BOOK REVIEW

Pam Nilan: Young People and the Far Right
Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021, 145 pages

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Received: 19 February 2022 / Revised: 19 February 2022 / Accepted: 21 February 2022 / Published online: 10 March 2022
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Young People and the Far Right forms part of the Alternatives and Futures: Cultures, Practices, Activism and Utopias series at Palgrave Macmillan. ‘Activism and utopias’ might evoke a slightly more positive vibe than what a book on the far right is likely to deliver, but Nilan’s reframing of far-right political movements as a particular subculture that serves to create boundaries of identity and belonging enables it to fit comfortably into the series, albeit with a focus on an alternative future that is far from utopian for most. Yet the far right is offering an alternative future based on their vision of a utopian ethnostate. Understanding how far-right movements are managing to promulgate this exclusivist version of utopia is the central theme of this timely and accessible book. Nilan encourages the reader to move beyond individualist explanations of far-right youth radicalisation. Instead, she contextualises youth involvement in far-right movements as an outcome of the collective ‘aggrieved entitlement’ of primarily young, white men. This ‘aggrieved entitlement’ is, according to Nilan, validated and reified through the aesthetics and affordances of digital communication technologies.

Weaved throughout the book are questions of how young people negotiate the complex emotional landscapes arising from the disconnect between their youthful aspirations and the realities of contemporary social and political life. Written in the midst of the global COVID-19 pandemic, this disconnect is arguably greater than ever before, with young people’s fear and anxieties about their futures exacerbated through further economic and social precarity. Driven by the desire to be active agents in constructing their own (idealised) futures, Nilan argues that some young people are drawn to the empowered versions of themselves promulgated through far-right discourses. First painting a picture of perennial threat, far-right discourses then provide an avenue of heroic action to mitigate the looming danger. As such, young men are offered the chance to be on the vanguard of an historical moment, securing
their power and position if only they have what it takes to join the movement. In this sense, rather than representing a conservative movement, the contemporary far right offers young people a space for radical political action.

*Young People and the Far Right* begins by briefly outlining some key concepts before focusing on the themes of youth, class, masculinity and race as they relate to the far right. While Nilan acknowledges the complexity of the far right as a continuum of views, her choice to use ‘the generic term ‘white supremacist’ (p 4) is not unproblematic in light of several high-profile contemporary far-right groups that are led or supported by non-whites. Indeed, Nilan herself cautions us from assuming that all young people are joining the far right to express their deeply racist and misogynistic views. Rather, she positions young white men as grappling with amorphous feelings of anger and resentment as the privileges they were traditionally afforded are perceived to be eroding. As Nilan points out, far-right recruiters can effectively channel these feelings towards support for white supremacy (p 3). However, this emotional underpinning arguably transcends the explanatory power of ‘white supremacy’ ideology and demands us to find new ways of thinking about the far right’s appeal that better incorporate the kinds of subcultural and experiential aspects that can explain these seeming anomalies. How new technologies interact with emotions to generate social spaces primed for the promulgation of far-right ideas emerges as an important area for further research (for example see Waldek 2021). Indeed, it is when the book turns to the multitude of ways that far-right discourses are mobilised and spread through the everyday practices of youth that many valuable insights emerge.

Chapter Two provides a fascinating tour through the many ways that far-right actors normalise their attitudes by appropriating the digital tools and practices at the heart of contemporary youth culture. Martino (2015), has pointed to how the lives of young people, particularly young men and boys, are increasingly being shaped into a militarised variant of youth culture through First Person Shooter (FPS) video games. Unlike other Role Playing Games (RPG), the affordances of FPSs make them particularly useful for spreading far-right ideas. Nilan identifies the male-dominated environment, the synchronous live-chat functions and the subjective positioning of the player in ‘the killing space’ (p 41) during an epic and existential battle for survival, as ripe for the socialisation of young players into far-right political subcultures. For those who follow across onto other platforms, click bait, bots, algorithms and peer-to-peer transmission of content all influence the types of information being offered and consumed, while trolling becomes a perverse kind of game where the ammunition is a variety of hateful slurs, and memes and shit-posting draw on irony and humour to mask hateful and often violent content. Nilan demonstrates that these edgy, permissive, entertaining and highly social activities help to make the far right accessible and attractive to young people.

Nilan points to the idea of ‘floaters’ and ‘members’ to describe the ‘two kinds of youthful Far Right followers’ (p 7). Floaters move across various far-right sites, liking, posting, trolling and commenting, anonymously harassing the identified Other, but without committing to a particular far-right group. Members, on the other hand, make themselves known, attach themselves to a specific group and step up to take responsibility for driving the group forward. This provides a useful heuristic tool
for differentiating between roles that young people may adopt, and Nilan points out that followers can move back and forth between these positions. Framing of young people as ‘followers’ of particular groups or ideas—even hateful ones—potentially downplays the degree to which they are active participants in creating and curating the environment in which they thrive (for example, see Waldek et al. 2021). However, this does not take away from the important contribution Nilan’s book makes to illuminating the mechanisms of how youth engage with the far right. Indeed, these types of questions and debates point to valuable areas of further research on youth agency within extremist milieus. This is particularly important in the context of the decreasing age of young people becoming involved in extremism (Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) 2022). Understanding more about the experience and impact of being immersed in subcultures of far-right extremism across different stages of youth, via different levels of commitment, and through performing different roles, is vital for developing nuanced strategies to mitigate the harm this may have on young people. As Nilan points out throughout the book, engagement in the far right is harmful, not only to those to whom they direct their hate, but also to those who dehumanise themselves through being hateful.

Continuing her exploration of the emotional appeal of the far right, the focus of Chapter Three is on the power of white warrior and fantasy symbolism as an avenue of re-enchantment among young, disenchanted white men. Throughout the book, Nilan provides glimpses of young men seeking to escape the drudgery and discontents of their modern lives. The high fantasy genre provides a mode of escapism where tales of heroic warriors engaged in epic battles, triumph against the odds. Far-right discourses follow this template, drawing on medieval tropes and tapping into the yearning of young, white men to transcend their ordinariness and reclaim their own triumphant position in the world. Nilan demonstrates how far-right fantasy blurs the line between imagination and reality, creating an environment of brotherhood and belonging that firmly draws on masculine norms of violence. Not all, even most, of the young men attracted to this white warrior fantasy will end up in neo-Nazi groups—this is not the point that Nilan is making. It is the bolstering of entitlement connected to white masculinity that she argues is being effectively socialised through these discourses, and can consequently be expected to continue to pervade political and social institutions through various means.

In Chapter Four, Nilan turns to the role of Western ultra-nationalism in shaping the imagined futures of young white men. Benedict Anderson (1983) famously pointed to the power of newspapers and novels for shaping revolutionary national imaginings throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In the context of the contemporary far right, digital mediums surpass printed ones, enabling imaginings of a future white ethnostate while simultaneously feeling connected and inspired by a global community of compatriots engaging in a similar quest. Arguably the power of ideologies lay in their ability to identify or create a sense of injustice, inspire people to imagine a future that can be better, and connect that to a political agenda for action. In this sense, they are ‘narratives of hope’ that promise to ameliorate the discomfort (real or perceived) of everyday life (Smith 2021, p 6). As confronting as it is to consider that engaging in far-right extremism may provide hope to disenchanted young white men, it does point to the
importance of contextualising the appeal of extremism within dynamic historical, political, sociological and cultural conditions (Taylor and Horgan 2006).

The final chapter of *Young People and the Far Right* turns its attention to the practical process of entering or exiting far-right movements. Drawing on biographical accounts of those who have undertaken the journey into, and out of, far-right groups and movements, Nilan provides a succinct account of the push and pull factors that emerge. The previous chapters have aptly prepared the reader to comprehend the role of ‘aggrieved entitlement’ as pushing people away from the mainstream political and social environment. Existing personal relationships are powerful conduits for deeper engagement providing the promise of camaraderie connected to the opportunity to actively bring about social change. Yet, what also transpires in the accounts of those who have been there, is that the promises are a façade, and the hopes generated through engagement in the far right eventually get crushed. A little considered fact is that most young people who join extremist movements will eventually seek ways to leave (Barrelle 2015). What emerges from Nilan’s analysis is that leaving is unlikely to be easy. Fear, shame, stigmatisation, loss of purpose, and fractured identities all need to be navigated through on the pathway out of the far right. The longer a person is involved the more compounded these complex issues are likely to be.

By focusing on questions of *how* young people become involved in the far right, rather than *why*, Nilan centres understanding over judgment. By doing so, she broadens the explanatory realm beyond dogmatic discussions of ideological doctrine or individual pathology to incorporate the aesthetics and techniques of contemporary youth subcultures. She reminds us that there is a rich and enduring body of sociological work that can be brought to the topic of youth radicalisation to extremism. Unashamedly writing from a position of, ‘deep concern for the well-being of young people … [including] those who make the dubious choice to support extremist ideas’, Nilan (2021 p. 2) brings a much needed sociological perspective to youth studies of extreme political movements.

**Declarations**

**Conflict of Interest** The author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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