outside traditional structures of authority. In addition, state housing policies have undermined small, geographically defined communities in recent decades, further driving individuals to seek that connection elsewhere.

This is not to ignore the significant influence of tech billionaires and conservative politicians in the spread of the far right. However, it remains crucial to establish what factors have created the conditions for far right ideas to gain ground. Most importantly, this understanding allows the left to speak to those who remain in the orbit of, yet not fully convinced by, the far right.

Despite the fact that the strategy of the modern far right is rooted firmly in the digital age, the factors which drive people to take part are much older. The concept of alienation, which has its roots in Rousseau, Hegel, and Feuerbach, and was built upon by Marx and Gramsci, offers an insight into why working people feel so little agency in their day-to-day lives. This theory also approaches the issue of how legitimacy is created, and how people are ‘won’ to particular positions.

Marx developed the idea of alienation by demonstrating that it was not merely an ideological phenomenon, but one shaped by the material forces of a society. In the *‘Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844’*, he identified four key aspects of alienation: the alienation of humans from nature, from their own labour, from their own characteristics as human beings, and from each other.<sup>32</sup>

Because workers are compelled to spend their working hours in the service of their employers, they usually have little say in the way they spend that time. The act of creating can be life-affirming but when it is commodified, it alienates the worker from their own life-activity. On top of this, the objects created by the labourer under capitalism, and the person of the labourer themselves, are measured by their value as a commodity. This is a fundamentally

dehumanising process which denies the worker creative agency as a human being. Workers lack control over their time at work, over their shift patterns and in certain jobs, such as call centres, even over toilet breaks monitored to the minute. In a busy bar, a worker can put several thousand euros into the till, yet never see more than a fraction of this in return for their efforts. Workers are pitted against one another in competition for better wages or security and, increasingly, for access to housing.

It is perhaps unsurprising that, given the experience of alienation in their everyday lives, some people have become open to far right figures who claim to promise them stability, self-empowerment, and community. In addition, these networks offer individuals a sense of having access to the ‘truth’ withheld from the wider population by the mainstream media. Indeed, while a worker may be utterly dehumanised in their job, far right rhetoric can ‘uplift’ them as bearers of a superior culture or tradition. Across the Irish online sphere, these arguments are made through the profuse employment of supposedly ‘Celtic’ designs and with reference to figures from history, most notably Pádraig Pearse. This positions the white, Irish (usually male) worker in a somewhat empowering lineage, while they remain ultimately subjugated in their workplace.

In some ways, this is comparable to Hegel’s analogy of the religious experience of the poor.<sup>33</sup> Though their material conditions remain unaltered, poor worshipers are effectively alienated from their alienation by taking part in religious processes, where they can become “equal to the prince”.<sup>34</sup> Regardless of the exalted position they are allowed in religious thinking, however, they will always return to the degraded conditions of their material life. For many, particularly those who have been most vilified by the state, the sense of belonging generated by this imagery is powerful. Though destructive and oriented around hate, there is a genuine alternative community to be found in the online far right.

Furthermore, the far right target vulnerable groups as the cause of suffering and disempowerment in society. Women and people of colour, drag queens, hate speech legislation, ‘globalism’ and immigration are variously highlighted as the root of the average worker’s anxiety in the rhetoric of the far right. By taking on those more vulnerable than themselves, far right activists feel a sense of empowerment – particularly as this is wrapped up in distortions which suggest that those on the far right are victims of a wider movement to undermine their country and their culture.

### **The role of neoliberalism**

Another element which exacerbates this alienation is the undermining of democracy by neoliberal globalisation. Since the beginning of the neoliberal era - which marked the decline of the welfare state - public services and goods have been increasingly privatised. Decision-making power and funding around economic issues has been transferred from local governing bodies (such as councils) to central governments, and then delegated 'upwards' to private companies and international bodies such as the EU and IMF.<sup>35</sup>

People have less input into their own day-to-day affairs, while national governments choose to enact economic policy based on the needs of globalised markets, rather than the material needs of ordinary people. The result of this, combined with concerted attacks on left wing parties and trade unions, is a working class which is less empowered to affect economic affairs but retains some influence over socio-cultural or identity-based issues.

Capitalist reality clashes with the rhetoric of sovereignty and democracy and the far right respond by claiming they will bring power back to the national arena. They claim they are the only ones who can reaffirm national identity and re-

consolidate the nation-state. Through this strategy, the far right has been able to mobilise support around the 'defence' of national identity or supposed national 'values' (e.g., conservative views on gender), and to use economic crises to reaffirm these positions.

An example of this, referred to earlier, is the Irish far right's insistence that the housing and healthcare crises are primarily the result of immigration, using a distorted 'supply-and-demand' logic to defend their case. Of course, this argument falls flat when we observe the numbers of vacant properties in Ireland and the impact of economic and political elites in artificially inflating the cost and accessibility of housing - but nonetheless, it remains a powerful rhetorical tool for the far right to argue an immigrant has your home.

Instead of arguing for structural changes to the political economy of the state, the far right is happy to retain this system and 'solve' the issue by limiting access to public goods and services on the basis of identity - be that nationality, skin colour, gender, or sexuality. In this sense the far right works (intentionally or unintentionally) in tandem with the state: offering a 'strategy' for dealing with the crises of capitalism without challenging capitalism or the state, itself. They seek to consolidate the



traditional 'nation-state' in the hopes that this will solve the problems created by capitalism.

This is an easier, if ultimately defeatist, strategy than a genuine revolution. The 'traditional' society agitated for by the far right will always disappoint, however, as their idealised vision of life 'back then' never existed. The pursuit of this aim cannot be achieved, leading to further disenfranchisement. The pervasive effect of capitalist alienation in the lives of workers, combined with the existential threat posed by climate change, means that marginalised groups provide a convenient, yet persistent, scapegoat.

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This reveals the true aim of far right thinking; not the full empowerment of people to control their own lives, but to maintain a permanent mental state of being under attack and fighting on the edges of society against a powerful elite; all-the-while reinforcing this elite by redirecting anger against the victims of the system and dividing the working classes.

At times, this state of perceived victimhood is powerful enough to compel people to the streets to defend 'their' identity, or apparent community. Though not a new argument, in the context of a global online far right capable of permeating personal

social networks, it raises a new challenge for the radical left.

### **Is there a socialist alternative?**

It can appear a disheartening task to contend with the multi-headed hydra that is the modern far right. Where one figure becomes discredited, or a post is proven false, more are waiting to take their place. In many ways, the far right has sought to take ground from the radical left, both in its online rhetoric and on the streets. Running through much of their messaging are allusions to issues common with the left; dissatisfaction with the government, anger towards the housing crisis, and an anxiety borne of the inherent precarity of life under capitalism. Though challenging, this aspect of the far right's strategy offers a path to dissuade working people from their ranks.

It is, of course, vital to counter the misinformation of the far right with persistence, and patience. However, rather than playing ideological 'whack a mole' with the right, it behoves the left to consider how socialist ideas can become the common sense of our time. This requires nothing less than convincing the most alienated and deprived in society of their power as workers, and of their shared cause with other workers, regardless of colour, gender, or creed. But it also means

starting from where working people actually are; it means finding common ground with the majority of decent people and looking for ways to move common sense towards good sense. The left should not engage in heresy hunting or celebrate abstract purity in a society so full of alienation and reactionary ideas flowing from the top.

Instead, it needs to talk to people in a language they can understand – to learn from people with good ideas and to argue in a comradely way with those who have confused and contradictory ones. In the end it is our job to convince people that they can change the world and not merely fight amongst each other for the crumbs. This essay will conclude with some tentative ideas about how this can be achieved.

The left must develop a programme of genuinely uplifting political action to counter the despair drawing so many young people to the far right. However, the struggle against the right must take place on an ideological plane as well as a practical one. The chasm between ‘theory’ and ‘practice’ must be overcome if the left is to not only make its ideas understood, but to relate them to modern struggles and modern lived experiences. Rather than exclusively engaging in routines or slogans ‘by rote’, the left should be tactically

flexible and respond to circumstances as they emerge. We have seen that part of the far right’s successful engagements with mass psychology comes from the fact it is unencumbered by tradition. The manner in which they instrumentalise ideas, such as housing or gender, has to cross a much lower bar of scrutiny than those of the left, but this doesn’t mean the left cannot win people to our ideas.

The far right has successfully tapped into the anxieties of alienated people and misdirected them against minorities. We have to relate to people in a different way. We have to start from their lived experiences, look for common causes and move people left through everyday language and common struggles for progressive reforms.

The far right’s ideas emerge as a contradictory ‘hotchpotch’, reflecting the contradictory society from which they emerge. But they can still be enormously effective. When a dubious racist image circulates in WhatsApp groups for example, it can be readily accepted and digested by a far more ‘neutral’ audience. There are serious lessons to be learned from this dissemination of ideas. In a world where a majority of people interact with politics through their phones, we have to ask whether a public meeting in a hotel is the most effective way to get our ideas across?

This raises further questions about how the left has historically communicated and shared its ideas with people beyond the membership of their organisations. These are new challenges for the left.

However, they also raise opportunities to engage in new kinds of activity. Some traditional methods of agitating will remain essential, if used in tandem with newer modes of communication.

As Seán Mitchell argues in ‘Lenin, Elections and Socialist Hegemony’ for example, electoral campaigns are not only a platform for the left, but a “means to sink roots and forge connections, to fight for the political independence of the working class and, crucially, to win socialist leadership within the ultimately determinant class struggle itself”.<sup>36</sup> In addition, participation in unions and other community organisations to improve working and living conditions, and to resist evictions ultimately proves that struggle can work. Indeed, it is struggles on a mass scale that can push back the right and open up new opportunities for the radical left.

A major movement on housing would undermine those in the National Party who argue that private property should be sacrosanct for example, and it would open up spaces for interaction between working people and left wing activists. Furthermore,

as Justin Kong, Edward Hon-Sing Wong, and Veronica Yeung argue in their 2018 article ‘Organising the Suburbs’, activists should not shy away from promoting anti-racist, anti-colonial, anti-sexist, pro-LGBTQ ideas within these wider struggles.<sup>37</sup>

Consistently linking these arguments with class politics, and being willing to engage friends, family, and co-workers in a non-dogmatic way, is also vital in winning people away from the far right and making socialist politics relatable.

The radical left must also consider how it engages organisationally with the modern working class. For many, the precarity of housing or working hours makes regular membership of a specific, geographically-bound branch or union impossible. How can we speak to the ‘unrooted’ worker, compelled to move from place to place by evictions, and employed in precarious gig labour? How can we speak to those who consider politics as something separate from their lives, and something they would rather avoid? Whilst organisation remains central to any radical left strategy, opportunities to engage with unaffiliated workers and activists must be not only taken but created.

That said, the online strategy of the left should not be dismissed as unimportant

compared to offline activities (such as leafleting, or attending branch meetings), but as a vital tactic to broaden the reach of socialist ideas among diverse groups. As seen in the case of the far right, the potential for social media to penetrate mainstream discourse is considerable, though it is not their exclusive domain. Beyond the online sphere, how the left relates to and defines community in the 2020s is a question which requires further exploration.

Finally, these issues of hegemony and the online sphere force the left to appraise its present internationalism. In an era defined by war, a global pandemic, worsening climate change, but also unprecedented technological innovation, we are more connected than ever. Despite this, left wing organisations are, in the main, isolated from one another. The same tools at our disposal to build a fairer and more united world are also in the hands of the far right. This article has demonstrated the danger of allowing the far right to emerge as the main transnational political tendency.

Rather than the occasional doffing of the cap towards the idea of general affiliation with an international left, we should carefully consider how we can connect with socialists across the globe in a practical and routine sense. Socialists in Ireland today should not shy from the

potential of well-organised, global networks. Whilst maintaining a focus on national and local events, the left should consider how it can share information and make connections with socialists across the globe. This internationalism is not only of tactical usefulness for the left. Awareness of being connected in a common, global struggle could become the most valuable tool in combatting the ever-increasing isolation and alienation of capitalism.

- <sup>1</sup> Benedict Anderson. 1991. *Imagined Communities*. London, Verso.
- <sup>2</sup> Cas Mudde. 2019. *The Far Right Today*. Cambridge. Polity Press.
- <sup>3</sup> Julia Ebner and Jacob Davey. 2019. 'The Great Replacement: The Violent Consequences of Mainstreamed Extremism'. London. *Institute for Strategic Dialogue*.
- <sup>4</sup> Cas Mudde. 2019. *The Far Right Today*. Cambridge. Polity Press. p.148.
- <sup>5</sup> Scott Burnett & John Richardson. 2022. 'Breeder for race and nation': gender, sexuality and fecundity in post-war British fascist discourse, *Patterns of Prejudice*, 55:4, pp. 331-356.
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid, Cas Mudde, *The Far Right Today*. Cambridge. Polity Press.
- <sup>7</sup> Julia Ebner and Jacob Davey. 2019. 'The Great Replacement: The Violent Consequences of Mainstreamed Extremism'. London. *Institute for Strategic Dialogue*.
- <sup>8</sup> Scott Burnett & John Richardson, 'Breeder for race and nation': gender, sexuality and fecundity in post-war British fascist discourse, *Patterns of Prejudice*, 55:4, pp.331-356.
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>11</sup> Julia Ebner and Jacob Davey. 2019. 'The Great Replacement: The Violent Consequences of Mainstreamed Extremism'. London. *Institute for Strategic Dialogue*.
- <sup>12</sup> Kieran Allen, 2023. What is Fascism? *Rebelnews.ie*, (February 16th, 2023).
- <sup>13</sup> James Connolly 1897. *Socialism and Nationalism*, *Marxists.org*.
- <sup>14</sup> Cónal Thomas, 2021. Move quickly and misinform: How direct provision centres became a catalyst for far-right activism in Ireland, *Noteworthy*, Ireland.
- <sup>15</sup> Rebecca Lewis. 2018. Alternative Influence: Broadcasting the Reactionary Right on YouTube, *Data & Society White Paper*, (October 2018), pp.15-16.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid, p.43.
- <sup>17</sup> Brooke Erin Duffy. 2016. The Romance of Work: Gender and Aspirational Labour in the Digital Culture Industries, *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, Vol.19, no. 4 (July 1, 2016): pp. 441–57.
- <sup>18</sup> Rebecca Lewis. 2018. Alternative Influence: Broadcasting the Reactionary Right on YouTube, *Data & Society White Paper*, (October 2018), pp.15.
- <sup>19</sup> Jessie Daniels. 2018. The Algorithmic Rise of the "Alt-Right", *Contexts*, Vol.17, No.1, (2018), pp.60-65; Safiya Umoja Noble 2018. *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism*, (New York, 2018). See also Derek O'Callaghan, Derek Greene, Maura Conway, Joe Carthy, and Pádraig Cunningham, 2015, 'Down the (White) Rabbit Hole: The Extreme Right and Online Recommender Systems'. *Social Science Computer Review*, Vol.33, No.4, (2015), pp.459-78.

<sup>20</sup> Derek O’Callaghan, Derek Greene, Maura Conway, Joe Carthy, and Pádraig Cunningham. 2015. Down the (White) Rabbit Hole: The Extreme Right and Online Recommender Systems. *Social Science Computer Review*, Vol.33, No.4, p.470.

<sup>21</sup>See Huszár, Ferenc, Sofia Ira Ktena, Conor O’Brien, Luca Belli, Andrew Schlaikjer, and Moritz Hardt. 2021. Algorithmic Amplification of Politics on Twitter, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, Vol.119, No. 1.

<sup>22</sup>Paul Hosford. 2023. Revealed: How racist Irish YouTube accounts profit by livestreaming protest’s, *Irish Examiner*, 31 Jan. 2023.

<sup>23</sup>Ashlea Simon, Twitter post, May 11, 2023, 2.00pm, <[https://twitter.com/AshleaSimonBF/status/1656645572139286530?cxt=HHwWhICw4duXy\\_0tAAAA](https://twitter.com/AshleaSimonBF/status/1656645572139286530?cxt=HHwWhICw4duXy_0tAAAA)>.

<sup>24</sup>Andy Ngô, Twitter post, May 11, 2023, 10.07pm, <<https://twitter.com/MrAndyNgo/status/1656768135624802304?cxt=HHwWgIDS8ez1gv4tAAAA>>.

<sup>25</sup> Aoife Gallagher and Ciarán O’Connor. 2021. ‘Layers of Lies: A First Look at Irish Far-Right Activity on Telegram’, *The Institute of Strategic Dialogue Paper*.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, p.8.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, p.12.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, p.13.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, p.14.

<sup>30</sup>Philip Dwyer, Twitter post, May 8, 2023, 6.04pm, <[https://twitter.com/PhilipDwyer\\_MOI/status/1655619671813500933?cxt=HHwWisC92brU-PktAAAA](https://twitter.com/PhilipDwyer_MOI/status/1655619671813500933?cxt=HHwWisC92brU-PktAAAA)>.

<sup>31</sup>Paul Murphy, Twitter post, April 24, 2023, 7.46pm, <[https://twitter.com/paulmurphy\\_td/status/1650572029874036770](https://twitter.com/paulmurphy_td/status/1650572029874036770)>.

<sup>32</sup>Karl Marx. 1944. *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, online edition, <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/manuscripts/hegel.htm>>.

<sup>33</sup>G.W.F Hegel, *The Philosophy of Spirit (Jena Lectures 1805-6)*, online edition, <<https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hegel/works/jl/ch03c.htm>>.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Harvey, D. 1989. From Managerialism to Entrepreneurialism: The Transformation in Urban Governance in Late Capitalism. *Geografiska Annaler. Series B, Human Geography*, 71(1), pp.3–17.

<sup>36</sup> Seán Mitchell. 2021. *Lenin, Elections and Socialist Hegemony*, Dublin, Rebel, pp.7-9.

<sup>37</sup>Justin Kong, Edward Hon-Sing Wong, and Veronica Yeung 2018. ‘Organizing the suburbs’, *Briarpatch*, <<https://briarpatchmagazine.com/articles/view/organizing-the-suburbs>>.