FAR-RIGHT FANTASY
A SOCIOLOGY OF AMERICAN RELIGION AND POLITICS

JAMES AHO
Far-Right Fantasy

Far-Right Fantasy is a straightforward, jargon-free study of contemporary American right-wing extremism. Accessible to both professional and lay audiences, it allows activists to speak for themselves in their own words. It takes the self-announced religious motivations of extremists seriously, and illustrates this by citing numerous cases of radical politics. The book addresses the strengths and weaknesses of the standard psycho-socio-cultural explanations of far-right activism. It shows how extremists are similar educationally and psychologically to their more conventional neighbors; that they get into the movement in the same way that others become peace activists or radical environmentalists, namely, through their ties with fellow workers and churchgoers, family members, and classmates; and that their views are given a patina of certainty by being repeatedly corroborated within closed, noncontaminated communication systems.

The book avoids being preachy or judgmental, but it does try to challenge readers morally by submitting far-right fantasy to a formal ideological critique. It does this by showing how the reforms it recommends—a marketplace free of regulation; draconian immigration restrictions; an end to the federal reserve bank and the income tax; a balanced budget amendment to the Constitution; antiunion right-to-work laws and a return to debt slavery; the privatization of schools, the post office, and the commons; and so on—contradict its ostensible goal, which is to protect and enhance middle-class interests. Far-Right Fantasy is suitable for adoption as a supplemental text in political psychology and sociology, sociologies of religion and knowledge, collective behavior, and American political history.

James Aho is Professor Emeritus at Idaho State University, Pocatello, Idaho.
Aho revisits the dark world of right-wing extremist ‘Christian Patriots,’ and readers benefit from his deep acquaintance with this movement, which he analyzes with penetrating sociological insights. Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of his account is the evidence he musters to indicate how the worldview of these ‘far-right fantasists’ has percolated into mainstream conservatism.

Peter Kivisto, *Richard A. Swanson Professor of Social Thought, Augustana College Research Fellow, University of Trento*

Aho’s study of the right-wing fantasies of Christian Patriots and white supremacists is grounded in a lifetime’s study of sociological methods, religious history, and first-hand encounters with extremists in his own home state of Idaho. As he dispels simple-minded explanations of these outliers on the American scene, he also offers us a deeper understanding of their ideologies and convictions. A delightful read as well as a profoundly informative work of scholarship.

Charles Guignon, *Emeritus Professor of Philosophy, University of South Florida and author of On Being Authentic*

Authoritatively written and masterfully analyzed, this penetrating study journeys into the dark world of America’s Christian extremists and their dangerous political fantasies. It is as gripping as it is unsettling—a must read.

Far-Right Fantasy
A Sociology of American Religion and Politics

James Aho
I hate them with perfect hatred: I count them mine enemies.

(Psalms 139:22)
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Acknowledgments
Cliven Bundy, a grizzled Mormon rancher, is said to have fifty-seven grand- and great-grandchildren. His family has grazed cattle on 600,000 acres of yucca- and mesquite-dotted desert near Bunkerville, Nevada, since 1877. In April 2014, federal agents rounded up Bundy’s livestock for allegedly trespassing on Bureau of Land Management (BLM) property. During the ensuing scuffle, one of his sons was bloodied by a Taser gun, and a daughter was knocked to the ground.

Sensing a good story, Fox TV inflamed the situation by portraying Bundy as a “martyr” for freedom and liberty and theorized that the cattle seizure was part of “Agenda 21,” a United Nations environmental conspiracy. Others on the far-right gossiped that Nevada Senator Harry Reid had orchestrated the BLM roundup so that a Chinese company he was invested in could build a solar power plant on the land and, still others, that Reid was trying to help a Canadian company access the land for a gold mine. Neither story was true (for a history of the dispute, see Fuller, 2014).

Responding to a call for supporters, an estimated 1,000 Patriot militiamen from across the country were “mobilized” and tweeted GPS coordinates so that they could negotiate their way to Bundy’s homestead. On arriving, one of them, hefting a large pistol, told reporters, “I don’t want no one to get hurt, but sometimes we have to stand up.” A companion wagged his head in agreement and warned, “I’m ready to pull the trigger if fired upon.” As if to underscore the seriousness of their threats, several weeks later two of the militia, Jerad and Amanda Miller, murdered a pair of Las Vegas policemen and a private citizen before killing themselves (see Appendix, June 8, 2014).

Wary of the danger the militia posed, a score of uniformed federal officers and growling K-9 dogs greeted the Patriots at Bundy’s gate. They were then unceremoniously dispatched to their own holding pen, a fenced-off “first amendment area.” There they posted a sign-up sheet (“Militia sign-in”) and erected a banner reading, “Liberty and freedom for God we stand.” There were placards: “End marshall [sic] law, now!” and “Utahans stands with Clive Bundy.” Vows were made that if fired upon by the feds, they would use women and children as shields and record the massacre for posterity on their cell phones.

Prologue

The Battle of “Bunker Ville”
Bundy argued that on the basis of tenure rights recognized in common law, insofar as his family had worked the land for many years prior to the establishment of the BLM, “we own this land.” He called on the local sheriff to disarm the federal interlopers and have them arrested for trespassing. Prudently, the sheriff demurred. (Bundy claims that when he arrived at his office, the sheriff was “hiding under a table.”)

Fox News pundits praised Bundy, saying that the land under dispute “was not being used” and that, if anything, the Bundys should be given a medal for performing a “public service” by keeping the price of beef down and for “mowing the lawn.”

The BLM maintains that the reason for the roundup in the first place was that Bundy had refused to pay grazing fees since 1993 and that his debt (at $1.35 monthly per animal unit [one cow and her calf] × 240 months × 900 cows + interest, fines, and roundup expenses) equals more than $1 million. Bundy, they say, is a “million-dollar welfare deadbeat” and his actions are “unfair to the thousands of ranchers who graze livestock in compliance with federal laws and regulations.” Besides this, Bundy’s livestock threaten the habitat of the Mojave desert tortoise, an endangered species. Environmentalists add that Bundy’s cattle hinder the ability of plants to recover from range fires and damage ancient Native American cultural sites and that Bundy’s presence itself is a threat to recreationists.

Federal courts support the BLM complaint, arguing that the Nevada state constitution, written in 1863 by Civil War unionists a decade and a half prior to the arrival of the Bundy clan, grants the federal government “paramount allegiance” in land disputes. They ordered that Bundy remit the fees and fines, remove his herds from federal land, and cease interfering with the administration of law.

Bundy admits to being a citizen of the “sovereign state of Nevada” but does not recognize the authority of the United States, which he considers a “foreign country.” He claims that federal agents illegally “seized Nevada statehood, and we’re here to take it back . . . . I’ll do whatever it takes to gain our liberties and freedom back!” Bundy has said that the actions of the BLM confirm everything that the far-right has long supposed: This is “how the federal government feels about ‘we the people’.” They “pay to kill babies in the womb,” and now they are “willing to kill an adult human being, Cliven Bundy, over a desert tortoise.”

The militia issued an ominous forecast, saying that the impending “Battle of Bunker Ville” was “only the beginning,” that “battlefield America” had become a reality and that a nationwide insurrection was imminent. As proof, they offered astronomical predictions of a “tetrad of blood moons,” four total lunar eclipses, that would occur in the years 2014–15. This, they solemnly decreed, was an indisputable sign of the End Times.

As it turns out, the government siege ended peacefully. Cognizant that escalating tensions endangered people on both sides, the BLM quietly returned Bundy’s cattle. (In the 1990s, as a protest against what locals said was “government over-reach,” BLM and U.S. Forest Service offices in Nevada had
been bombed.) Bundy’s supporters erupted with joy, waved flags, and called him a hero. “The citizens of America,” Bundy prated, had brought the standoff to an end by threatening force. The militia had “backed those bureaucrats down and they run out of this county into Utah.”

What the BLM’s concession portends remains to be seen. One Fox TV commentator interpreted it as a sign of President Barack Obama’s seemingly inveterate weakness. Obama had “caved, as [he] did earlier with [Russian President] Vladimir Putin.” And as was true for the Crimea and Ukraine, his frailty would only stir more resistance to tyranny. As if to confirm the point, the militia established armed checkpoints in the neighborhood of Bundy’s ranch and demanded that drivers show proof of residency before being allowed to enter. Several dozen others traveled to nearby Blanding, Utah and, with their own children as shields, defied the government by driving ATVs (all-terrain vehicles) on roads the BLM had earlier closed to motorized travel to protect fragile Pueblo Indian burial sites.

Senator Reid has issued his own warning: “We can’t have an American people that violate the law and then just walk away from it. So it’s not over.” He reminded voters of a series of armed encounters 30 years earlier that involved another Mormon government-hating rancher, Gordon Kahl, which resulted in several deaths, including Kahl’s (Corcoran, 1996; see also Appendix, 1983).

Some recommend that the dispute be resolved by seizing Bundy’s monetary assets, assuming he has any. Others suggest that his ranch house be foreclosed on, and still others that a lien be placed on his cattle so they can’t be sold. One person even proposed that Patriots hold a fundraising drive to raise the million dollars or so that Bundy needs to pay off his debts. Much pro-Bundy sentiment faded away, however, after Bundy went on the air to “wonder” about “whether black people were better off as slaves,” picking cotton and sitting on their porches watching over their chickens and gardens.
This book concerns what a small but vociferous group of Americans believe has caused the loss of “their” country and the policies they recommend to get it back. It is a worldview so contrary to that of the average citizen as to warrant its own special designation: *far-right fantasy*. Far-right fantasists call themselves “Christian Patriots,” a title that I will honor in these pages. Critics, however, say they are neither. Others are less charitable. Celebrated religious historian Karen Armstrong (2000: 361–2), for example, writes that far-right fantasy has “fascist potential,” a judgment with which both Chris Hedges (2006) and Naomi Wolf (2007b) agree. The conservatively inclined Assembly of God Church speaks of it as displaying “unscriptural triumphalism,” and Rick Perlstein (2007) condemns it as “Christian imperialism.” Theologian Gregory Boyd (2007: 24) claims that far-right fantasy harbors a “demonic dimension,” and Frank Schaeffer (2008) says, simply, that it is “anti-American.” Schaeffer is the son of Francis Schaeffer, whose *Christian Manifesto* (1981) is discussed later.

As used here, *far-right fantasy* refers to an intellectual style with a belligerent tone, an exotic history of the world, and a concrete program of social reform. My argument is that its proponents are neither monsters, morons, nor madmen, but basically rational people of normal intelligence: good people with blind spots. Which is to say, they are superbly gifted at espying the “splinter” in their neighbor’s eye, yet remain largely oblivious to the “log” in their own (Matt. 7:3–5; Luke 6:41–42). In this way they resemble the ancient Pharisees who are said to have thanked God “that I am not like the rest of men—extortionists, swindlers, adulterers, or even like this tax collector here” (Luke 18:9–14). It is this blind spot, this scotoma, that explains their sometimes flippant cruelty, their moral certitude and, above all, their unwillingness to compromise, even when the costs of inflexibility are exorbitant. The goal of this book is to aid the blind to recover their sight, so to say; to remind them, *and ourselves*, of the harm that can come from good intentions when untempered by wisdom, justice, and mercy.

My sojourn into the world of the radical right began in 1985 after learning about what has since become an all-too-familiar scene on the evening news: a shootout between federal marshals and a band of malcontents. They called
themselves the *Brüders Schweigen*, a German phrase that means “brothers keep silent.” Evidently, they had sworn an oath over the head of one of their infant children to reply, “I know nothing,” if ever interrogated by the police (Flynn & Gerhardt, 1990).

The shootout had started when the *Brüders Schweigen* tried to shut down shipping lanes in Puget Sound, Washington, as a first step in what they hoped would grow into an all-out race war between themselves and what they called “ZOG,” Zionist Occupation Government (i.e., the federal government) (Aho, 1990: 61–7). They maintained that ZOG was allied with Earth’s “mud people”—blacks, Hispanics, Asians, and Indians, whose dark skins “proved” they have no souls—to rid Earth of spirit-inclined whites. Although it may be coincidental, ZOG bears an uncanny resemblance to Zod, the arch-villain of Superman’s home planet of Krypton.

The mythology of the *Brüders Schweigen* derived from a heretical theology known as Christian Identity (CI), which holds that the ancient Israelites were not Jews at all but Aryans. Jews, CI teaches, are descended from Cain, history’s first murderer, who is said to have been conceived by Eve after being impregnated by the Devil (the serpent of Genesis). After killing his brother Abel, so the story goes, Cain was exiled by God to “east of Eden,” where he mated with the “witch women of Nod,” giving his name to the Canaanites of the Old Testament. The Canaanites thenceforth evolved into the Jewish Zionists of our era. Meanwhile, the non-Jewish Israelites, after having been freed from Babylonian captivity, migrated over the Caucasus Mountains—hence, their racial type, Caucasian. According to CI, these Israelites settled in various European countries, some of which today presumably bear the titles of their founding tribes: Danmark, by the tribe of Dan, for example; Jutland, by the tribe of Judah; and so on. It is from the Aryan Israelites that Jesus Christ is said to have come. As evidenced by Sunday school paintings familiar to most readers, he was a movie-star chinned, brown-eyed brunette. And it is his blood that courses through the veins of Germans, Scandinavians, Finns, Russians, northern Italians, the British, and white Americans (for a comprehensive history of CI, see Barkun, 1996).

As it turned out, incendiary flares fired by the police ignited the cabin where the *Brüders Schweigen* were holed up, burning it to the ground. The body of its founder, a one-time John Birch Society activist, Robert Mathews, was found, roasted, in a bathtub (for his manifesto, see Aho, 1990: 246–50). In the ensuing months, scores of his followers were arrested and convicted of charges ranging from arson and armored car robbery—the largest at the time in American history—to counterfeiting, murder, and at least one teenage suicide.

The shootout might have passed me by unnoticed were it not for the fact that the *Brüders Schweigen* was hatched in the pine-forested lake country of northern Idaho, near the headquarters of a CI congregation known as the Church of Jesus Christ Christian (Aryan Nations). As a professor teaching at a university located within driving distance to the area, I undertook a several-year effort to comprehend what had transpired in my backyard. The findings
of that research need not be reviewed here. It is important to note only that I renounced the entire project in April 1995 after a disaffected veteran of the first Iraq War, Timothy McVeigh, in the name of Christian Patriotism, blew the façade off the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, killing 168 mostly female clerks and children. Until Al Qaeda flew planes into the World Trade Center in New York City, September 11, 2001 (9/11), this was the bloodiest terrorist event ever witnessed on our shores.

By his own account, McVeigh was seeking revenge for an earlier armed encounter, also involving federal agents, with a right-wing extremist family who had occasionally attended services at the Church of Jesus Christ Christian (see Appendix, Aug. 21–31, 1992) and for another conflagration a year later, recorded for TV in real time, that incinerated over 25 children at the headquarters of the Branch Davidian sect outside Waco, Texas (Aho, 2006). McVeigh claimed to have been inspired by the same novel, The Turner Diaries, that had earlier served as the blueprint for the Brüders Schweigen. Reports are that he was so infatuated by the book that he was seen at gun shows giving away free copies.

Following the bombing, I began to have misgivings about my research, feeling that I was profiting from the misfortunes of others: g-men, the radicals themselves, and their wives and children. I came to believe that in a perverse way my fascination with political violence was adding to the seemingly voracious appetite for it in the public. In other words, I felt like a hypocrite. I was content with this stance until the late 2000s when I overheard the admonition, “Starve the Beast!” enunciated by a now-forgotten guest on a Fox TV talk show. Legend has it that the phrase had earlier been coined by an unnamed staffer with the Reagan administration; it first appeared in print in 1985 in the Wall Street Journal. I was introduced to it while attending an Aryan World Congress around that same time.

The Aryan World Congress was held each July at the barbed-wired compound of the Church of Jesus Christ Christian. Advertised as “bringing together the great minds of the Aryan movement,” it attracted pretend SS officers in jodhpurs and black riding boots, garish-robed Klansmen, buttoned-down libertarian college students, and elderly Holocaust deniers from across the globe, including (the time I attended) a self-styled cowboy, Mormon polygamist. We have to “starve the Beast!” he told me, adding that his having multiple wives had nothing to do with sex. “That’s a big misunderstanding.” Rather, it is that by impregnating them he could produce many dependents, all of whom would live off the public dole. Since, he bragged, he paid no income taxes, this would help bankrupt the Beast described in Revelation 13:1–10.

Biblical exegetes claim that the Beast is an allegorical allusion to the Roman Empire, which CI insists worked with Jews to persecute the early Christian church. Today, however, it refers to the United States Government. Ours, the polygamist cowboy told me, are the Latter Days prophesied in the Book of Revelation, and the Battle of Armageddon between the sons of Darkness and the sons of Light is about to commence.
The Aryan World Congress was profoundly unsettling and, after having witnessed the lighting of a gigantic kerosene-soaked, rag-enshrouded cross (Aho, 1999), I drove back to my hotel room, giving thanks that I would never have to listen to such bile again. Imagine my dismay, then, to hear exactly the same expostulation—“Starve the Beast!”—and the strategy implied by it, promulgated by luminaries of the New Christian Right two and half decades later: first, by the Fox talk-show guest mentioned previously, then by the likes of Sarah Palin, Herman Cain, Michele Bachmann, and Rick Perry, all of whom would go on to participate in the Republican Party presidential primaries of 2010–11. Oratorical pronouncements that just a few years earlier were considered beyond the pale had, it seemed, been assimilated into the worldview of the Grand Old Party.

Palin, Cain, Bachmann, and Perry are not Aryans; Cain, for one, is black. Although a number of their followers do profess to racism, on the whole Palin and her fellows seem driven less by racial animus than by religious conviction. It is hard to envision them screaming, “The niggers are in! The niggers are in!” after learning of a local school being integrated, of decrying the machinations of the “Jews-media,” or ruminating about “international Jewish bankers.” Instead, they speechify about “equal opportunities, not equal outcomes,” “reverse discrimination,” “state’s rights,” “law and order,” and “welfare queens” (a codeword for needy black women). While these are largely inaudible to the general public—in the sense of being heard yet not listened to—they encourage politically astute, prosperous older white males and their spouses to support politicians and policies that have the effect of disproportionately harming the poor, young minorities, and females (Lopéz, 2014). Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2003) calls this rhetorical style “racism without racists.” Lawrence Bobo, James Kluegel, and Ryan Smith (1997) speak of it as “laissez-faire racism,” which they describe as a “kinder and gentler” variation of the same message once voiced by pre–civil rights era bigots.

If Palin, Bachmann, and the rest are not biological racists, neither are they conservatives in any conventional sense. Their stated intention is not to safeguard established authority through conciliatory means, a standard conservative goal, but to overthrow it altogether. They call for armed insurrection (Palin’s so-called “Second Amendment remedies”), of state nullification of what they consider unconstitutional federal laws, of seceding from the country (Tea Party, 2012), and of voluntarily exiling themselves to armed enclosures within America’s borders (Weyrich, 1999). They compare the U.S. government to Nazi Germany (GOP presidential aspirant Ben Carson, in Strauss, 2014), gleefully entertain the possibility of revolution, and liken themselves to the Founding Fathers, sometimes dressing the part. Above all, they take it as a compliment when real conservatives (in the sense just described) criticize them for being unwilling to compromise. “Thank you,” says one, “for pointing out a quality I want the community to recognize … Compromise is not in my nature” (Earl, 2014). They talk of the need to “shrink government down to the size where we can drown it in a bathtub” (Norquist, n.d.) and dabble in the
politics of what conservative Michael Gerson characterizes as “apocalyptic utopianism.” This is an outlook that gives little thought to the human costs of their policy proposals. Indeed, in some respects—absent his Judeophobia and racism—they remind one of Earl Turner, the central protagonist of the *Turner Diaries*, whose contempt for progressives is exceeded only by that for conservatives. Conservatives, says Turner, are not only the “world’s biggest conspiracy mongers”; they are “also the world’s greatest cowards.” “Woe betide any whining conservative … who gets in the way of our revolution.” Rather than debating them, “I will simply reach for my pistol” (MacDonald, 1980: 63, 94). (For a less virulent, but equally contemptuous dismissal of conservatism by a typical far-right pundit, see Larsen, 2013b.)

The point is that while / may have disappeared after the bombing of the Murrah Building in 1995, the far-right did not. After initially suffering large-scale defections following the McVeigh bombing, the far-right returned with a vengeance when a “black man,” Barack Obama, moved into the White House in 2009. Reports are that on the day of his inauguration three self-proclaimed Christian Patriots, one of whom had just compared him to Hitler and Stalin, snuck onto the walkway leading to the stage, anointed it with holy water, and prayed that it be cleansed of evil (Daily Kos, 2009). Less than a year later, a reputable poll reported that 35 percent of Republicans wanted to impeach Obama for “his actions so far” (Jensen, 2009). When, despite the GOP’s best efforts to obstruct everything Obama proposed, the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (Obamacare) eked through Congress, extremist alarms were sounded. “The hour grows late!” shrieked one talk-show host. “The gates are open! The Nazis are here!” Libertarian Wisconsin Senator Ron Johnson called Obamacare “the greatest assault on freedom in our lifetime” (Johnson, 2013).

Rumors that Barack Obama had not been born in the United States and was thus ineligible to run for president persisted throughout the duration of his first term. Nevertheless, he was convincingly reelected in 2012. Attention on the far-right then shifted to how to subvert his signature legislation. Secret planning sessions are said to have been held and a “blueprint” devised on how to shut down the federal government if Obamacare was not defunded (Stolberg & McIntire, 2013). A “tool kit” was assembled to carry out the plan, underwritten by bequests of tens of millions of dollars from right-wing business elites. Elderly “sentinels” were paid to infiltrate town meetings and express their outrage at “socialized medicine”; fake “Obamacare cards” (to be burned on college campuses by “conscientious objectors” to health care for the poor) were printed; cliché-filled sample letters to the editor were composed; and a mass advertising campaign was mounted against those suspected of interfering with the anti-Obama campaign.

Soon thereafter, a national poll found that 29 percent of registered Republicans believed an “armed revolution” might be necessary to “protect our liberties” (Drudge, 2013) from a “tyrant,” wrote one Patriot, who had “declared war” on the people (Earl, 2013a). Radio gossip repeated tales about President
Obama’s hatred of the Constitution, his worship of Allah, his devotion to the Muslim Brotherhood, and his similarity to Hitler (Now the End Begins, 2009–2014). It told about how he had lost his license to practice law because of his criminality, how he had given away cell phones to poor people and free food to illegal immigrants in order to win their votes, and how he was secretly married to another man. He was, one Patriot concluded, “the most dangerous person that’s ever walked in these United States” (quoted by Capehart, 2013).

Talk turned to the advisability of the “real” America—the old Confederacy, the Midwest, and the Rocky Mountain states—seceding from the country. And reminiscent of the so-called “Running Nigger” targets I first came across at the Aryan World Congress “nigger shoot” (Aho, 1990: 230), National Rifle Association (NRA) convention-goers in May 2013 were given the opportunity to purchase human-sized, plastic Obama targets that would, they were promised, bleed when shot. (After being displayed for two days, the vendor removed the target at the request of the NRA [Miller, 2013].) One activist, speaking to a Don’t Tread on Me, Confederate flag-waving crowd, warned that President Obama “needs to leave town, get up off his knees, put the Qur’an down, and come out of the White House with his hands, figuratively, out—up” (Alman, 2013). Days earlier, that same speaker had set a date for Obama to resign if he wished to avoid being jailed for his “Muslim, socialist, anti-Christian, antiwhite, pro–illegal immigrant, pro–radical gay and lesbian agenda” (Brown, 2013).

Death threats against President Obama reached historic highs soon after he took office, averaging thirty a day, a rate four times higher than those directed at President George W. Bush (Harnden, 2009). In 2010, the Southern Poverty Law Center described the recent proliferation of right-wing paramilitary organizations nationwide as “astounding” (National Public Radio, 2010). Three days after Obama’s reelection in 2012, a crazed Idahoan, announcing that he was a “modern Jesus Christ,” took it upon himself to save the country from what he called “the Devil” by firing on the White House with a semiautomatic rifle. After leaving at least five bullet pockmarks on the building, he sped from the scene, crashed his car into a highway abutment and, to avoid life imprisonment for attempted assassination, pled guilty to illegal gun use.

In 2013, the self-anointed “founder” of the modern militia movement, one J.B. Campbell, emerged blinking into the sunlight in Teton Valley, Idaho, to announce that Obama was a “rabid dog” out “to enslave all of us and kill some of us” (Levy, 2013; cf. Campbell, 2011). Predictably, there followed a run on local firearms and ammunition. “Preppers” throughout the upper Rocky Mountain region began stocking up on nonperishable enzyme-rich vegetable juice extracts and water jugs. Plans were made to erect armed “redoubts with defensible perimeters” high in the mountains to fend off city-dwelling liberals who, it was said, would soon be fleeing chaos in the lowlands.

I could go on, but the point, I think, has been made: The time has come for me to re-engage the larger conversation about happenings on the far-right with the tools afforded by my professional training as a sociologist. My earlier
Introduction

reluctance to feed the hungry maw of American loathing has been superseded by a more urgent obligation—to understand and, if possible, temper the voices of hate.

I am well aware that there exists a virtual library of coverage about the contemporary extremist right. In fact, I draw on much of it in this book. The most recent and informative example is Leonard Zeskind’s *Blood and Politics* (2009), a masterfully detailed account of how, since the 1970s, far-right ideology has gravitated from the margins of American political discourse to inform mainstream “conservative” thinking on a host of policy issues, domestic and foreign. There is a problem with Zeskind’s account, however, at least from the standpoint of sociology: It lacks methodological rigor and theoretical grounding. Zeskind addresses the who, the when, the what, and the where of right-wing extremism, but overlooks the most pivotal question of all: why? Why is there such a phenomenon at all? And why are some people drawn to it? To address these questions, we need to approach the subject from a different angle. Instead of just ordering things temporally as Zeskind does, we must base our analysis on what social scientists have come to believe are some of the reasons behind hate groups, urban legends, and political violence.

Journalists are in the habit of spinning social conflicts in order to advance partisan ends. Sociology has a very different goal, namely, to learn what animates the disputants in the first place. The word for this is *Verstehen*, a German term that means literally to “stand there” (*stehen*) in the subjects’ shoes. Instead of berating them from a distance, sociologists try to get up close to them, momentarily suspend judgments, and then empathetically “take their role”: seeing, thinking, recalling, and feeling about the world as they do. Georg Simmel (1977) has argued that the ultimate test of whether *Verstehen* has been attained in a particular case is if the analyst in question can glimpse something of him- or herself in the subjects and aspects of the subjects in him- or herself. Exactly how one goes about doing this goes beyond our immediate concerns. All that needs to be emphasized here is that *Verstehen* can go a long way to help promote civil discourse. After all, it is hard to demonize another if you can see yourself in them (and them in yourself).

Having said this, it is important to note that no one is just a sociologist. Once they doff their professional spectacles, sociologists can be as censorious and mean-spirited as the next person. There is an advantage to being habituated to the discipline required for doing sociology, however. It is that its practitioners are instilled with warning bells that alert them when their parsing begins devolving into preaching and they risk becoming what they decry. It hardly needs to be added that no matter how dispassionate and fair-minded sociologists want and believe themselves to be, it is naïve for them to expect extremists of any sort to extend to them the same courtesy.

As readers probably already know, there are sociologies of pretty much anything: family life, economic behavior, youth culture, personal faith, crime, the body, and even time. This book falls under the category known as the sociology of knowledge. This is a specialty that seeks to describe, explain and,
where appropriate, critique how such collectivities as classes, races, religions, and nations perceive, wonder about, remember, and emote toward the things around them (for an introduction to the sociology of knowledge as used here, see Aho, 1998). In regard to the subject of this book, my goal is first of all to understand the lived world of Christian Patriots, not from the viewpoint of their detractors but from the “inside,” from the standpoint of the Patriots themselves. This requires that we drink deeply from their considered fountains of wisdom: their books and pamphlets, orations, Internet blogs, letters to the editor, radio commentary, videos, and so forth. I am especially interested in the Patriot theory of history, how it accounts for the events that disturb them and what it recommends by way of reform.

My second objective is to review what social scientists have determined are the causes of this way of experiencing the world, why Patriots believe as they do. Are they, as some claim, ill-educated or crazy? Are they drawn to the cultic elements of extremism because of their social alienation? Or is the opposite true: Are they fanatical because of who their friends and acquaintances are? Do they see themselves as innocent victims of a “war on whites,” to quote an Alabama congressman (McCalmont, 2014)? And finally, what role does the peculiarity of their communication systems play in the generation and sustenance of their beliefs?

My third and final objective is to conduct what is technically known as an “ideology critique.” Here, instead of imposing on Patriots moral standards with which they may disagree, I try to uncover internal inconsistencies between their professed goals and the means they advocate to achieve them.

Sociology has a well-deserved reputation for turgidity and obfuscation and for a propensity to turn active-voiced verbs into passive nouns. In fact, the very term sociology is a nineteenth-century neologism fabricated out of Greek and Latin. To avoid marginalizing myself from current debate about the far-right, this book seeks to break through the chatter, the tedious statistics and, wherever possible, the long words; to address the questions before us in a straightforward, simple, if not simple-minded, way. If this contributes in some small degree to a better understanding of right-wing extremism, momentarily disarming fearful, hate-filled voices on all sides, thereby lessening the likelihood of violence, I will be satisfied.

Chapter 1 discusses how I use the term far-right in these pages, and it places the contemporary movement in the wider context of American political history. My aim is to show that while outbreaks of right-wing fanaticism are typically experienced as unprecedented and novel by their enthusiasts and critics, there is rarely anything new or, for that matter, of lasting significance about them. This should disarm “catastro-freaks,” as I like to call them, who see in the recent upsurge of extremism “The End of America.”

Chapters 2 and 3 provide an overview of what social scientists consider to be the preconditions of right-wing radicalism. It is primarily for the benefit of readers unfamiliar with the vast research on hate and hate groups and provides them with some of the classic references to which they can go to further their
knowledge of the subject. Chapter 2 examines theories relating to formal education, psychosis, authoritarianism, and social estrangement. My goal here is to normalize extremists by showing that by and large they are psychologically and socially indistinguishable from their less ideologically purposed neighbors. Chapter 3 refocuses the question of causality by taking into consideration what activists themselves say about their motives. This leads to discussion of the cultural memes of white male victimhood and heroic redemption.

Chapter 4 deals with how far-right fantasies are nurtured, namely, through self-referential “echo-chamber” systems of communication. I argue that such systems attract communicants who have a need for nonfalsifiable certainties, a yearning that increases when, among other things, official claims makers breach the public trust. Distrust is aggravated under conditions of secrecy.

In Chapters 5 and 6 we step into the shoes of Christian Patriots to get a close-up look at their fantasies. Chapter 5 deals with the Patriot claim that there is a plot afoot to “satanify” the nation. While this is advertised as a fresh revelation, in actuality it is a literary theme traceable to America’s founding, if not far earlier. This suggests that the legend of a conspiracy is less a reflection of reality “out there” than a projection onto that reality of deep-seated, perhaps unconscious personal issues. The balance of Chapter 5 focuses on recent allegations of government plots to promote gun massacres and bombings, establish a collectivist educational curriculum, and dramatically alter the climate.

Chapter 6 delves into a second fantasy, that by “re-Christianizing” America, reconstructing it on the basis of (presumed) biblical/constitutional designs, the fate prophesied by conspiratologists can be averted. Here I detail the political economic program advanced by Christian Dominionism, the considered vanguard of the far-right movement in the present era. In the liberal media, Dominionism is associated with “no!” No to equal rights for gays, no to abortion, no to undocumented immigrants, no to global warming, no to Darwinism, no to scientific geology, no to heliocentrism (the theory that Earth revolves around the Sun), no to artificial birth control, and sometimes even no to vaccinations against deadly diseases. But as Albert Camus (1956 [1947]) has shown in his study of the rebel, every no implies a yes, every rejection an affirmation. The point of Chapter 6 is to spell out exactly what this yes is for Christian Patriots.

Chapter 7 offers a critique of Christian Dominionism, demonstrating how it is not only impious and hypocritical but, more important, how it is “ideologically false.” That is, the policies it recommends are inconsistent with its ostensible goals. This once again underscores its fantastical nature.

Chapter 8 comments on a second kind of falsity emblematic of Dominionism: false consciousness. This refers to the unwillingness or inability of Patriots to acknowledge that the dragons they labor so tirelessly to slay are largely their own fabrications.

Following each chapter there is an Interlude that illustrates what Christian Patriotism means today: advocacy of secession, sovereign citizenship, racially pure townships, the shutting down of the government, and so on. The Epilogue
describes one of the latest and most bizarre experiments on these lines: the effort to establish a radical Patriot communal theme park.

The number of Christian Patriots who resort to firearms and bombs to get their way is miniscule, but it is estimated that from 1980 through 2014 this tiny aggregate has been implicated in over 400 violent deaths: murders, suicides, and killings by police. The Appendix itemizes the dates, locations, names of the perpetrators, and body counts of the relevant encounters. Many of these are referred to in the course of the text.

Note

1 Neither “conspiratologist” nor “conspiratology” (a term I introduce in Chapter 5) are in Webster’s. Both terms, however, are widely invoked by far-right rhetoricians. I do not use terms like ‘conspiracy-monger’ or ‘conspiracy-mongering’ in this book, in order to avoid casting aspersions on this style of thinking. Conspiratologists, as they call themselves, consider what they do to be serious historical inquiry, not ‘mongering.’ There exists an Institute of Conspiratology, an International Conspiratological Association, and a Royal Institute for Conspiratology, all of which claim to conduct ‘scientific’ investigations into the alleged one-world plot.
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