

Matthew Cunningham, Paul Spoonley, and Marinus La Rooij (eds.)
Histories of Hate: The Radical Right in Aotearoa New Zealand
Dunedin: Otago University Press, 2023, 444pp

What is the Far-Right in Aotearoa New Zealand?

MAX SOAR

In 1988, Stuart Hall published *The Hard Road to Renewal*, a collection of essays written over the previous decade that attempted to grapple with the nature and significance of ‘Thatcherism’ in Britain. The Thatcherist neoliberal project, Hall argued, attempted to reconfigure the common sense of the people. The aim of the neoliberal project was to dismantle social democracy and the post-war welfare state and construct a new modernity characterised by free-market enterprise, imbued with conservative values of tradition, family, and nation. To that end, Hall reminds us that:

There is nothing more crucial, in this respect, than Gramsci’s recognition that every crisis is also a moment of reconstruction; that there is no destruction which is not, also, reconstruction; that, historically nothing is dismantled without also attempting to put something new in its place; that every form of power not only excludes but produces something.¹

Although this initial moment of Thatcherist reconstruction has passed, we keenly feel its consequences in Aotearoa New

¹ Stuart Hall, ‘Gramsci and Us’, in *The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left* (London: Verso, 1988), 164.

Zealand today—our own neoliberal turn comes from a related lineage and brought with it similar transformations. The atomisation of collectives into individuals has accompanied a decline of mass organisations—from trade unions to political party membership—weakening links between people and their democratic representatives.² The embeddedness of neoliberal rationality and governmentality has gone hand-in-hand with wider structural transformations within capitalism in ways that only heighten the extent of global crises. The world economy is unstable, but national responses shield corporate profit and financiers from the consequent shocks of that instability. Action to mitigate the climate crisis continues to be obstructed in favour of ongoing accumulation, drastically increasing the frequency of major weather events. Further, rising temperatures and the practices of industrial capitalism that contribute to them make zoonotic spillover more likely, leading to more frequent pandemics and major health crises. The human (and non-human) cost of overlapping social, economic, and environmental crises is immeasurable, and it is no wonder that these developments have accompanied a crisis of trust in civil society and democratic institutions.

The years following the 2008 Global Financial Crisis have also seen a resurgence in the political relevance of the far-right. We have witnessed the electoral success of far-right populist candidates in the US and Brazil, the domination of an authoritarian religious right in India, and the advance of far-right cultural movements, such as the so-called ‘alt-right’. These political and cultural developments have also spawned far-right organising (including militias) worldwide, alongside increasingly prevalent and horrific acts of white-supremacist violence. Global instability and a resurgent reactionary right demands the consideration of the characteristics of a modern fascism and the conditions that give rise to it. In this moment of crisis and destruction, what does the far-right seek to reconstruct?

Commentary about the threat of fascism often provokes handwringing

2 See Peter Mair, *Ruling the Void: The Hollowing of Western Democracy* (London: Verso, 2013) for a version of this argument with respect to political parties; or, for an alternative formulation, see Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2015).

about the ambiguities of fascism as a political designation and the term's overuse as a rhetorical weapon.³ Some of these concerns arise from the use of rigid typologies to capture what is effectively an incoherent ideology, built through the work of a broad spectrum of heterogenous groups with conflicting interests. Fascism is not logical; it is reactionary and contradictory to its core. The contradictions do not mean, however, that in a historical moment of rising far-right fervour—and overlapping social, economic, and environmental crises—there are not coherencies to be found in manifestations of the reactionary right. Stuart Hall, through his engagement with Antonio Gramsci, gives us something further to consider:

In our intellectual way, we think that the world will collapse as the result of a logical contradiction: this is the illusion of the intellectual—that ideology must be coherent, every bit of it fitting together, like a philosophical investigation. When, in fact, the whole purpose of what Gramsci called an organic (i.e. historically effective) ideology is that it articulates into a configuration different subjects, different identities, different projects, different aspirations. It does not reflect, it constructs a 'unity' out of difference.⁴

The challenge, then, for those of us committed to an anti-fascist politics, is to understand and anticipate how an incoherent fascist ideology might take advantage of very real dislocations and vulnerabilities—particularly under the current and imminent conditions of capitalist crisis—to configure its subjects into an effective political force. But we must also be able to articulate our own liberatory alternative.

It is in this context that *Histories of Hate: The Radical Right in Aotearoa*

3 See, for example, Dominic Green, 'The Problem With Using Fascist as a Political Insult', *The Atlantic*, 18 December 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/12/fascism-populism-presidential-election/510668/>; Mitch Daniels, 'Opinion | Tossing around "Nazi" and "Fascist" as Insults Is Reckless and Historically Illiterate', *Washington Post*, 19 July 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/07/11/tossing-around-nazi-fascist-insults-is-reckless-historically-illiterate/>.

4 Hall, 'Gramsci and Us', 166.

New Zealand has been published. As the title implies, the volume takes a predominantly historical perspective on the radical right in Aotearoa New Zealand, with only the last of its five sections reserved for twenty-first-century developments and movements. *Histories of Hate* is clear that its subject is what it calls the ‘radical right’—that is, the broadly defined spectrum of right-wing beliefs and political behaviours more radical than those held by the mainstream or centre right. While contributors define the right in their own terms, the editors are clear in the introduction that they consider many of the political beliefs discussed—particularly those that precede World War II—to be extreme- or far-right, even if they were at the time considered mainstream or normative. This framing gives the book scope to address everything from the impact of scientific racism and social Darwinism on the colonisation of Aotearoa, to histories of specific organisations—and, in some cases, individuals—from the early twentieth century and interwar years. It proceeds in a loose chronology to consider developments in the post-war rightward fringe—including everything from skinhead gangs to anti-communism to fluoridation—before discussing more recent organisations, such as the National Front, Action Zealania, and the spread of white supremacist ideologies online.

It is precisely because of the variety and breadth of histories included in the book—and, consequently, the juggling of temporally shifting political contexts and definitions—that the editorial framing seems to eschew any strong claims about fascism, populism, nationalism, or white supremacy, although it provides various definitions and typologies of each. Instead, it adopts a birds-eye view of everything right-of-centre, hesitant to make judgements and content to let readers make their own. For me, this viewpoint contributes to a central tension in the book. The editors specify an interest in instances where radical-right beliefs ‘jump the firebreak’ from the fringe and into mainstream politics, and they repeatedly highlight the radical right’s desire to influence political policy and mainstream discourse. Yet the editors strongly state: ‘despite the occasional blurring of lines, it is important to maintain a distinction between the radical and centre-

right'.⁵ It is not specified how such a clear distinction could be drawn. This is an unproductive framing that minimises the ways in which the extreme elements of right-wing ideology are co-constituted with more mainstream conservative politics. As Jessie Daniels argued in her book on white supremacist discourse in the United States, such discourses resonate with mainstream, institutionalised forms of white supremacy “produced by elected officials ... mainstream political debate, academic intellectuals, and popular culture representations,” thereby serving “to sustain privileges of race, class, gender, and sexuality which are endemic to a white supremacist context.”⁶ For these reasons, among others, I think the term ‘fascism’ is still a useful one: it makes clear the historical lineage of far-right ideologies while keeping an eye on the political horizon of the far-right project.

The tension between the neutrality of the introduction and the incisiveness of the individual contributions is immediately apparent with the opening chapter, where Leonie Pihama and Cheryl Smith discuss scientific racism in Aotearoa. They locate the establishment of hierarchies of race and constructions of ‘racial fitness’ within the imperial-colonial project of capitalist expansion led by Britain and other European powers. The authors point to the historical bi-partisan support for eugenicist policies that supported racist and white supremacist systems (including justifications for colonial expansion) and how such structures of white dominance persist in modern capitalist systems. In Aotearoa New Zealand, these structures produce disproportionately poorer outcomes for Māori and non-white immigrant communities. The authors point out how eugenicist politics and social-Darwinist hierarchies also manifest themselves in other forms of oppression, such as the dehumanisation of disabled people or the designation of queerness as ‘degenerate.’ Similar dynamics persist today because these logics are part of the foundation of our society. For example, pseudo-scientific theories of racial hierarchy still underly the bipartisan

5 Matthew Cunningham, Paul Spoonley, and Marinus La Rooij, eds., *Histories of Hate: The Radical Right in Aotearoa New Zealand* (Dunedin: Otago University Press, 2023), 38.

6 Jessie Daniels, *White Lies: Race, Class, Gender and Sexuality in White Supremacist Discourse* (New York & London: Routledge, 1997), 7.

coded language of ‘unskilled’ labour in immigration. At the same time, politicians and academics alike insist on defending (in conspicuously abstract terms) the free speech of transphobes, who are frequently supported by more explicitly fascist organisations. These hierarchical and colonial fictions are deeply embedded in our society and they have emerged more recently, as Pihama and Smith argue, through the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on Māori, especially with elements of the Labour Government’s response found to breach Te Tiriti o Waitangi.⁷ It seems to me that the far-right’s explicit support for eugenicist policy and its use of ideas about racial hierarchy does more than “jump the firebreak” into mainstream politics—each is an expression of the same white supremacist foundations.

The book’s contributors each consider the radical right in a particular point in time, through the history of specific organisations or a focus on specific issues of right-wing fixation, and many of the chapters present observations that are disconcertingly relevant to the twenty-first century. Elisabeth Ward considers the anti-socialist formations of the interwar years, where the radical right found fertile ground in the discontent of farmers and homeowners towards proposed land nationalisation. Similar tendencies can be seen today in the racially-coded objections to co-governance, centralisation policies like Three Waters, and various rural protest movements against Significant Natural Areas, in which each is framed as part of an escalating programme of government overreach. The more extreme varieties of these objections tend to lean on conspiratorial claims about an imminent world communism that dance dangerously close to anti-Semitic conspiracies of financial control and white supremacist narratives about the ‘Great Replacement.’ Again, there are resonances here between radical-right and mainstream politics that suggest they interact in complex ways and cannot be easily differentiated.

Dolores Janiewski’s chapter on the Christian religious right and Peter Meihana’s contribution on anti-Treaty ideology present further examples

7 Waitangi Tribunal, ‘Haumarū: The COVID-19 Priority Report – Pre-Publication Version’ (Wellington, Aotearoa New Zealand: Waitangi Tribunal, 2021), <https://www.waitangitribunal.govt.nz/assets/Covid-Priority-W.pdf>.

in which mainstream conservative politics are mutually constructed in conversation with the far-right. Janiewski points to the patriarchal family, monogamy, heterosexuality, and restrictions on reproductive autonomy—coded as ‘family values’—as pillars of a Christian right. These have been formed in opposition to what has, confusingly, been articulated as feminism, post-modernism, and/or a ‘leftist’ agenda for sexuality and gender. These Christian values have often been core to centre-right politics in Aotearoa New Zealand and far-right organisations alike. In particular, the ‘societal ills’ that such ‘family values’ are meant to protect us from are opposed by explicitly fascist organisations such as Action Zealanda who, as discussed in the chapter by Paul Spoonley and Paul Morris, “valorise Christendom, Christian militarism and the idealised Christian heritage of European white culture.”⁸ This focus on ‘family values,’ heteronormativity, and, in particular, the protection of children can also be seen in organisations like Voices for Freedom, who are not explicitly Christian and like to maintain a rhetorical distance from other organisations on the right, maintaining a veneer of respectability. Each of these organisations could, in theory, be confined to different segments of a political spectrum, but they nevertheless rely on common discourses and values that suggest potential for collaboration, if they unite around a shared issue.

Peter Meihana describes how ‘anti-Treatyism’ as an ideology reflects Aotearoa New Zealand’s unique constitutional arrangement, especially in the context of a worldwide movement towards the recognition of the status and rights of Indigenous peoples. Anti-Treatyism attempts to reconfigure political moves to redress the ills of colonial subjugation as evidence of Māori privilege. Such claims also mix with pseudo-historical and pseudo-archaeological claims about pre-Māori European settlers, which are favoured by white supremacists, Nazis, and fascists alike. While post-1970s anti-Treatyist ideas have found purchase and coherence alongside the raised profile of Te Tiriti, Meihana points out they are not new. Instead, “they

8 Paul Spoonley and Paul Morris, ‘Identitarianism and the Alt-Right: A New Phase of Far-Right Politics in Aotearoa New Zealand’, in *Histories of Hate: The Radical Right in Aotearoa New Zealand*, ed. Matthew Cunningham, Paul Spoonley, and Marinus La Rooij (Dunedin: Otago University Press, 2023), 317.

appear throughout New Zealand history particularly during times of ‘crisis’ when settler ambitions were hindered by Māori attempts to retain control of their lands and resources.”⁹ It is untenable to argue settler colonialism is anything other than mainstream and hegemonic. Challenging this argument is another way in which extreme elements of the reactionary right not only find purchase within the political mainstream, but where the two blend together. As Meihana so clearly puts it:

Colonisation is at its core a process of dispossession, and it is an ongoing one. Land was essential to the establishment of a British settlement; thus it was taken first. With the loss of land came the subjugation of Māori authority. Operating within the same colonising paradigm, today’s anti-Treatyists attempt to dispossess Māori by attacking the validity of the growing recognition of the Treaty of Waitangi over recent decades. ... Anti-Treatyism, when infused with pre-Māori conspiracy theories, is an intoxicating mix that appeals to some, even when they are presented with evidence to the contrary. For this reason, it will continue to linger on the margins although politicians may continue to bring anti-Treatyism into the mainstream when the need arises.¹⁰

These examples—an anti-socialism blended with opposition to co-governance and nationalisation, a conservative Christian resistance to an emancipatory politics of gender and sexuality, the reactionary defence of white supremacist systems of governance from Indigenous claims to self-determination—are ways in which the history of the radical right are reflected in contemporary politics. They are also each avenues through which the extreme-, far-, radical-, and fascist-right might all contribute to the same project, reforming and coalescing into larger, more coherent, and

9 Peter Meihana, ‘The Anti-Treatyist Response to the Recognition of Māori Treaty Rights’, in *Histories of Hate: The Radical Right in Aotearoa New Zealand*, ed. Matthew Cunningham, Paul Spoonley, and Marinus La Rooij (Dunedin: Otago University Press, 2023), 264.

10 Meihana, ‘Anti-Treatyist Response to the Recognition of Māori Treaty Rights’, 282.

more politically effective ideological alliances.

Finally, a discomfiting theme that emerges in the early sections of the book is the frequent centrality of the labour movement and labour issues to both individuals and organisations that have gone on to be influential in Aotearoa New Zealand’s radical right. Stevan Eldred Grigg and Zeng Dazheng examine the history of Sinophobia within the labour and class politics of Aotearoa New Zealand in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This history is informative for contemporary struggles, particularly given recent fearmongering about foreign ownership and Chinese interference in democracy, which contrasts with the importance, and past success, of internationalism for socialist movements. Marinus La Rooij examines a significant figure from the history of Aotearoa New Zealand’s far right, Lionel Terry, who murdered a Chinese man in Wellington in 1905 to draw public attention to what the contemporary far-right would now refer to as the ‘Great Replacement’: “a coordinated global super-conspiracy by powerful Jews to destroy the Empire and replace racial Britons through mass alien immigration.”¹¹ Terry’s experience as a union organiser and coal miner in British Columbia was significant to his radicalisation, where he saw capitalist attempts to bring in Chinese labourers as a threat to the wages and working conditions of the white working class. Similarly, Mark Derby argues that Arthur Desmond, a working man and labour organiser, may be the author of the influential fascist manifesto *Might is Right*. The chapter tells the tale of Desmond’s “ideological transformation from left-liberal champion of the working class and dispossessed Māori to a vehemently anti-Semitic, racist and misogynist autocrat.”¹²

These examples do not conflate a left and right politics, but rather

11 Marinus La Rooij, ‘Lionel Terry: Radicalisation, Revolution and the “Great Replacement” Myth’, in *Histories of Hate: The Radical Right in Aotearoa New Zealand*, ed. Matthew Cunningham, Paul Spoonley, and Marinus La Rooij (Dunedin: Otago University Press, 2023), 77.

12 Mark Derby, “‘Devils Are in Demand’: Arthur Desmond’s “Might Is Right” and Its Present-Day Influence on the Far Right’, in *Histories of Hate: The Radical Right in Aotearoa New Zealand*, ed. Matthew Cunningham, Paul Spoonley, and Marinus La Rooij (Dunedin: Otago University Press, 2023), 101.

they highlight the potential futility of defining incoherent political ideologies on a simplistic spectrum. They also provide cautionary lessons for labour organising. “Fascism,” as I will continue to call it, has always relied on elements of anti-capitalist and anti-bourgeois ideology. Fascists have historically been quick to abandon such programmes in service of establishing cross-class alliances to “seem attractive allies to conservatives looking for ways to perpetuate their shaken rule.”¹³ Workers, like Lionel Terry and Arthur Desmond, can be vulnerable to radical right propagandising when it appeals to the very real ways in which workers are ground beneath the bourgeois boot. But, as Robert Paxton argues, “fascism is, after all, an authentic mass popular enthusiasm and not merely a clever manipulation of populist emotions by the reactionary Right or by capitalism in crisis.”¹⁴ We must therefore be vigilant by taking lessons from history and ensuring socialist and labour movements remain committed to anti-racist and internationalist politics.

These confluences of far-right conspiratorialism with working class concerns highlight that to understand the radical right ideology in all its complexities, contradictions, and tensions, we must become comfortable with messiness. To that end, I think ‘fascism’ remains a useful term for discussing the political machinations of the right, not because every right-wing organisation is explicitly fascist, or because I predict an imminent, politically effective fascist uprising (though the potential conditions are there). Rather, I think the term is useful because many individuals and organisations, including some who identify themselves as on the left, can contribute to the *work* of fascism, materially and ideologically, in the context of a resurgent right. Thinking about fascism as something that must be actively constructed by a range of actors, both deliberate and naïve, helps us to become comfortable with messiness: the question becomes not ‘is this group fascist,’ but ‘are they doing work that brings us closer to fascism?’ The editorial introduction to *Histories of Hate* broaches the former

13 Robert O. Paxton, ‘The Five Stages of Fascism’, *The Journal of Modern History* 70, no. 1 (1998): 15.

14 Paxton, ‘The Five Stages of Fascism’, 3.

question, but, in all but the most obvious circumstances, the book leaves it to the reader to answer for themselves. As to the latter question: each of the contributions in this book provides compelling evidence that their subjects were, or perhaps are, contributing to that work in ways that are materially significant for contemporary struggles.

For me, fascism is a word that still has power. It keeps in view the potential violence and severity of consequences at the horizon of radical-right organising. It also helps us think about the complexities of radical-right ideologies, not just in terms of what they oppose (which can rhetorically shift day-to-day) but what they seek to build. This book provides critical context and demonstrates threads of ideological coherence within the right that persist from colonial dispossession of Indigenous land through to the political struggles of today. It fails, however, to draw those threads together into its own explicit analysis or point-of-view. The tentative editorial framing of the far right provides the reader with numerous tools by which to examine the contents of the book but it leaves any overarching argument implicit in the curation of the contributions. For me, this means that the book fails to overcome the, admittedly tricky, inertia of an edited collection with broad scope and it is unable to draw the contributors' thoughtful histories and clear political arguments together into its own coherent vision. Lingering questions thus remain, particularly around the editors own political analysis of the content of book: why should we learn the *histories* of the radical right? Are these mere curiosities to be consumed? Or are there important lessons to be taken from these examples to inform an anti-fascist response to contemporary threats? Answering such questions is an urgent task if we are to struggle against the rise of the far right.