GLOBAL DIALOGUE

15.2

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International Sociological Association

Indian Sociology

Rajesh Misra
Maitrayee Chaudhuri
Indira Ramarao
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Radicalized Mainstream

Sabrina Zajak
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Pasha Dashtgard
Andrea Grippo
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Theoretical Perspectives

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Open Section

> Darcy Ribeiro and a Global Theory from the South
> The Repression of Palestine Solidarity in Germany
> A Critique of Anti-Women Urbanism in Iran

> Editorial

This second issue of the year opens with a focus on India, home to one of the world's most vibrant sociological communities. In this section dedicated to Indian sociology, five leading intellectuals from the country engage with different issues such as the tension between indigenous and Western sociologies, ongoing efforts to decolonize thought, the historical development and regional specificities of Indian sociology, and the impact of feminism and social movements. By foregrounding these central themes in Indian debates, we pay tribute to the Indian Sociological Society, founded in 1951, which will host its 50th annual conference in December 2025.

The main thematic section of this issue addresses the normalization of the far right. The seven articles, curated by Sabrina Zajak, Emanuele Toscano, and Anna-Maria Meuth, argue that the far right has already become the "new normal." They provocatively describe this trend as a "radicalized mainstream," pointing to the widespread normalization of authoritarian, sexist, ethno-nationalist, anti-migrant, anti-rights, and anti-pluralist ideologies. The authors analyze the diverse and evolving strategies through which the far right gains legitimacy and reshapes political and cultural landscapes. They explore the normalization of far-right politics through shifts in European party systems, the role of digital platforms in mainstreaming extremist content, and the radicalization of male self-improvement spaces within the manosphere. The far right's engagement with fashion is analyzed as a subtle yet powerful tool for identity formation and ideological diffusion. Further, the texts delve into how far-right actors infiltrate civil society in both global and localized contexts and how populist regimes reconstruct civic space to align with authoritarian and exclusionary agendas.

In our "Theoretical Perspectives" section, Palestinian sociologist Anaheed Al-Hardan and American sociologist Julian Go reclaim anticolonial thought as a vital source of critical social theory. They argue that anticolonial struggles have produced original concepts and insights that challenge imperialist epistemologies. Rather than rooting critique in geographic identity, they propose the anticolonial standpoint as a generative basis for dissident theory.

We conclude this issue with three diverse contributions in our "Open Section." The first revisits the legacy of Brazilian thinker Darcy Ribeiro and his contributions to global sociology. The second analyzes the war in Gaza in the German context, discussing the instrumentalization of anti-Semitism, the silencing of dissent, and various forms of repression targeting solidarity with Palestine in academic and public spheres. The final article critiques the silencing of women in the production of urban space in Iran.

Our next issue will be dedicated entirely to *Global Dialogue*'s founding editor, Michael Burawoy, following his tragic passing. If you would like to contribute or share suggestions, please don't hesitate to reach out. ■

Breno Bringel, editor of *Global Dialogue*

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> **Submissions should be sent to:**
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ISA International Sociological Association

GLOBAL DIALOGUE

> Editorial Board

*The thematic section dedicated to **Indian sociology** presents some debates on one of the world's most vibrant sociological communities.*

*The thematic section on **far-right normalization and the radicalized mainstream** explores how what has always been labeled as the far right becomes the new normal.*
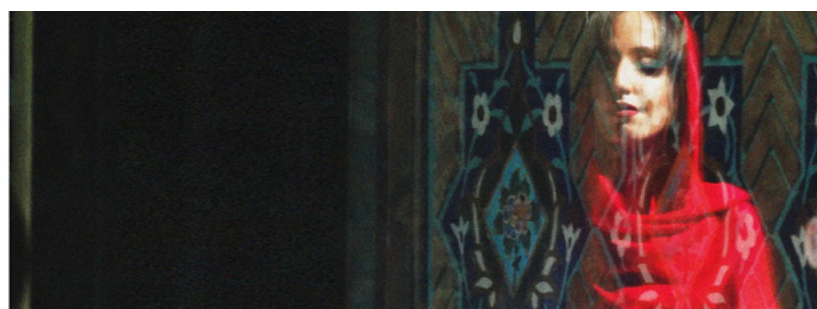
*The **Open Section** includes different contributions, on the legacy of Brazilian thinker Darcy Ribeiro, the war in Gaza in the German context, and women in the Iranian urban space.*

Credit for the cover page: Taurino, fisherman in Marajó (Pará, Brazil). Photo by Lara Sartorio Gonçalves, 2025.

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> In This Issue

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> "*The dual movement of far-right normalization that leads to mainstream radicalization signals a broader sociopolitical trend; one that blurs the boundaries between fringe and center, extreme and moderate*"
>
> **Damla Keşkekci**

> The Dialogue of Differences: Indigenous Ideas and Western Sociology

by **Rajesh Misra**, University of Lucknow, India

Credit: John Arrowsmith, public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.
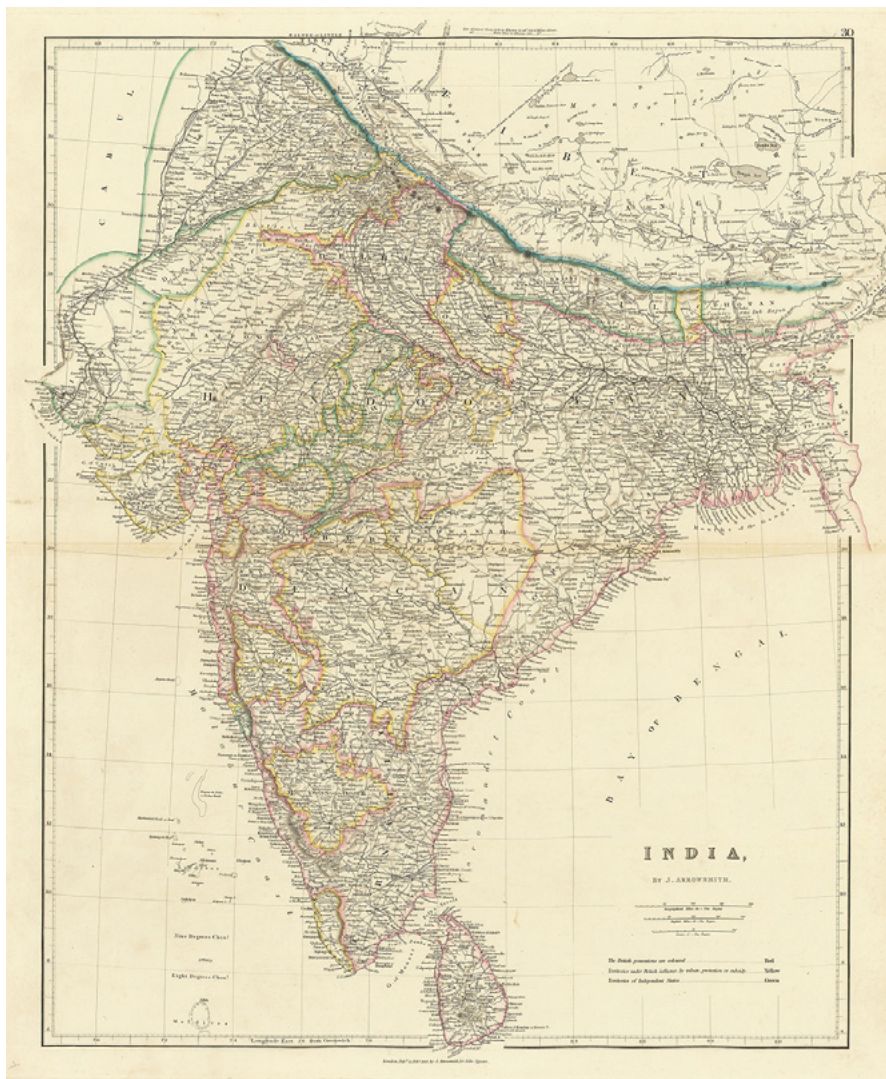
The discussion around decoloniality and indigenous sociology gained popularity in the 1990s; however, from the beginning, sociology in India has emphasized the importance of indigenous concepts and viewpoints. This emphasis can be traced back to two contexts: firstly, the socio-political context, and secondly, the intellectual–ideological context.

> **A sociology founded on the interplay between the freedom struggle and Western intellectual traditions**

The development of sociology as an academic discipline in India began in the early twentieth century, paralleling experiences in France, Britain, and Germany. The first sociol-

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ogy department in India was established in the same year as the sociology department was founded by Max Weber at the Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich: 1919. However, plans to create the sociology department at the University of Bombay were made before World War I in 1914. *The Indian Sociologist*, the first Indian sociological journal, began publication in London in 1905, founded by Indian freedom fighter Shyamji Krishna Verma, the same year *Sociological Papers* was released, which eventually led to the creation of *The Sociological Review* in 1907, marking the first sociology journal from Britain. Another journal from India, *The Indian Sociological Review*, was established in the 1920s by a British-born American philosopher from Baroda. It is worth noting the divergent backgrounds of the editors. The foundation of sociology in India is marked by a dynamic interplay between ideological preferences stemming from the freedom struggle and the expanding influence of Western intellectual traditions.

Despite India being under British rule and having foreign beliefs, knowledge agendas, and educational systems forced on it, the 1920s were characterized by major political and social transformations, including a surge in the political consciousness of the idea of unity against British rule, the anticolonial independence movement, peasant movements, and labor strikes. This decade also witnessed the implementation of the repressive Rowlatt Act and the self-governing Government of India Act of 1919, alongside the rise of movements like the Khilafat, the non-cooperation movement, and the establishment of trade unions. The All India Trade Union Congress was founded in 1920, followed by the formation of the Communist Party of India in 1925. As the freedom movement gained momentum in the late 1920s, it began to mobilize large groups and lead major protests. Furthermore, organizations representing "low castes" started to assert their presence, criticizing the dominance of "upper castes" and securing some reserved seats in the Madras Legislative Council.

All these mobilizations, movements, and organizations were mainly led by an emerging middle class educated in European traditions, yet drawing vigor for resistance from its indigenous heritage. Another section of the educated middle class was engaged in professions related to academia and intellectual pursuits. Against this backdrop of political upheaval, efforts to integrate indigenous perspectives into the liberal arts, social sciences, and political theories can be seen at the intellectual level.

> **A long history of multifaceted philosophy**

The indigenization of sociology can also be framed within a philosophical and intellectual context. India's philosophical and intellectual legacy is among the oldest and most diverse, encompassing numerous schools of thought and a broad spectrum of themes. Historically, Indian philosophy has not only been shaped by but has also influenced the cultural, spiritual, and intellectual currents of the Indian subcontinent. Different schools of Indian philosophy have offered unique perspectives on metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, and spirituality; emphasizing ways to shape everyday social life, norms, and values.

Throughout the medieval era, Indian philosophy experienced significant growth and a creative fusion between Hindu and Muslim thought, along with the emergence of the Bhakti and the Sufi movements, leading to a more varied cultural landscape. In recent times, public scholars and personalities have connected ancient insights to existing issues, advocating ideas such as universal brotherhood and non-violent resistance. The multifaceted nature of Indian philosophy represents a rich interweaving of various elements, each contributing to a deeper comprehension of existence, society, and the universe. This legacy not only mirrors the past but also seeks to understand the present. It has influenced the development of sociology in India specifically, and has also shaped political and ideological thinking more broadly.

> **Sociology for India or sociology of India**

In these two contexts, Indian Sociology has consistently engaged with the discussions of indigenization, contextualization, and Europeanization centered on the academic hubs of that era, Bombay (Mumbai), Calcutta (Kolkata), and Lucknow. Initially, sociology in India occupied a subordinate position in its institutional development, often seen as a leftover discipline compared to anthropology, economics, philosophy, and civics. However, the sociological practices at Bombay (Mumbai), Lucknow and Calcutta (Kolkata) sought to establish an independent trajectory, using concepts and perspectives that were grounded in Indian realities, while also preserving their unique viewpoints.

In this regard, three distinct approaches aimed at integrating indigenous perspectives within broader sociological approaches can be identified. The first approach is traditionalist and completely rejects the Western sociology paradigm, asserting that the unique characteristics and distinct nature of Indian society can only be understood and described through a long-established classical philosophical perspective and employing indigenous concepts, which are now referred to as the Indian (Hindu) knowledge system. The second approach is strictly sociological and focuses on applying Western sociological frameworks and methodologies to both generalize and specify the characteristics of Indian society. The third perspective aims to merge the dynamic features of Indian traditions with Western traditions, recognizing the impact of Western social theory and philosophical practices while integrating the Indian philosophical viewpoint and cultural diversity in Indian society. This can be observed in an effort to triangulate the Vedantic philosophy, hermeneutics, and Marxian dialectics to explain the rationalization of Indian tradition.

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While the first approach represents a closed monologue, the third promotes a dialogue between indigenous perspectives and Western sociology, creating a global conversation. It is relevant to acknowledge that a captivating debate unfolded among leading Indian sociologists representing two contrasting perspectives: "Sociology for India" and "Sociology of India." This dialogue focuses on whether sociology should concentrate on the study and interpretation of Indian society specifically or whether it should take a wider perspective that includes all societies, India being one of them. Recently, there has been a call for a discourse on postcoloniality, which may not yet have come to fruition.

> **An ongoing and evolving conversation between indigenous and Western sociology**

In the period since independence, the integration of Indigenous perspectives with European methodologies in the social sciences has gained significance in India, acknowledging traditional knowledge systems and cultural practices while also appreciating the utility of Western sociological approaches to analyze contemporary economic changes, political shifts, and societal transformations. Frequently, Western sociological frameworks overlook the distinct social systems found in India, thereby emphasizing the necessity to decolonize academic viewpoints and disciplines in post-colonial India in order to foster intellectual autonomy. In this context, the insights from Indian sociologists emphasize the importance of examining cultural practices, diversities, rural communities, caste structures, kinship ties, ethnic identities, caste discrimination, agrarian movements, social activism, societal changes, and economic progress. This was especially true in the period following independence, by proposing novel concepts and models that promote comprehension of Indian society through its historical, cultural, and traditional perspectives.

Although the Hindu system of knowledge is distinct and creatively integrates with various oriental perspectives, there exists an undeniable appeal in the Western knowledge system and its practical use. In this context, the themes, concepts, methods, and theories of Western sociology remain prevalent, despite a robust tradition of indigenization and contextualization. One could assert that the conversation between indigenous sociology and Western sociology has been ongoing, reflecting the progress of the discipline.

Additionally, the process of indigenization amid globalization is evolving, with emergent research areas like Dalit studies, tribal studies, and gender studies framed within subaltern and critical theory approaches. Indian sociologists contribute to global sociology by offering indigenous insights into traditional societies as they navigate the transition to modernity. Although sociology has traditionally been a social science primarily developed in the West and remains largely influenced by Western paradigms, it would be misleading to assert that Indian sociology has been decisively dominated by Western frameworks throughout its history, whether during the colonial period or after independence.

Since its inception, there have been initiatives to recognize the importance of indigenous viewpoints and ideas. This is evident in the diversity of viewpoints present in works that are either firmly based in Indian knowledge traditions or shaped by Western sociological concepts while remaining rooted in the Indian context. Despite the ongoing difficulties of merging traditional values with contemporary practices and indigenous perspectives with global influences, persistent efforts are essential to strengthen indigenous sociology and to integrate indigenous insights into global sociology. ∎

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> Everyday Practices of Sociology in India: Decolonizing in Retrospect

by **Maitrayee Chaudhuri**, President of the Indian Sociological Society and Jawaharlal Nehru University Delhi, India

In India, the disciplines of sociology and anthropology, with their close but contested relationship, began when India was still a British colony. Linkages between colonialism and sociology in India are thus necessarily deep and complex. In recent decades, a body of scholarship on disciplinary histories as well as the relationship between anti-colonial thought and social theory has emerged.

Locally within Indian sociology, however, there has been a much longer history of debate on the limits of alien concepts and a quest for indigeneity, as is evident from even a cursory look at the debates in *Sociological Bulletin*, *Contributions to Indian Sociology* and *Seminar*.

Globally, there has been a buzz around decoloniality; paradoxically, a relatively recent import in an erstwhile colonized country such as India. The questions that these developments prompt one to ask are: Can the quests within Indian sociology be read as "decolonizing" in the ways that the term is being used now? And does the long persistent quest to resist academic colonialism mean that Indian sociologists agreed upon what it means to critique Western categories?

The answer to the latter question is, perhaps, not quite. Many early sociologists in India share a common concern with nation-building, social reform, and importantly the value of science. However, another intellectual strand that was always present but long muted was an advocacy of India's unique culture demanding its own set of analytical categories. Even within that claim, important differences existed. However, it is with the rise of Hindutva that the idea of a hegemonic Indian Knowledge System (IKS) has acquired power and legitimacy. Significantly, this has been accompanied by an appropriation of the concept of decoloniality, begging the question: How do we read decolonialism?

"decolonializing offers us a language to speak"

> Decoloniality as doing

Writings on decoloniality suggest that decolonizing is not a singular thing; it is more about "doing", better grasped as a verb and therefore a process. Reading through efforts at decolonizing the classroom and syllabi in the West made me rethink my own pedagogic engagement. It made me wonder whether decolonizing is a term that I can add in retrospect. I draw from two sets of experiences: teaching a course on gender and writing on feminism in India; and teaching a course on concepts of social change in India. To fill in the context further, I entered university as a student in the late 1970s and started teaching in India in the late 1980s.

> Teaching gender, acknowledging feminism

The Global North has been a pervasive presence in our local everyday academia. Its presence was larger than life in our curriculum. Teaching a course on women and society in the early 1990s, I felt a certain unease concerning beginning with the mandatory reference to liberal, socialist, and radical feminist theories in Western textbooks. It made more sense to me to begin with history. It was, however, only in retrospect that I figured out why historizing was important; for the theoretical frames available at the time had no space for different histories. The buzz about multiple modernities had still not reached our shores nor had provincializing Europe. Third-world feminism had yet to

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become an essential add-on to the internationalized curriculum in the Global North. We were still struggling, sans the language to argue that our global histories have played out differently. Our modernity was therefore different, just as our feminist histories were.

As I struggled to write a conceptual account of feminism in India, I went through a process of learning from the everyday challenges that I faced. The first was the belief that feminism was not debated in India. In retrospect, I understood that this meant we had no debate akin to *The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism*. Second, I realized that the obvious but often overlooked fact is that, while for Western feminists whether or not to engage with non-Western feminism is an option they may choose to exercise, no such clear choice is available to non-Western feminists or anti-feminists. For us, our very entry to modernity has been mediated through colonialism, as was the entire package of ideas and institutions such as nationalism or democracy, free market or socialism, Marxism or feminism.

Third, was a recognition that contexts of knowledge circulation have changed. The nature of Western/modern ideological influence during colonialism and anti-colonial resistance was directly political, linked to social movements – whether of middle class or anti-caste social reformers, nationalists, communists or Adivasis. They sought to make history, seeking to articulate a distinct identity. For those in the women's movement, it was often expressed as a denial. "I am not a feminist" was a statement heard more often than not from women who were major public figures, leading to questions of whether we ought to go by self-definitions or by assessing their actions and consequences in society.

Fourth, therefore, recognizing that feminism was being debated, but differently, took time, particularly because such attempts at articulating difference were taking place in a context uninformed by either the language of difference or the more recent political legitimacy accorded to it. Concepts which slide spontaneously to the tip of the tongue and pen "gender construction", "performativity", "patriarchy", and "intersectionality" went under different labels a century ago. It is only in hindsight that most Indian feminists learnt that they were intersectional analysts.

> **Teaching concepts of social change in India**

For a long time, Indian sociology was in a state of constant catching up, keeping pace with concepts generated by the West. Thus, even as the modernization framework dominated Indian sociology for decades, the desire to develop concepts that were seen as home-generated was strong. I recall many seminars where Sanskritization would be flagged as an instance of authentic concept-making; and where both feminist and anti-caste questionings, like earlier Marxist ones, were seen outside the sphere of academic sociology.

In my sociology class, we learnt about modernization as the process of change towards those types of social, economic, and political systems that developed in Western Europe and North America and that would spread globally. We also read that there is a cultural lag, but in time we too would develop institutions that paralleled those of the more economically advanced nations, which ultimately would lead to a global convergence of societies. Colonialism was given a miss. This was more than a little strange in a country where we grew up learning about Dadabhai Naoraji (1825-1917) and his book *Poverty and Un-British Rule in India* as an early critique of uneven development and theory of the Indian "wealth drain". Thus, even when theories of underdevelopment and André Gunder Frank were introduced, they were an add-on to a largely structural functionalist framework that worked as the template for Indian sociology.

The key takeaway from modernization theory was the compatibility/incompatibility between "traditional structural and cultural features" and "development". Historians of modern India have shown that while modernization in the West led to urbanization, in India the destruction of the handloom industry with the flooding of manufactured goods from Britain led to the immiseration of weavers, who then flooded the rural and agrarian spaces. Some of them became part of indentured labour working in sugar and cotton plantations in distant lands such as the Caribbean, or British, Dutch and French Guiana. When I began to teach modernization in India, I had to move away from that inquiry of cultural lag and complicate the storyline; and deal with the historical specificities of our encounter with modernity via colonialism. One had to move away from abstract theory to history, much like my experience with feminism.

> **Final notes**

It is only in hindsight that it made sense why recourse to historical details was so important for us and why histories of doing in the Global South were histories of theorizing. Our stories did not exist within extant theoretical frameworks, for anti-colonial movements and thought remained hidden in mainstream sociology. While wary of buzzwords, and the dangers of appropriation, decolonializing offers us a language to speak. ■

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> Sociology in South India

by **Indira Ramarao**, former President of the Indian Sociological Society and University of Mysore, India

The beginnings of sociology in south India can be traced to the second decade of the twentieth century. The history of sociology in south India is presented here divided into three time periods: 1900-1950, 1950-2000, and 2000-2024 (to date, at the time of writing). The regions covered are the five states of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala, Tamil Nadu and the union territory of Puducherry.

> 1900-1950

The need to gain sociological insight to understand social phenomena germinated as early as the year 1915, when the Cambridge economist Gilbert Slater came to the Department of Economics at the University of Madras as chair of the department. Slater envisioned the teaching of economics to Indian students as complete only if they learnt what society is, and more importantly, about rural communities in India. His study of Indian villages, *Some South Indian Villages*, was published by Oxford University Press in 1918. I see this as laying the foundation for the development of what we today eulogise as interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary studies.

A similar endeavour was initiated when A.R. Wadia travelled from Wilson College, Mumbai, to the University of Mysore in 1917 to head the Department of Philosophy at Maharaja's College. Wadia's keen interest in giving a sociological orientation to philosophy, an idea supported by Brajendra Nath Seal, the then Vice-Chancellor of the University, saw sociology becoming an integral part of the undergraduate course in social philosophy. Wadia's decision to promote sociological studies also led to the introduction of the first undergraduate programme in sociology in India in the year 1928. Another milestone in the history of sociology in south India was the introduction of the one-year master's programme in sociology in 1949.

In Osmania University, Hyderabad, the undergraduate programme in sociology was situated in the Department of Economics, and it was only in the academic year 1937-38 that the discipline gained its individual identity. Sociology acquired the status of a fully-fledged department in 1946,

when a postgraduate programme was introduced. At the time of the reorganisation of the states on a linguistic basis in 1956, Mysore and Osmania were the only universities offering master's programmes in south India.

In the state of Kerala, the teaching of sociology as a subsidiary subject began in the 1930s; it was offered in colleges and taught to students of economics, history and political science. It should also be noted that the institutions concerned were all affiliated to the University of Madras.

On the research scene, I wish to make a special mention of the studies carried out by Austrian ethnologist Christoph von Furer-Haimendorf, who joined Osmania University as Honorary Professor and Advisor to the Nizam Government in 1945. His arrival in the department not only led to the starting of post-graduate classes in sociology in Osmania University, but also to a considerable amount of research activity being undertaken in the large tracts of tribal areas in the state. Some of the most celebrated field studies by von Furer-Haimendorf were carried out among the Chenchu, Bhil and Raj Gond tribal communities.

> 1950-2000

This was the most active period in the history of sociology in south India, in terms of both growth in the number of institutions and also research activities. In universities as well as in colleges, the teaching of sociology flourished. While master's and research programmes were offered in university departments, the undergraduate programme in sociology was offered in colleges.

Between 1950 and 2000, the master's programme in sociology in Karnataka was launched in six universities and each of these universities had affiliated colleges which offered sociology at the undergraduate level. The year 1970 saw the establishment of the Institute for Social Change, ICSSR's Premier institution in Bengaluru, Karnataka.

In the undivided state of Andhra Pradesh, postgraduate departments of sociology were started in seven universities

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"pioneering work on Indian society was undertaken in sociology departments in the south"

and ten institutions in Tamil Nadu, out of which eight were in universities and one each in a private college and an institute. The Department of Sociology in the Central University of Pondicherry was inaugurated in the year 1993.

Kerala presented a unique picture in that postgraduate programmes in sociology were offered in colleges, and the discipline entered the university scene only in 1969. A point to be noted is that colleges which offered sociology at the postgraduate level developed a research culture, generally thought of as being the prerogative of postgraduate departments. A prominent example is the monograph *Marriage and Family in Kerala* by Joseph Puthenakalam, who was in the sociology department of Loyola College, Thiruvananthapuram, considered to be a seminal work on kinship in Kerala.

The early 1950s saw pioneering work on Indian society undertaken in sociology departments in the south. Shyamacharan Dube, who set the trend for village monographs in India, came to Osmania University in 1952 as Reader in the Department of Sociology. Dube's seminal work, *Indian Village*, published in 1955 and based on Shamirpet, located close to the city of Secunderabad, is considered the first book on a single village in south Asia. In 1954, American anthropologist Milton Singer from Chicago University was invited by the government to study the changing rural society in the then state of Madras. His research on the role of tradition in the industrialised city of Madras, and the Sanskrit tradition in modern urban centres, led to the publication of the classic *When a Great Tradition Modernizes: An Anthropological Approach to Indian Tradition* in 1955. M.N. Srinivas's books – *Marriage and Family in Mysore* and *Religion and Society among the Coorgs of South India* – were published, respectively in 1942 and 1952, when he was at the Department of Sociology, Bombay University.

In the decades of the 1970s and 1980s, departments of sociology in Karnataka were also home to research projects that focused on social problems, sponsored by national and state organisations. These projects mainly concentrat-

ed on undertaking a situation analysis and recommending solutions. C. Parvathamma's studies on housing for rural poor and both scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, are but a few examples of how the idea of research for social action was encouraged in sociology departments.

The period 1950-2000 saw the maximum growth, both in the number of universities and teaching programmes in sociology all across south India. But from 2000 onwards, with the control of higher education shifting from the state to the private sector, sociology received a setback.

> 2000-2024

Across the southern states, many new universities were established in the twenty-first century, but a majority of them are in the private sector. Even in the newly established state universities, sociology has seen a downturn. Karnataka is a classic example. In this period, 37 universities were founded by the government and, out of these, sociology departments only function in nine universities. Between 2000 and 2023, as many as 39 universities were established in the private sector; and yet, only in two of these universities is sociology currently being offered. Of the 49 institutions opened in Andhra Pradesh, and 28 in Telangana (separated from Andhra Pradesh in 2014) over this period, it is only in three universities that sociology is being offered. In Tamil Nadu, sociology is not being offered in any of the 29 universities opened in the private sector. In Kerala too, sociology is not offered in any of the private universities opened after 2000. But the redeeming feature is that undergraduate colleges do offer sociology courses.

> Concluding remarks

The trajectory of sociology in south India has raised many questions that require serious dialogue. The first relates to gaps in recording the history of the discipline in different regions of the south. There is no systematic recording of the growth pattern, or the causes of the downhill journey sociology has taken. As for identifying the major research areas that different university departments have covered, and engaging in a critical debate on the outcomes and outputs of these research studies, I find that there is another large gap. There have no doubt been groundbreaking studies in many departments, but documentation regarding these works, their current relevance and efforts to undertake longitudinal studies using these studies, all seem to be virtually absent. Not setting aside the job value of PhD research, most of the research is purely degree-centric, without any serious review. Also, there is a need for a very solemn dialogue on pedagogical practices and quality assessment. ■

> Women in Indian Sociology:

Feminist Contributions, Pedagogy, and Praxis

by **Arvinder Ansari**, Jamia Millia Islamia University, India

The evolution of Indian sociology has been deeply influenced by the intellectual legacies of colonialism, nationalism, and modernity. These historical processes favored certain ways of creating knowledge, which often aligned with patriarchal, Brahmanical, and Eurocentric views. Additionally, these historical processes frequently excluded alternative modes of knowledge and marginalized subaltern perspectives. Within these dominant structures, women were predominantly positioned as subjects of sociological study rather than as knowledge producers or theorists in their own right. Their roles were frequently confined to analyses of family, kinship, reproduction, and social roles, reducing their lived realities to data points in broader sociological narratives. While women's experiences were rendered visible as objects of academic inquiry, the intellectual contributions of women sociologists themselves remained largely invisible within the canonical histories of the discipline: sidelined in university curricula and underrepresented in institutional spaces of recognition and authority. It is argued that this marginalization is not incidental but reflects deeper structural and epistemic exclusions that continue to characterize Indian sociology. To grasp these problems, we need to both re-examine the histories of the fields involved and take action as feminists to make sure that the intellectual work of women is recognized as essential to the growth of those fields.

This essay provides an overview of feminist contributions to Indian sociology, emphasizing the transformative impact of women sociologists on the discipline. It examines significant interventions in pedagogy, methodology, and institutional leadership, emphasizing the challenges women have posed to dominant paradigms and sexist traditions. I discuss the pioneering ideas of thinkers like Neera Desai, Vina Mazumdar, Maithreyi Krishnaraj, Sujata Patel, Maitrayee Chaudhuri, and Sharmila Rege, who have deconstructed masculinist epistemologies and institutional hierarchies. These scholars advocate a feminist reimagining of sociology, incorporating reflexivity, epistemic pluralism, and intersectionality as essential methodologies. Thus, I argue that women's contributions are not merely supplementary but foundational to the discipline's evolution.

> **Pioneering criticism of male-centric epistemologies exposed the systemic marginalization of women**

The emergence of feminist engagement within Indian sociology marked a critical intervention against the discipline's early epistemological focus. In its formative years, Indian sociology remained preoccupied with village studies, caste hierarchies, kinship patterns, and social structures – domains that frequently overlooked women's experiences and excluded gendered analyses from their conceptual frameworks. For feminist scholars, these omissions were challenged by making gender an important part of sociological analysis. This changed both the field's main themes and the way research is done.

Among the earliest pioneers, Irawati Karve's ground-breaking studies on kinship and family life integrated ethnographic sensitivity with rigorous social theory, offering a more nuanced and inclusive understanding of Indian social structures. Building on these foundations, scholars spearheaded the institutionalization of Women's Studies in the 1970s and 1980s. Their endeavors were profoundly influenced by the "Towards Equality" report, released in 1974 by the Committee on the Status of Women in India, and energized by the broader women's movement, carving out autonomous spaces for feminist scholarship that critiqued male-centric epistemologies and exposed the systemic marginalization of women within sociological research and academia.

> **Integrating feminist perspectives into teaching and research**

Feminist scholars in India have reshaped sociological inquiry by challenging dominant epistemologies and advancing transformative pedagogies grounded in lived experiences, reflexivity, and intersectionality. Maithreyi Krishnaraj's

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leadership at the Research Centre for Women's Studies at SNDT Women's University was instrumental in the integration of feminist perspectives into teaching and research. Her participatory learning approach emphasized collaboration between students and communities, encouraging the co-production of knowledge. Vina Mazumdar bridged activism and academia through her role as the founding director of the Centre for Women's Development Studies, spearheading community-based education and research initiatives that empowered marginalized women and foregrounded their experiences in feminist scholarship. Neera Desai further institutionalized feminist pedagogy by establishing India's first autonomous Women's Studies Centre at SNDT Women's University in 1974, maintaining an organic link between feminist scholarship and activism.

Sharmila Rege advanced a critical pedagogy that brought the intersections of caste, class, and gender to the fore. As Director of the Kranti Jyoti Savitribai Phule Women's Studies Centre at the University of Pune, Rege's use of Dalit women's narratives and testimonies marked a radical intervention in feminist theory and pedagogy, expanding methodological horizons and challenging the exclusionary practices of both mainstream sociology and upper-caste feminist discourses.

Sujata Patel and Maitrayee Chaudhuri have made pivotal contributions to feminist pedagogy, particularly through their emphasis on reflexivity as a methodological and ethical imperative. Chaudhuri, in her influential work *The Practice of Sociology*, advocates classroom spaces that foster self-reflection and challenge entrenched epistemic hierarchies. Her approach emphasizes methodological pluralism and encourages students to draw upon their lived experiences as critical sources of knowledge. Patel's interventions similarly emphasize reflexivity, interdisciplinarity, and transformative learning. Her critiques of colonial and nationalist legacies within Indian sociology expose the dominance of Eurocentric frameworks and call for a sociology that centers on the perspectives of marginalized groups. Patel's feminist pedagogy promotes dismantling epistemic hierarchies to foster more inclusive and socially engaged knowledge production.

> ### Situating knowledge and revealing intersectionalities

Donna Haraway's concept of situated knowledge critiques the false claims of objectivity in science and calls for epistemologies grounded in lived experiences and specific social locations. In India, Sharmila Rege operationalized this framework through her work with Dalit women's testimonies, advancing the epistemology of the Dalit feminist standpoint and challenging both mainstream sociology and upper-caste feminist discourses by insisting that caste, class, and gender be treated as co-constitutive structures of oppression.

"women's contributions are foundational to the discipline"

Intersectionality, first conceptualized by Kimberlé Crenshaw, has become a vital analytical and methodological framework within Indian feminist sociology. Sujata Patel and Mary E. John have expanded its application to address the specific intersections of caste, class, gender, religion, and region in the Indian context. Patel critiques the colonial and Brahmanical foundations of Indian sociology, exposing exclusionary practices that intersectional approaches seek to dismantle. Similarly, Mary E. John uses intersectional analysis to look at how patriarchy, caste systems, communalism, and neoliberal globalization all work together. She calls for a feminist politics that is aware of these complicated power structures.

> ### Situating feminist theory within the social world

Gail Omvedt and Kamla Bhasin have extended feminist praxis beyond academia, bringing feminist methodologies into grassroots movements and community learning spaces. Omvedt blurred the lines between scholar and activist by integrating feminist theory with Dalit and rural women's movements, emphasizing participatory learning and collective empowerment. Her work on participatory action research positioned marginalized communities as co-researchers, disrupting traditional hierarchies in knowledge production. Kamla Bhasin democratized feminist knowledge through her feminist educational initiatives with Sangat and her accessible writings like *What is Patriarchy?* and *Understanding Gender*. Through storytelling, songs, and dialogue, Bhasin fostered collective learning and consciousness-raising among rural and working-class women, making feminist theory accessible at the grassroots level.

Collectively, these feminist methodologies prioritize participatory, inclusive, and ethically engaged research practices. They challenge positivist and detached modes of inquiry by promoting reflexivity, situated knowledge, and intersectionality. Reflexivity, as emphasized by Gita Chadha and Maitrayee Chaudhuri, calls on researchers to critically examine their positionality and the power relations inherent in knowledge production. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's concept of reflexive sociology, feminist scholars advocate deeper self-reflection, situating the researcher within the social world they study and dismantling claims of objective neutrality. These approaches underscore a commitment

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to decolonizing knowledge production and fostering praxis that connects scholarship with social transformation.

> Violence and discrimination against women continue

Yet, despite these foundational contributions, Indian academia continues to grapple with masculinist institutional cultures that often render women's scholarly work invisible or peripheral. Chaudhari argues that gendered hierarchies persist, extending beyond leadership positions into knowledge production and dissemination. Research by women – especially when engaging feminist theory, caste, and marginality – is frequently undervalued or siloed within "women's studies," rather than integrated into mainstream sociological discourse. Maitrayee Chaudhuri criticizes this epistemic exclusion, arguing that feminist insights are often treated as supplementary rather than central to the discipline's analytical frameworks.

Feminist sociology in India today confronts a complex set of interlocking challenges shaped by neoliberal globalization, technological change, and rising sociopolitical tensions. The expansion of the gig economy and platform-based labor has intensified the feminization of precarious work, disproportionately affecting Dalit, Adivasi, and minority women who face insecure livelihoods, wage disparities, and exclusion from social protection. These developments, compounded by the digital divide, reinforce existing hierarchies of caste, class, and gender, limiting equitable access to economic opportunities. Simultaneously, urban planning and infrastructural development often privilege dominant groups, restricting marginalized women's access to safe and inclusive public spaces.

Environmental degradation and climate-induced displacement – issues underscored by scholars such as Bina Agarwal and Vandana Shiva – further exacerbate vulnerabilities, particularly for rural and indigenous women whose labor underpins community survival and ecological sustainability. Moreover, the rise of religious fundamentalism, communal conflicts, and political polarization has intensified violence and discrimination against women from religious minorities, undermining their rights and security. These interconnected challenges demand a feminist praxis that is reflexive, intersectional, and committed to social justice, addressing both local and global structures of inequality in the evolving world order.

> Embracing pluralism and promoting socially engaged scholarship to move towards a truly inclusive and reflexive discipline

Feminist scholars have been instrumental in reshaping Indian sociology, challenging its masculinist foundations and broadening both its methodological approaches and thematic concerns. Despite encountering persistent and evolving forms of inequality, their sustained contributions and transformative interventions have secured greater inclusion and leadership for women within key academic institutions, notably the Indian Sociological Society (ISS).

Recent developments in Indian sociology signal meaningful institutional progress and a renewed commitment to inclusivity. A landmark moment came in 2016, with the election of Sujata Patel as the first woman President of the ISS – an event that marked a significant step in redressing gender disparities in academic leadership. Her tenure opened up pathways for subsequent women leaders, including Prof. Indira, Prof. Abha Chauhan, and Prof. Maitrayee Chaudhuri, whose presidencies have consolidated these gains. Collectively, their leadership has advanced the democratization of the ISS, reinforcing its focus on addressing structural inequalities and promoting inclusive scholarship.

Through critical interventions in pedagogy, research, and institutional practice, feminist scholars have foregrounded reflexivity, intersectionality, and participatory methodologies that center social justice. The contributions of women leaders, particularly within the ISS, have further strengthened these transformative efforts. Yet, the task of democratizing Indian sociology remains an ongoing project. Building a truly inclusive and reflexive discipline requires the active engagement of scholars across all genders.

The aim is not to create feminist spaces that exclude men, but rather to foster collaborative platforms where diverse voices work together to develop more comprehensive and equitable understandings of Indian society. Encouraging male scholars to engage deeply with feminist perspectives can help dismantle entrenched hierarchies and enrich the discipline. By embracing pluralism and promoting socially engaged scholarship, Indian sociology can move toward a future in which feminist thought and praxis are central to its intellectual and institutional growth. ◼

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> Rethinking Social Movement Studies from India

by **Shruti Tambe**, Savitribai Phule Pune University, India

The sociology of social movements developed as a field in the second half of the twentieth century in the Western academic world. In the 1960s, this subfield of sociology was very popular worldwide, including in India. In fact, the sociology of social movements arose at the time of decolonisation around the world. Is it an accident that the rise and success of anti-colonial movements and the rise in the popularity of the sociology of social movements coincided?

I argue that the many different protests and anti-colonial, anti-imperialist, and anti-race movements inspired the rise of a separate field of sociology; precisely, the sociology of social movements, which advanced beyond the traditional formulation of social change. Yet this field did not acknowledge and include the methods, strategies, and ideologies that were observed on the ground during the period of decolonisation. It was almost as if the specialised field of the sociology of social movements was completely isolated from developments in the "colonial world".

> Modern proletariat movements within Western liberal capitalist democracies

I wish to lay out three postulates that were important in the field of the sociology of social movements as it became a distinct field of research. These also mark the boundaries of academic access to and legitimacy of certain experiences.

The first is the argument that social movements are a modern phenomenon. All the elements of modernity – the transformation of ideas and values, polity, economy, society, and technology – have contributed to making social movements a thoroughly modern phenomenon. Although the process of transformation was initially very slow and regionally specific, certain intellectual processes have commonly been observed in various parts of Europe since the fifteenth century. Individualism, rationalisation, and encouraging both new aesthetics and the importance of science and technology were commonly experienced in the modern world. These transformations in turn initiated changes in politics, economy, and social relations. Was this the case with the colonial world? Was race an important issue in the Global South at that time?

"the Global South is not a homogenous category"

Secondly, this field implies that the study of institutionalised collective action is rooted in all the aspects of modernity, individualism, and dissent in liberal democracies shaped by Western capitalism. This grants an authenticity exclusively to the Western experience. These institutionalised actions are associated with twentieth-century democratic institutional structures in a Western liberal capitalist democracy.

The third postulate elaborates on who the leaders of these struggles are and who the followers are. The obvious assumption in the field is that proletariats are the vanguards of social movements. The struggles underline the class conflicts and the resultant pressures for the sociopolitical and economic reformulations in democratic societies.

With these postulates and a number of conceptual frameworks and theoretical perspectives, social movements were studied by scholars across the globe. They highlighted issues of structural strain, discrimination, loss of livelihood and democratic dissent. Following the same path, various strategies adopted by movements were documented in India and across the Global South.

> No place in the mainstream despite six decades of popularity in India

In India, the 1980s witnessed a surge in research on social movements, nationalist movements, peasant movements, and tribal movements. Moreover, case studies like the Bhoodan-Gramdan (land gift and village gift) movement documented and analysed various struggles, movements, and agitations within the established frameworks of the sociology of social movements. Several doctoral dis-

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sertations were also submitted in multiple universities in the same period.

And yet, after six decades of the popularity of sociology of social movements as an academic field at the international sociological level, how and why are the cases and experiences of dissent, protest, and contestations involving millions of common resourceless people in South Asia and especially India awkwardly struggling to fit into the frameworks of mainstream sociological discourse on social movements? Can we understand this conundrum that continues today and identify the factors that can show us a way out?

> ## Waves of agitation and social movements across India failed to focus sociological debates

NAPM@30 is a document that celebrates struggles (both successful and failed) and states that when this people's alliance was emerging in the early 1990s, the Structural Adjustment programme driven by the World Bank had already been thrust on the Indian government. This incursion severely affected grants, welfare schemes, subsidies, and stable permanent employment for thousands. Yet, as NAPM@30 reminds us, a general agreement – albeit not a very clear one – prevailed among the ruling class and the resourceless exploited masses over the promise of the welfare state and the institutional structure based on constitutional values prevailing till the late 1980s.

The 1970s and 1980s saw a wave of agitations across India led by students and youth, broadly demanding the socioeconomic and political reformulation of Indian society through social movements, citing the goals of the anti-colonial nationalist movement and the constitutional goals of establishing democratic socialism and a welfare state. Redistribution of land to the landless, housing for socially and economically deprived sections like the scheduled castes, educational subsidies for poor students, a public distribution system ensuring subsidised food and grain to alleviate poverty were some of the demands. Even till the mid-eighties, it was still believed after four decades of post-colonial existence that the democratic republic of India had to march along the path of liberty, equality, and fraternity supported by (social, economic, and political) justice, secularism and socialism to secure an equitable future for the billions. With these aims, thousands of agitations, campaigns, and movements rose and ebbed in various parts of India. Yet, in India, social movements were a significant but not the central point of discussion and debate in sociological circles. The main debates in sociological circles in India were still the tradition versus modernity debate and the rural versus urban debate, along with the conceptual and substantial aspects of social stratification debate.

> ## "New" struggles reflect the gap between advanced capitalist economies and the colonial capitalist Indian economy

However, around the late 1980s, New Social Movement (NSM) theory emerged, analysing the "new" movements that were being observed since the 1960s in the developed Western world as opposed to the "old" movements, as per Marxist theory of social movements. The "new" social movements were characterised by a novel focus on lifestyles, values, and transformation of the private life and symbolic realm in advanced Western capitalist economies.

This was the time when many mass movements, including agitations by youth for employment, tillers and small peasants for fair prices and land rights, and tribal communities against displacement and to demand resources, were stirring up the Indian democratic arena. The issues of political and economic restructuring had surfaced and the urgent need to alleviate poverty through income and power redistribution was at the centre of debates within civil society. Issues of survival and democratic rights leveraged through movements and trade unions demanding dignity were common agendas in the 1980s.

In other words, while in India, movements concerning material conflicts, citizenship, and human dignity were being fought side by side, in Western societies the issues of survival had already been more or less settled and it was issues of identity, lifestyle, and values that were being contested. India had entered capitalism through the route of colonial capitalism, as Alavi and Shanin (1982) argue strongly, and this explained the gap between advanced capitalist economies and the colonial capitalist Indian economy.

> ## Neglected conceptual and theoretical frameworks

Since the 1990s, movements of the socio-culturally deprived and exploited sections of society – the "scheduled castes", as the state had labelled them after independence –, the tribal movements demanding hereditary rights over forest lands and forest produce along with cultural rights and dignity as citizens, and women's movements, have all been studied using the framework of NSM theory. The received framework of NSM was "applied" without much revision by scholars.

In the new millennium, while the unfinished protests and struggles for material rights and socio-cultural demands are raging on the ground, scholars are using all the social movement theories ranging from functionalist explanation using relative deprivation to NSM theory.

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An awkwardness is observed and almost an apologetic opinion is expressed by senior scholars that conceptual and theoretical frameworks that were used by Indian scholars of movement studies in the 1980s were largely neglected in the Indian academia. Activists point out that the slogans and agendas as well as the strategies employed in the movements on the ground have not triggered much discussion in the academia, barring curiosity from a few academics.

> Concluding questions from the Global South

Our contemporary world is vibrant due to the democratic expressions of dissent, protest and contestation of various ideologies and agendas. Looking from the Global South, sometimes one wonders whether it is the same world that we all inhabit. Deeper analysis reveals that even the Global South is not a homogenous category. From conflicts over equitable distribution of natural resources to movements for freedom against sexual abuse like #MeToo, and from identity-based movements like those of the LGBTQ communities to protests against displacement due to capitalist mining, industrial and infrastructural projects, some issues are common and some are specific to the Global South. It is a global picture strained with contradictions of resources, incomes, rights, and impunities.

So, to conclude, I raise the following questions: Did the sociology of social movements in India fail to derive its conceptual and theoretical basis from the anti-colonial struggle that used strategies ranging from violent conflict with the British to non-violent community-based networks formed under Mahatma Gandhi's leadership? While Western theories of the sociology of social movements branded nationalism a narrow ideological stance, was the meaning of nationalism under Gandhian leadership the same as in the West? Considering truth and morality based on non-violence, it seems that humanitarian values as the basis of a new democratic state with a wider international vision could have been studied as the new form of modernity emerging in the Global South. So, were we too mechanical in applying the received Western conceptual and theoretical frameworks when analysing the struggles and conflicts in India and other societies in the Global South, with an unconscious received Orientalism?

In order to breathe much-needed new life into the sociology of social movements, it is pertinent to find answers to these questions. Only then can we arrive at a subfield that is just and more suited to the varied realities of social movements, especially in the Global South. ■

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> Far-Right Normalization and the Radicalized Mainstream

by **Sabrina Zajak**, DeZIM Institute, Germany, **Emanuele Toscano**, Guglielmo Marconi University, Italy, and **Anna-Maria Meuth**, DeZIM Institute, Germany

Photo by Sebastian Christoph Gollnow edited with AI.

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Many democracies around the globe have seen tremendous changes to their principles and core values which are ongoing: what has always been labeled as the far-right has stopped being the far-away right and become the new normal, the mainstream. Ethno-nationalist, authoritarian, anti-migrant, sexist and anti-plural ideologies have captured key positions in societies. Far-right actors occupy positions in the economic and political elites, but they also mobilize through grassroots movements and insta-influencers alike. Many years of mainstreaming and mobilization has put the far-right ideologies into positions of power literally in all spheres of society, and into the hearts and minds of many ordinary citizens, men, women and children, turning society into what we would like to call the "radicalized mainstream".

> The concept of the radicalized mainstream

With this special edition of *Global Dialogue*, we want to shed some light on the recent and new dynamics of the normalization of the far right and its implications for liberal democracies in Europe, the US and beyond, as well as for the global architecture of democratic allyship. We will look into questions of which previously marginalized ethno-nationalist ideas and rhetoric have increasingly become adopted and openly articulated in mainstream discourse, socio-cultural dimensions, personal attitudes and political mobilizations and programs; and just how this has come about. We suggest using the concept of "radicalized mainstream" to shift the perspective away from analyzing the tactics, actors and ideologies of the far rights (alone), towards an understanding of radicalizing the mainstream itself.

By **radicalized mainstream** we understand the diffusion and bricolage of ideologies by an increasingly dense local-to-global network of actors (including politicians, business leaders, digital fascists, political parties, organizations and grassroot movements, as well as private individuals) who restructure society and social relations via orders of unequal worth. Using this concept, we would also like to draw more attention to an interrelated and yet so far largely neglected process: the de-normalization of democratic and inclusive norms and principles, and the push of pro-democratic, anti-discriminating (e.g. anti-racist, anti-sexist) and progressive forces to the margins.

In this introduction we would like to elaborate the idea of the radicalized mainstream and to point out some of its international consequences and its (expected) implications for equality and liberal pluralist democracy.

> From a search to analysis

When we first developed the concept of radicalized mainstream, at an international conference at the German Center of Integration and Migrations Research (DeZIM), co-hosted by the ISA in Berlin in 2023, we wanted to focus

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on a paradox. To us, the concept of the radicalized mainstream was rather a stylistic and thought-provoking device, an oxymoron, as the radical and mainstream are opposites or at least concepts that cannot be uncombined: what is radical can't be mainstream at the same time. We called the conference "In Search of the Radicalized Mainstream" as a platform to discuss with internationally renowned scholars the dynamics of normalization and its dangers when (mainstream) society becomes radicalized.

Today, instead of searching, we think it is time to look into the empirical realities of an increasingly radicalized society and the dynamics between the normalization the far right and the de-normalization of democratic, plural and progressive actors and values. The contributions to this issue offer broad evidence.

Terry Givens investigates the normalization of the far right through a comparative view of the different party systems in Europe in different phases. Damla Keşkekci talks about the different mechanisms of platform mainstreaming. Meanwhile, Pasha Dashtgard looks into how the manosphere turned men's self-improvement networks into ideological battlegrounds; he shows how optimizing one's body and masculinity becomes a mechanism of radicalization. Driven by a broader cultural turn, far-right actors have also increasingly leveraged fashion as a strategic tool to construct identity, disseminate ideology, and normalize extremist narratives beneath the surface of mainstream culture. Andrea Grippo shows how across generations, far-right aesthetic strategies have evolved – from overt subcultural styles to ironic, hyper-normalized fashion – weaponizing aesthetics as a vehicle for political infiltration and cultural legitimation. Finally, Sumrin Kalia identifies multiple mechanisms through which the far right has encroached on civil society in Pakistan and beyond, while Roberto Scaramuzzino and Cecilia Santilli analyze the various ways populist governance reconstructs civil society.

> Focusing on discursive shifts

So, what here is different from existing research on the far right and far-right mobilization?

A very large number of studies and articles focus on those who vote for far-right parties (predominantly male, from all social classes) and the reasons for their rise in Western liberal democracies. These include coping with rapid modernization experiences, social inequality, feelings of insecurity, changes in political milieus and systems of representation, the role of the polycrisis, war and the pandemic. Others focus on the societal level and research the rise of the far right as an effect of social mobilization.

The normalization perspective examines how actors and ethno-nationalist ideologies are adopted within the societal mainstream and spread politically, culturally, and discursively. Understanding and describing the rightward shift of political agendas and its effects on democratic societies is a central focus of this perspective. Many experts and authors emphasize that attacks on democratic institutions and values are often carried out from within democracy itself, hijacking its institutions and values.

The analytical focus is on discursive shifts: normalization can be traced through the use and dissemination of terms that were previously employed by right-wing actors but have since entered mainstream discourse and have become normalized. The process can lead to the transformation of political debates and culture, as well as structural changes in the public sphere. Social media platforms play a crucial part in this process, accelerating disinformation and amplifying radicalized actors, especially since hate speech is no longer regulated. This leads to tangible policies, for example, in asylum law restrictions, forced border controls or in sexual and gender self-determination.

> Ideologies of the unequal worth of human beings justify discrimination-based hierarchies

Normalization thus goes beyond the traditional study of the far right and instead highlights the role of actors within the democratic mainstream. The concept of radicalized mainstream builds upon and integrates these insights. But instead of focusing on the 'one-way path' from the extreme fringes to the mainstream, we expose the mainstream in all its ambiguities and complexities, where pre-existing ideologies, world views and practices become mixed and intermingled with far-right actors and ideologies. Not only are democratic ideas, values and practices de-constructed, but they are also pushed to the margins.

Overall, we define the **radicalized mainstream** as an increasingly dense network of actors, institutions and media which, even if not formally affiliated with extreme right-wing parties, adopt or shift towards rhetoric and positions that (once) belong(ed) to radical political formations.

We refer to the **mainstream** as a highly heterogeneous phenomenon: a diverse range of societal actors with different positions and backgrounds, across various domains, who accommodate, align with, justify, and normalize far-right ideologies, activities, and attitudes under a wide variety of circumstances and for many different reasons. In turn, **radicalization** refers to processes, from rhetoric to actions, in which ideologies of the unequal worth of human beings are used to justify and intensify race, gender, ultra-nationalist and discrimination-based hierarchies; modes of exclusion stir up hate and violence and can even lead to murder by individuals and groups.

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> Complex local, national and international consequences

This affects all societal fields: politics, culture, business, civil society and the public sphere, at the individual, organizational and institutional level. In this context, normalization of the radical right can be seen as a process of social acceptance, as well as an institutionalized phenomenon.

Against this backdrop, any exclusive focus on the electoral aspects of radicalization, far-right mobilization or discursive shifts in the mainstream risks producing a distorted interpretation of the phenomenon. Instead, we need to look into the complex interplays, ambiguities, burring boundaries and ideological bricolages which turn friendly neighbors, friends or family members into enactors of ignorance, hate or violence. Doing so also allows us to delve more deeply into the mechanisms of de-normalization and marginalization of democratic and progressive actors, ideas and practices. The fundamental implications for liberal democracy become obvious: the idea of democracy is reduced from a local, national and global organizing principle of social life into ever smaller islands of collectively organized equality, solidarity and hope.

We give only a few examples of local national and international consequences of the radicalized mainstream. In many so-called liberal democracies, social movements and progressive civil society including the labor, women's, LGBTQI+, climate and peace and (Palestine) solidarity movements, as well as pro-democratic movements, increasingly become criminalized, silenced and repressed. The closing of borders and restrictive admission of refugees exacerbate the protection and security situation of displaced people – both along their escape routes and in terms of their ability to exercise their right to asylum. Disregard of climate targets by powerful industries affects the global climate, as it knows no borders or national interests.

International arrangements are also at stake. It is unclear if the European Union, once the bastion for peace and anti-fascism, will survive the pressure of the radicalized mainstream from both within and without. Humanitarian concepts upheld by the UN become discredited and funding gets withdrawn, endangering millions of lives that depend on humanitarian aid worldwide. Increasing nationalism is weakening the multilateralism that has developed over recent decades to address and manage global problems. This is evident in boycotts of negotiations or withdrawals from previously concluded agreements in areas such as trade, climate, migration, and security alliances. Regarding the field of trade, protectionist economic policies are being introduced through increased tariffs and the (threat of) trade wars.

> A research agenda for the renewal and reinvention of democracy

These are only a few examples of how the new normal of the radicalized mainstream is already contributing and is expected to continue to contribute to the erosion of the protection, enforcement, appreciation, and visibility of human rights and democracy. If we want to stop and reverse the radicalizing of the mainstream, we are strongly convinced that we need thorough empirical analyses and inter-country comparisons to better understand the mechanisms of mainstream radicalization. Understanding how a mainstream radicalizes can ultimately contribute to developing concepts for its de-radicalization, looking into the "visions of hope" where democratic values, practices, and communities are restored, regenerated and renewed. Taking both together, the dynamics of far-right normalization and democratic de-normalization should shape the research agenda so we can contribute to the renewal and reinvention of democracy in the future. ■

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> From "Radical" Right to Mainstream Right:
A Shifting European Party System

by **Terri Givens**, University of British Columbia, Canada

Keywords in the development of right-wing politics.
Image generated by the author.

One of the trends I have seen since I began studying the radical right in the mid-1990s is that ideas that were seen as "radical" back then have become mainstream. As I was working on my first book on the radical right, many researchers discouraged me, since they considered radical right parties a "flash in the pan." However, these parties have become a persistent force in the electoral landscape. As I noted in my book, *The Roots of Racism*, "Right-wing politics casts immigrants as foreign objects within the body politic and blames them for a litany of social ills, including high rates of crime and unemployment." What was once considered radical has become mainstream, particularly in terms of anti-immigrant sentiment and Islamophobia.

> The tremendous rightward shift

As radical right parties entered the electoral scene in the 1980s, an elite consensus developed to fight these parties by maintaining a "cordon sanitaire" (barrier) that kept right politicians from cooperating with far-right candidates while encouraging left voters to support mainstream candidates. This consensus collapsed as conservative governments came into power across Europe after 9/11 and terrorism shifted the focus around immigration from labor policy to security issues. The Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) became part of the Austrian government in 2000, partly because they were seen as the only alternative to a grand coalition government. Being part of government seemed to moderate at least the leaders of the party at the time, but it has shifted back to a more strident anti-immigrant tone in recent years. This lack of moderation has continued as more parties have been formed and had electoral success.

The participation of the Austrian Freedom Party, the Danish People's Party, and various other far-right parties in coalition governments in the early 2000s opened the door

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to greater success for these parties. Support for far-right parties in Europe surged in the 2014 European parliament election, foreshadowing the successful Brexit vote in the UK in the summer of 2016; and that support would increase in 2019 with the far-right National Rally Party (*Rassemblement National*) of Marine Le Pen narrowly beating President Emmanuel Macron's party coalition, with 23% of the vote. *Rassemblement National*, which maintains most of the positions of its former incarnation, the *Front National*, has become a regular fixture in the European Parliament and the French Assembly. Party politics in Europe have seen a tremendous rightward shift since I began doing research on political parties in the mid 1990s. We have seen a decline in support for left-wing social democratic and communist parties, particularly in France. It is important to keep in mind the broader context of change as we have seen an evolution of the radical right from being on the fringes of party politics to the mainstream.

> Increasing electoral support for radical right parties this century

In nearly every election in Europe since the early 2000s, radical right parties have increased their support in legislative elections and have clearly become part of mainstream politics. In September of 2022, the Sweden Democrats became the second largest party in the Riksdag with 73 seats. In France, the *Rassemblement National* (RN) received 37 percent of the vote in the 2024 snap legislative election, although they did not get the expected number of seats because of strategic coordination by left parties. In Germany the *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) became Germany's second largest party in February of 2025, winning nearly 21 percent of the vote, doubling their share of the vote from the 2021 election.

Several parties have come in first in elections since 2022 when neo-fascist politician Giorgia Meloni's coalition, the Brothers of Italy, won enough votes to lead the formation of a government in Italy with Meloni becoming prime minister. In the Netherlands, Geert Wilders' Party for Freedom (PVV) won the most seats in the November 2023 election, but contentious coalition talks led to a government not forming until July of 2024, led by an independent civil servant as prime minister. Of course, Viktor Orbán has held power in Hungary since 2010, and his illiberal government has been a thorn in the side of the European Union.

> Populist appeal, racism and fear of minorities have seen increasing working-class support

It doesn't seem that long ago that far-right or radical right parties weren't taken seriously, but their role has gone from being the perpetual opposition to serious contenders for political power. Norms around issues of race and the politics of immigration have clearly shifted since I began studying the radical right in the mid-1990s. In 1999, when Joerg Haider's Freedom Party came in second place in the Austrian legislative election, the other fourteen European Union (EU) countries at the time considered his positions on immigration and the EU to be beyond the pale. Although they could not change the outcome of the vote, they took measures to indicate their stand on these issues, including passing the Racial Equality Directive (RED) in 2000, as a show of support for antidiscrimination policy. Radical right parties in Europe tend to use a populist appeal, arguing that they are for the "common man" and against the elite. They often lean authoritarian in their call for security to protect against outsiders and expect blind loyalty to the party or leaders. Another component is the racism and fear of minorities and immigrants that is being used by politicians in Europe to mobilize voters who fear a loss of privilege and ultimately, political dominance.

Since the early 2000s, researchers have noted that far-right candidates have seen increasing support from working-class voters. An important development in the mid to late 1990s was the success of center-left politicians like US President Bill Clinton, UK Prime Minister Tony Blair, and German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder. These leaders embraced a neo-liberal approach to economic policy that supported a more individualistic approach to governance. These policies contributed to economic growth as a whole, but they did little to improve wages or benefits for the working class and widened wealth inequality. If the center left's economic policies had improved the standard of living of working-class voters, it is likely that they would not have been as open to the messages of the radical right. Instead, wages remained stagnant, and union membership has declined along with manufacturing jobs.

> What the future may hold

Politics is an ever-evolving landscape, and it is easy to be pessimistic about the prospects for democracy as illiberal politicians continue to make gains, not only in Europe, but in the US. One can hope that right-wing politicians will maintain a connection to democracy, and that voters will support parties that are clearly in alignment with democratic norms. Only time will tell if the discourses revert to supporting democratic norms and those norms are supported by voters. In the meantime, researchers will need to continue their quantitative and qualitative analyses as we try to understand and explain the political, economic and social impacts that are driving voter behavior and the appeals made by political parties. ■
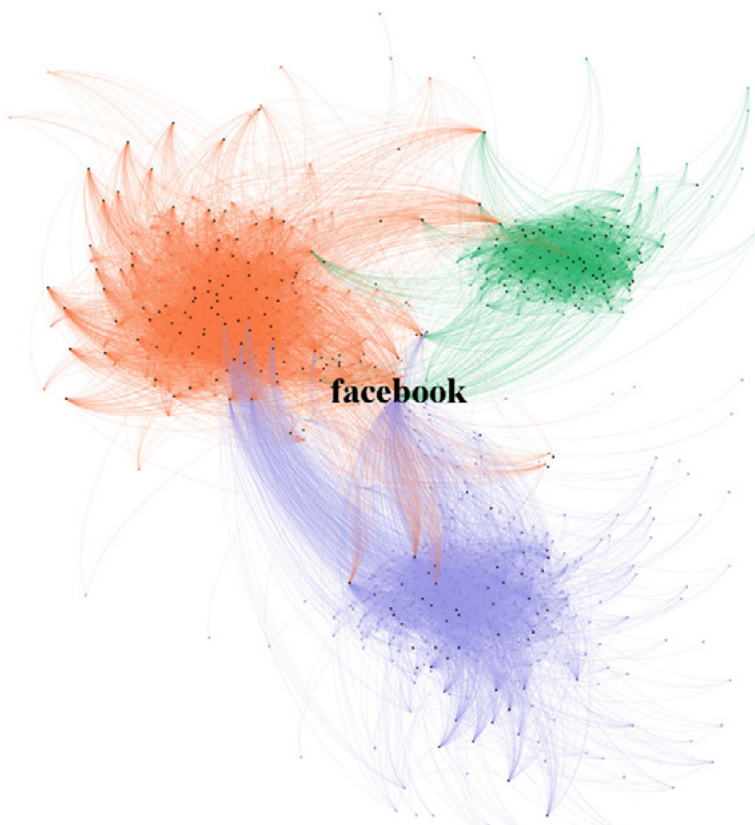
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> From the Margins to the Feed:
Platformed Mainstreaming of the Far Right

by **Damla Keşkekci**, Scuola Normale Superiore, Italy

Austria: purple; Germany: orange; United Kingdom: green. In-degree network of hyperlinks shared on the Facebook pages of far-right actors (2017–2021). Image generated by the author.

AT: Purple, DE: Orange, UK: Green, in-degree network of hyperlink shares by far-right actors (2017 – 2021)

Once confined to the fringes, far-right actors increasingly try to reposition themselves as normalized, legitimate actors within the political mainstream. Together with Liriam Sponholz, in the study "Radicalizing the Mainstream in Western Europe," we explore how the far right in Germany – comprising various actors from political parties to alternative media and social movements – strategically uses hyperlinks on Facebook. Drawing on a dataset of over 120,000 posts from 100 public Facebook pages (2017–2020), our analysis reveals how platform dynamics shape political communication and contribute to *platformed mainstreaming*.

We identify three key mechanisms that facilitate this process for far-right actors: (1) establishing and sustaining networks through which they project themselves as "normal"; (2) borrowing legitimacy by sharing mainstream media content; and (3) adapting to platform constraints to be able to continue spreading their messages. The resulting dual movement – of far-right normalization that leads to mainstream radicalization – signals a broader sociopolitical trend; one that blurs the boundaries between fringe and center, online and offline, extreme and moderate.

> Platform logic and the strategic use of hyperlinks

Far-right actors do not simply use digital platforms for leisure, they adapt to their logic while strategically attempting

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to overcome their constraints. Facebook's platform logic, for instance, rewards visibility through engagement. Content that triggers reactions (Like, Love, Haha, Wow, Sad, Angry), comments and/or shares is more likely to be amplified on other users' newsfeeds. Here, hyperlinks emerge as a powerful tool. Among other things, hyperlinks serve to disseminate ideologically aligned narratives and connect far-right actors.

The strategic use of hyperlinks presents a mechanism for platformed mainstreaming. Far-right actors mainly use hyperlinks for: network maintenance, self-promotion, and amplification. Notably, far-right alternative media outlets, like the blog Tichys Einblick and the Russia-sponsored media site Russia Today DE (RT DE), operate as "super-sharers" – posting thousands of links from a small number of domains. Other far-right actors, such as political parties (AfD – Alternative für Deutschland), and social movements (PEGIDA – Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes), act as "super-spreaders," distributing links from a broader range of sources. These link-sharing practices not only reinforce internal coherence within the far-right ecosystem on Facebook, but they also help reframe its public image.

> **Visibility, not virality: a shift in strategies**

Far-right actors' social media strategies go beyond chasing shareworthiness to go viral. Instead, they focus on being consistently visible. This is where the concept of *platformed mainstreaming* becomes crucial, as it is driven not only by the intentions of the far right but also by what is allowed and the constraints of social media. Mainstream platforms like Facebook play a paradoxical role in this process. They act both as gatekeepers and enablers. Ironically, their platform rules, designed to moderate and prevent extremist content, can ultimately contribute to the normalization of the far right.

For instance, following the Cambridge Analytica scandal, a wave of deplatformization in 2018 purged many far-right actors from Facebook. However, it still remains the most widely used social media platform worldwide and is heavily used by far-right actors. In our study, we observed that the number of far-right actors remained mostly stable during our investigation period, keeping Facebook in a key position within/for the German far right.

> **Subtle framing and self-linking maintain the visibility of far-right actors**

Although hyperlink usage declined slightly after 2018, it remained a consistent strategy among the remaining far-right actors on Facebook. In fact, 69% of all hyperlink shares in our dataset belonged to far-right media and commercial actors. The sustained presence of far-right actors on the platform is not coincidental, it is a result of de-

liberate strategies to comply with the rules of mainstream platforms in order to remain visible and influential.

To align with the platform logic of Facebook and community guidelines, far-right actors often refrain from overt hate speech or sharing links from controversial extremist sources. In doing so, they engage in *performative moderation*. They tone down their rhetoric, focus on subtle framing rather than explicit calls to action, and link to external websites that are harder to monitor.

A previously mentioned example of this approach is used by far-right alternative media outlets RT DE and Tichys Einblick, which almost exclusively engage in self-linking to their own third-party content on Facebook. This strategy allows them to bypass direct content moderation, maintain visibility, and potentially present a more moderate image to broader audiences, while still promoting the exclusionary and illiberal agendas they favor.

> **"Borrowed" legitimacy and the role of mainstream media**

Another important mechanism for platformed mainstreaming is the use of "borrowed" legitimacy from mainstream media. One of the most striking findings in our study was that far-right actors frequently link to mainstream media outlets and not alternative media sources on their Facebook pages. Moreover, the types of links shared varies depending on the actor type. While the AfD's pages primarily share articles from national quality newspapers such as *Die Welt*, PEGIDA favors tabloid and regional outlets like *Bild* and *Nordbayern*.

This borrowing of legitimacy from traditional media enables far-right actors to package their messages as grounded in reputable sources. The use of such a mechanism further indicates that the boundaries between the mainstream and the marginalized might have become more porous than many have realized. The far right no longer needs to generate all its own content. Instead, it selectively curates material from mainstream outlets that can be reframed to support its anti-immigration, anti-elite, or Islamophobic stances.

> **Implications for democracy**

As illustrated by the case of the German far right on Facebook, *platformed mainstreaming* offers a compelling tale of the evolving dynamics of far-right online communication globally. What we are witnessing today is not merely the "radicalization of the mainstream" or the "mainstreaming of the radical". Rather, it is a process of mutual reinforcing: to remain active on mainstream platforms, far-right actors adapt their strategies to the platform rules, while platform logics enable the repackaging of extremist content into formats that appear moderate.

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This dynamic has profound implications. It challenges the effectiveness of counterstrategies such as fact-checking, content moderation, and deplatformization. By leveraging the mechanisms for platformed mainstreaming, far-right actors continue to operate within the boundaries set by social media platforms – by borrowing mainstream media content, shifting to "safer" forms of communication, or directing audiences to third-party websites. Ultimately, the question is no longer whether the far right should be allowed on mainstream platforms; these platforms are already well integrated into far-right online repertoires.

The more pressing question is, what happens if platform principles change? In fact, in January 2025, Meta eliminated third-party fact-checking from Facebook, replacing it with "Community Notes" that will be generated by users. Guidelines on allowed content, especially around issues such as immigration and gender identity, were also updated, limiting moderation efforts to focus only on severe and illegal cases. What could such changes mean for platformed mainstreaming?

Our findings suggest that these developments may further increase the amount of activity of the far right online, accelerate the radicalization of the mainstream, and present a broader challenge for liberal democracies. Even under stricter content moderation efforts, Facebook played a role in the platformed mainstreaming of far-right actors. This new platform logic, which seems more welcoming for the far right, could enable far-right actors to disseminate their narratives more freely, further normalizing their presence within the mainstream political discourse.

Consequently, tackling the far right on social media cannot rely only on fact-checking efforts, content moderation regimes, state monitoring, or academic research. As far-right actors ultimately adapt to changing platform logics to continue promoting their narratives, any infrastructure of visibility can become a channel for mainstreaming extremist content. Addressing this issue requires a systemic approach that focuses on social media platforms as actors themselves, not as neutral environments but as profit-driven private companies with their own political agendas. ■

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> Optimizing Masculinity:
Men's Self-Improvement Networks and Ideological Battlegrounds

by **Pasha Dashtgard**, Polarization and Extremism Research and Innovation Lab, American University, Washington, USA

Boys and men feel distress at the gap between who they are and who they are expected to be. Credit: Elias Schäferle, Pixabay.

> Introduction

There are fewer and fewer places online geared toward boys and men that are free from the influence of male supremacist ideology. Many of these male-centered spaces, which originally emerged as places to find advice, support, and camaraderie, have instead become breeding grounds for radicalization. Whether in dating and relationship forums, fitness and fashion communities, or gaming and sports discussion boards, hateful sexist rhetoric is becoming increasingly normalized. Subtly embedding reactionary beliefs with seemingly apolitical or self-improvement-focused content makes it difficult to recognize the presence of extremist views, further facilitating their spread.

One through line that can be traced across these different male-centered online spaces is an intense focus on self-optimization. Self-optimization in this context is understood as an ongoing, individualistic strategy focused on continuous self-improvement, often driven by societal expectations and personal aspirations. While self-improvement on its own is perfectly healthy, fixating on self-optimization can lead to an obsession with "maximizing" one's body and lifestyle through self-tracking practices, fitness training, cosmetic surgeries, neuro enhancements, the use of dietary supplements, and adopting a rigid, formulaic strategy and approach to dating and relationships. The self-optimization narrative contributes to multiple multi-million-dollar industries that propagate through internalized shame, self-hatred, and a mind-over-matter compulsion to achieve an idealized form of masculinity. Internalizing these ideas leads to a vision of non-self-optimizers or unsuccessful optimizers as lesser, especially for oneself. This puts tremendous pressure on boys and men to achieve an impossible combination of physical fitness, sexual prowess, and financial success, with anything less being proof of one's inability to embody masculinity correctly.

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This concern for optimizing oneself in all areas of life increases vulnerability to ideological indoctrination. Haenfler (2004) specifically notes how individual concerns regarding self-control and moral purity can be weaponized to lead to subcultural resistance and group identity formation. While wanting to improve oneself is a worthy and laudable goal, the emphasis on individual and group purity – and discipline through pain and denial of pleasure – allows for bad actors and toxic ideologies to frame a lack of adherence to traditional masculine ideals as a moral failing, as an example of how feminism and progressive decadence has corrupted modern men.

> Dating and relationships: the Red Pill and the rise of the "manosphere"

One of the most visible areas where far-right ideology has taken root is in online discussions about dating and relationships. Red Pill communities found across the "manosphere" – a network of online spaces dedicated to male supremacist ideology – are some of the most easily accessible places for boys and men to find advice about how to manipulate women, how to have sex with as many women as possible, and how to embody the role of a strong, sexy, alpha male that women cannot resist. These forums, websites, apps, and platforms view feminism and women's empowerment as a direct threat to men. Within these communities, traditional gender roles are reinforced, with women often depicted as manipulative, hypergamous, and deceitful. Men who subscribe to these beliefs are encouraged to dominate relationships and reject any form of progressive gender equality. While these ideas may begin as dating advice, they often serve as a gateway to broader reactionary politics.

Another toxic subgroup within the manosphere is the "misogynistic incel" (involuntary celibate) community. Misogynistic incels believe that an oppressive, feminist social order – one in which women exclusively choose attractive and dominant men – has left them romantically and sexually hopeless. Many incels blame feminism, multiculturalism, and other perceived societal changes for their personal struggles, fostering resentment that can lead to violence. Incels adopt a fatalist, biologically deterministic attitude towards society, where one's genetics and physical features either guarantee you success sexually, financially, and socially, or doom you to a life of misery and failure. The rise in incel-related violence, including mass shootings, illustrates the real-world consequences of these toxic ideologies.

> Fashion and fitness: from "looksmaxxing" to extremism

Online spaces that are, on the surface, there to offer boys and men tips on how to dress well, get six pack abs, and better groom themselves are being overrun by narratives that capitalize on men's insecurities and desire to ascend to the top of an alleged masculine hierarchy.

"Looksmaxxing" is an online term used in some online self-improvement communities dedicated to fashion, looks, and fitness, which describes the process of analyzing and maximizing one's physical attractiveness through the deployment of pseudoscience, "alternative" treatments, and various kinds of contemporary male supremacist quackery. While on the surface this might appear to be a harmless form of self-betterment, many looksmaxxing communities reinforce harmful ideas about masculinity, genetics, and social hierarchy. These discussions often intersect with eugenicist beliefs, promoting the idea that only certain physical traits (read: White, Anglo-Saxon) are desirable, and that genetic determinism is an insurmountable reality.

Fitness culture has also become an entry point for far-right radicalization. Many male supremacist influencers use fitness and men's desire to physically improve their bodies as a way to advocate for hegemonic masculine ideals. Discussions of strength, discipline, and dominance are sometimes framed in opposition to individual moral decay and then a broader societal decay, further entrenching ideological divides. In certain online fitness spaces, failure to maintain a slim, strong physical form is seen as a moral failing, an inability to control one's desires and instead indulge one's lack of self-control.

The far-right's growing interest in fitness has also led to the emergence of "Active Clubs," groups that blend martial arts training with extremist ideologies. These clubs attract men under the guise of self-defense, self-improvement, and empowerment but often serve as training grounds for political violence. This connection between fitness and far-right extremism underscores how seemingly innocuous online communities can lead to real-world radicalization.

> Sports and gaming: new arenas for the normalization of male supremacy

Beyond traditional self-improvement spaces, male supremacist ideology has infiltrated videogame and sports forums, which serve as major cultural hubs for men and boys online. As a result, self-optimization narratives have also embedded themselves in discussions of sports and gaming.

Gaming organically fosters niche online communities of those either playing a videogame or following the company that produces said game. #GamerGate was a 2014 controversy and online harassment campaign ostensibly centered on ethics in video game journalism but largely fueled by misogynistic and anti-progressive sentiments within gaming communities. It involved coordinated harassment, doxxing, and threats against women in the

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gaming industry, particularly targeting developers, critics, and journalists advocating greater diversity and inclusivity. This event demonstrated the ability of videogames to create strong in-group identification and the potential for videogame communities to be vulnerable to radicalization. Many gaming forums cultivate a "politically incorrect" culture, where racist, sexist, and homophobic jokes are common, reinforcing exclusionary worldviews under the guise of free speech. While #GamerGate no longer serves as a galvanizing force online, the legacy of #GamerGate can be felt in the ways certain factions of gamers respond to games, movies, and television shows that feature diverse casting or center stories and characters deemed "woke" or progressive.

Sports influencers use platforms like YouTube and podcasts to push reactionary narratives about athletes who engage in activism, and blend conservative political commentary with sports coverage, often criticizing progressive movements in athletics, such as racial justice protests or gender inclusivity in sports. One such example is Barstool Sports, a popular sports media brand, which has played a role in mainstreaming male supremacist ideas. While it presents itself as a lighthearted, bro-culture media outlet, its content frequently promotes misogyny, dismisses progressive movements, and encourages a culture of hyper-masculinity. Barstool Sports runs recurring features called "Guess that Ass," "Guess that Rack," and "Twerk Wednesday." And in 2010, Barstool Sports creator Dave Portnoy wrote, "I never condone rape, but if you are a size 6 and wearing skinny jeans you kind of deserve to be raped, right." By framing these views as humorous, edgy,

and rebellious, it makes them more appealing to young men who may have intended to merely engage with sports coverage, not realizing they are also engaging with male supremacist ideology.

> Conclusion

Digital spaces for men and boys are increasingly shaped by male supremacist ideology, turning once-supportive communities into hubs for radicalization. Under the guise of self-improvement – whether through dating advice, fitness, fashion, sports, or gaming – these spaces normalize reactionary beliefs that reinforce traditional gender hierarchies and exclusionary ideals. The infiltration of far-right ideology into these spaces underscores the need for healthier, more inclusive communities for men and boys.

To counteract this trend, we must ask: Where can boys and men go to build community without being forced to consume content underpinned by male supremacist ideology? The answer lies in creating new, positive spaces that promote healthy masculinity, emotional intelligence, and genuine support. Encouraging open conversations about identity, vulnerability, and respect can help steer young men away from toxic influences. Ultimately, society must invest in fostering inclusive environments where men and boys can connect and grow without being drawn into harmful ideological frameworks. Boys and men seek out communities and online spaces that offer advice, guidance, and community; there's no reason why online spaces dedicated to the interests of boys and men need to become spaces dedicated to misogyny and extremism. ■

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> The Weaponization of Fashion by the Far Right

by **Andrea Grippo**, The Academy of Fine Arts Vienna, Austria

From uniformity to fragmentation: The far right's aesthetic drift. Image created by the author with ChatGPT.

The collective action of the far right has undergone a profound transformation. Alongside direct political confrontation, cultural strategies focused on symbolic, aesthetic, and performative content have significantly expanded. Far-right actors now seek to reshape collective imaginaries, redefine cultural belonging, and influence everyday life through lifestyle practices.

> The changing role of fashion within the far right

Fashion has emerged as one of the far right's most effective tools in this battle for the cultural hegemony, offering a medium through which exclusionary narratives, nationalist myths, and authoritarian ideals can be disseminated and normalized. At the heart of the far right's cultural turn, fashion has been strategically weaponized.

In the Nazi skin subculture, fashion functioned as a gateway into the group and a crucial tool for constructing identity. Through a process of "bricolage", Nazi skins combined British working-class style with Jamaican and mod influences, crafting a distinct aesthetic of shaved heads, leather jackets, and combat boots. Though historically powerful, today the skinhead aesthetic is a minor strand within the broader and more fragmented visual culture of the far right. Since the late 1990s, far-right fashion has diversified, shedding overt codes in favor of camouflage and ambiguity. Aesthetic conformity is no longer a requirement for entry into the movement; instead, fashion becomes a space for differentiation and adaptability. As Miller-Idriss observes, "today's far-right youth can express their own individuality and still be right-wing".

The far right has embraced the "language of fashion" – a means not only of expressing identity and belonging, but also of gaining visibility, attracting new followers, and normalizing its worldview through symbols, style, and everyday consumer goods. Aesthetic strategies have evolved across far-right generations, marking significant innovations in the use of visual language, style, and symbolism to convey ideology and cultural values. These aesthetic shifts enable a soft entry into mainstream spaces, subtly pushing the boundaries of what is considered socially acceptable.

> Generation X (1965–1980): aesthetic rebellion and stylistic hybridization

In the late nineties, the far right underwent a significant aesthetic shift, moving away from the rigid uniformity of neo-Nazi skinhead subcultures and embracing a more diverse, hybrid, and rebellious aesthetic. A key visual archetype to emerge during this time was the Viking warrior: runes, references to Valhalla, and mythological figures like Thor became recurring motifs on garments, functioning both as markers of strength and as coded expressions of ethnic heritage. These mythological references began

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to blend with traditional far-right symbols and elements drawn from countercultural worlds such as the biker, rocker, and hooligan scenes. Streetwear began to emerge as a key reference, creating a visual identity that balanced masculine rebellion with ideological signaling. Symbols became coded and ambiguous, allowing the wearers to express affiliation while avoiding immediate public scrutiny.

The turning point came with the rise of Thor Steinar, a German brand that blended Nordic-Germanic mythology with outdoor and technical fashion. Its logos, numerals (like "44"), and runic symbols functioned as semiotic gray areas – decipherable within far-right circles but deniable in public. Even the brand's name paired "Thor," the Norse god of thunder, with "Steinar," alluding to Waffen-SS general Felix Steiner. The strategy was clear: embed radical symbolism in mainstream-friendly design.

This strategy set the standard. Brands like Erik & Sons and Ansgar Aryan followed, reinforcing a "warrior" ethos that emphasized heritage, strength, and resistance – codes for white supremacy but wrapped in seemingly neutral aesthetics.

> Millennials (1981–1996): classical antiquity and cultural camouflage

The rise of digital culture shifted far-right fashion again. Aggressive and militant styles gave way to sleeker, more marketable aesthetics – casual sportswear, normcore, and hipster styles. Minimalist polo shirts and pastel tones replaced combat boots and bomber jackets.

Symbolically, Viking themes faded. In their place, brands embraced classical antiquity: Sparta, Rome, phalanxes, legions. The far right reimagined itself as heir to a unified Greco-Roman civilization under siege by multiculturalism. Here, visual culture framed Europe as a civilizational bloc, distinct and culturally pure. This shift aligned with ethnopluralism – emphasizing cultural separation over racial hierarchy. Brands like Phalanx Europa, Pivert, and Peripetie fused Greek and Latin slogans and heroic references into normcore apparel.

Themes of resilience and cultural origin have been conveyed through a clean, approachable aesthetic. This strat-

egy enabled these brands to circulate within both radical and mainstream spaces. Clothing became a Trojan horse: ideologically charged, but visually more neutral.

> Generation Z (1997–2012): aesthetic hyper-normalization and visual performativity

With Gen Z, far-right fashion adopts irony, softness, and ambiguity. Raised online, this generation merges meme culture, pop aesthetics, and subversion. Ideological messages are embedded in light, or humorous designs – often referencing adversarial symbols like LGBTQ+ imagery or leftist slogans, only then to be repurposed for mockery or ideological inversion. A prime example is Tim Kellner, a German far-right YouTuber whose rainbow-colored designs, unicorns, and ironic slogans parody inclusivity and gender diversity. His merchandise fuses bright, inclusive visuals with hateful content. This calculated visual dissonance, in which radical content is dressed in pop packaging, has become a hallmark of Gen Z far-right fashion.

> Conclusion

From uniformity to hybridization, from mythology to classical civilization, and finally from coded symbols to hyper-normalized irony, far-right fashion has evolved into a sophisticated system of cultural communication. What began as subcultural identity has become a fully operational lifestyle market, capable of normalizing extremist narratives through everyday dress.

The attempt to integrate far-right aesthetics into mainstream fashion is not just a branding exercise, it is a deliberate political strategy aimed at normalization. By embedding their ideologies within everyday consumer culture, far-right actors shift the boundaries of acceptable discourse. Their use of normcore and minimalist styles allows them to appear non-threatening, positioning their views as part of a broader, normalized political landscape. The result is a subtle, insidious form of aesthetic warfare – one that cloaks extremism in softness, irony, and mainstream appeal, making resistance more difficult and infiltration more effective. As a result, aesthetics has been weaponized, while extremism has been normalized. ∎

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> How the Far Right is Encroaching on Civil Society

by **Sumrin Kalia**, Freie Universität Berlin, Germany

People gathered at a TLP rally in Karachi on March 30, 2022. Photo by the author.

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Across Europe and beyond, the far right is no longer a fringe force. Far-right parties have gained considerable electoral successes and used state apparatus to prosecute minorities, crack down on human rights organizations, and embolden vigilante violence against marginalized communities.

Why and how have far-right parties managed to gain popular appeal? These questions have been the focus of several scholarly endeavours. Some scholars argue that rapid changes brought about by globalization and modernization have resulted in economic and cultural grievances, creating fertile conditions for the rise of far-right parties. Others contend that the unresponsiveness of mainstream political parties, the decline of class-based voting, and the increasing mediatization of politics have facilitated the resonance of far-right exclusionary ideas.

> The case of Pakistan

Such conditions have always existed in some countries, such as Pakistan. However, the tutelary control of the military and weak institutionalization of electoral competition have constrained the rise of far-right parties in Pakistan. Nonetheless, their ideas have gained considerable popularity and have resulted in increased hostilities towards minorities as well as feminist and liberal groups in Pakistan.

In this article I argue that to understand the resonance and normalization of far-right ideas, we need to shift our focus to civil society understood as a sphere of social and political engagement. Far-right parties use movement strategies to exploit existing grievances, expand the influence of their ideas, and modify political behaviour, attitudes, and culture.

To illustrate my argument, I examine the case of a far-right party in Pakistan. Pakistan offers an interesting case to study the normalization of far-right ideas in civil society because political institutions are weak when it comes to enforcing democratic norms, and the military controls political competition through selective patronage and repression of political actors. Consequently, political competition spills over to civil society where far-right parties engage not just in conventional political preference formation, but also in contentious mobilization.

In what follows, I show how the party uses movement-like strategies to increase the resonance of its exclusionary ideas. In particular, I illustrate three techniques used by the party leaders, members, and activists to expand their ideas and norms.

> Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP)

Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) claims to be a religious political party whose agenda is to protect Pakistan's anti-blasphemy laws, which specifically target offenses related to Islam, its sacred figures, and the Quran. The party emerged onto Pakistan's political scene in the 2018 elections, fielding 262 candidates, and ranked as the fifth largest party. By 2024 elections, it ranked fourth, surpassing all established Islamist parties. Beyond elections, TLP has silenced any debate on the reform of blasphemy laws. It has justified extra-legal killings and attacks on Ahmadis, feminists, and activists.

Pakistan offers a compelling case for studying the normalization of far-right ideas in civil society because political competition is not fully institutionalized through elections but instead unfolds within civil society. The country's political institutions such as its judiciary, legislature, and executive remain weak when it comes to enforcing democratic norms because its powerful military not only restrains these institutions but also limits civil liberties. High degrees of inequality and elite capture have crippled social mobility, while any activism by leftist, secular, and feminist groups remains constrained. The military has historically adopted selective patronage, supporting various political actors, including Islamists, to maintain control. While previous military regimes favoured Deobandi and Salafi groups, the current establishment has facilitated the rise of TLP, granting it greater political space and legitimacy.

> Techniques of civil society encroachment

Much like most far-right parties in Europe, TLP combines electoral and movement strategies, allowing it to engage in both civil society and formal political competition. Far-right parties often originate within civil society as social movements before transitioning into formal political entities, organizing themselves as movements or mass parties. As hybrids, they combine electoral and movement strategies, whereby political entrepreneurs and activists invest in both contentious mobilization and conventional political preference formation.

As a movement party, TLP has used the three techniques I detail below to expand its influence and gain legitimacy in civil society. Together, I term these "techniques of civil society encroachment", which expand the influence of the party's ideas and norms. By encroachment, I refer to a cultural process in which the boundary between civil and uncivil society is transgressed – such that the uncivil encroaches upon the civil.

> Reframing narratives

TLP reframes religious narratives to serve its political goals. For example, the Prophet's visit to Taif – historically told as a story of patience and forgiveness – is reframed by TLP's charismatic leader Khadim Hussain Rizvi to incite hate and revenge. Similarly, the story of Ilam Din, a young Muslim who killed a Hindu publisher in colonial India, is retold by TLP activists to glorify extra-legal violence. These reinterpretations are reinforced through evocative speeches, edited social media videos, and rhetorical strategies that conflate religious devotion with political action.

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> Network brokerage

TLP expands its reach by co-opting grassroots activists who serve as brokers between different networks and enable TLP to infiltrate existing religious organizations and networks. For instance, during the 2018 elections, TLP activists made connections with organizations such as Dawat-e-Islami (DI) and Sunni Tehreek used WhatsApp groups to circulate TLP propaganda. Similarly, they also disseminated their political messages in student organizations like Anjuman-e-Tulba-e-Islam (ATI), which helped mobilize support for TLP's Faizabad sit-in. These brokers facilitated the spread of the party beyond its core sectarian base, extending its influence into different religious, educational, and political spheres.

> Symbolic performances

TLP embeds its exclusionary ideas in existing religious symbols and practices to increase their resonance. Mosques, particularly the Bahar-e-Shariat mosque in Karachi, serve as sites where routine religious gatherings are appropriated for political mobilizations. Rituals such as reciting Prophetic praise are repurposed to disseminate TLP narratives. During election campaigns, the Prophet's sandals (Nalaain) were used as a campaign symbol, while the practice of kissing the thumb as an act of devotion to the Prophet was reinterpreted as a symbolic act of voting for TLP.

In Pakistan, conditions such as pre-existing socio-cultural divisions, military patronage, and the weakness of counter-movements have facilitated encroachment by TLP. The party has capitalized on historical Islamist movements, particularly the anti-Ahmadi campaigns of the 1950s and 1970s, reframing their narratives while rebranding itself around the "sanctity of prophethood" to gain legitimacy. It also benefitted from Pakistan's hybrid political system, where the military selectively tolerates and patronizes religious parties while repressing others, thereby allowing TLP to expand its influence beyond the Barelvi sect. Meanwhile, other civil society actors, such as religious minorities, left-wing parties, and secular feminists, remain too constrained by repression and patronage politics to counter growing TLP influence.

While Pakistan's weak civil liberties, religious nationalism, and political clientelism create fertile conditions for encroachment on civil society, it may be worth exploring whether and how civil society is encroached upon in contexts with strong political institutions, protection of civil rights, and institutionalized political competition. In the end, it is not only political institutions but also a strong civil sphere that can resist far-right encroachment into civil society and the normalization of their ideas worldwide. ∎

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> The Impact of Populist Governance
on Civil Society Advocacy

by **Roberto Scaramuzzino** and **Cecilia Santilli**, Lund University, Sweden

Between lobbying and advocacy. Image created by the author with Microsoft Copilot.

The rise to power of right-wing populist parties in liberal democracies has sparked intense debates about the state and future of democracy. Sweden is a clear example of a country with stable democratic institutions, a vibrant civil society, and a high degree of trust in public institutions that has seen a

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right-wing populist party, the Sweden Democrats, increase its electoral success election after election. Following the 2022 elections, Sweden Democrats gained direct access to state policies by supporting a centre-right government led by a liberal-conservative party.

Drawing on considerable experience of civil society studies at the School of Social Work at Lund University, and funded by the Swedish Research Council, we started a research project in 2024 titled "Civil Society and Populism: How the rise to power of populist parties affects state–civil society relations". The project employs a comparative approach, focusing on two countries: Sweden and Italy. The latter is an interesting example of a liberal democracy with a long history of right-wing populist parties influencing government policies. In this brief article we present the project's research agenda and insights from a case study recently published in the *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*.

> ### The centrality of advocacy in liberal democracies

One of the main functions of civil society organisations (CSOs) in liberal democracy is advocacy. For some organisations, this means advocating for their members' rights or interests, such as those of women, people with disabilities, or other minority groups. Other organisations pursue more general interests without a strict representative role, such as those focused on sustainability, peace, or human rights. This advocacy role is a hallmark of liberal democracy and presupposes access to free public debate and policy-making processes. CSOs can, therefore, be viewed as intermediaries between the state machinery and citizens.

Such an advocacy role is potentially in tension, or even in conflict, with how many right-wing populist parties conceive of their position in society and the political system. These parties tend to emphasise the direct connection between the leader and the people, rejecting the idea of intermediaries like CSOs, which can be viewed as part of a corrupt elite. Furthermore, many CSOs with a central position in access to public policy-making over the last few decades originated in social movements that push for humanitarianism, solidarity, the rights of minority groups, and against discrimination. These values clash with the nationalistic, nativist and value-conservative view of many right-wing populist parties.

> ### Advocacy and four types of CSO responses

Our study explores how operationally effective CSOs in Italy and Sweden responded to their governments' budgetary legislation in 2024. Budgetary legislation is a crucial part of governance, allocating resources for various policies, including funding for CSOs. It can become an essential instrument for populist governance, understood

as the exercise of power by populist parties. We study effective CSOs because, having a central position in policy-making and possessing considerable resources, they can be greatly affected by changes brought about by populist governance measures, not least in terms of their capacity to act if their funding were cut. They would also be, from their operationally effective position, able to criticise the government's provisions, although at the risk of losing their privileged position.

To understand different advocacy strategies, we develop a model of CSO responses to policy changes based on two dimensions: 1) level of criticism, from acceptance to rejection; and 2) extent of criticism, from policy-oriented to system-oriented. These two dimensions intersect, forming four different response options, as shown in the model that follows.

The model allows responses to be characterised according to these dimensions. Policy-oriented acceptance (lower left) would be pursued by CSOs that largely accept the political status quo but may criticise specific policy details. System-oriented acceptance (lower right) would instead be used by CSOs that accept the broader political framework but advocate significant systemic reforms.

Regarding the more conflicting reactions, policy-oriented rejection (upper left) would be adopted by CSOs that reject specific policies or initiatives of populist governments without challenging the entire system. Finally, system-oriented rejection (upper right) would apply to CSOs that fundamentally oppose populist governance and advocate transformative change.

CSO responses to policy changes
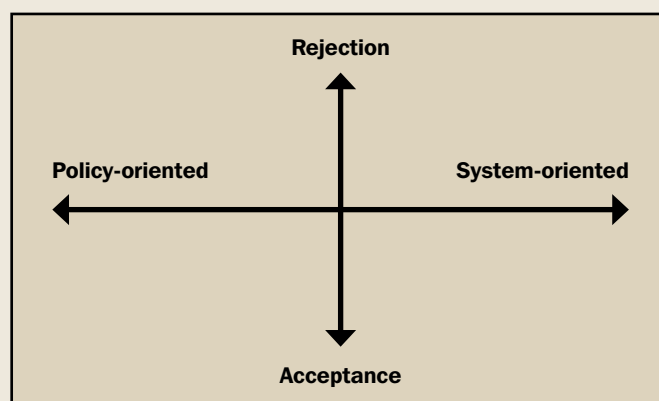
Source: The authors.

> ### Different CSOs respond differently

In our study, we find instances of all four types of response, which indicate that CSOs can react quite differently to the changes brought about by populist governance, depending on their position in the organisational field. Some policy areas might be more or less exposed to reforms that CSOs perceive as unfavourable, affecting the

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members' perception of their impact on the CSO or the interests they represent. Compared to CSOs active in specific policy areas, some, aiming to represent the entire civil society sector, may adopt a more conflicting approach or a more prudent approach, possibly depending on the level of consensus among their members. Based on their ideology and mission, some might also feel more threatened by what they perceive as a nationalist–conservative agenda. This can, for instance, apply to organisations linked to workers' or migrants' movements.

These results suggest that different CSOs will respond to populist governance differently, based on their perception of the effects of the reforms, their policy area of interest, their ideology and value base, and their position within the civil society sector hierarchy.

> **Context matters for CSO responses**

One of the central values of comparative studies is based on the assumption that context matters for the outcomes we are interested in. Italy and Sweden offer two very different contexts within the framework of stable liberal democracies in Europe. Italian civil society is traditionally primarily oriented towards service provision, while Swedish civil society is oriented towards expressive functions and advocacy. State funding of civil society in Italy is generally more indirect, through regional and local authorities, while in Sweden, it is more direct and administered by state agencies. The types of populist parties, historical trajectories and access to power also differ between the two countries.

Despite finding important differences between Italian and Swedish CSO responses to budgetary legislation, we also observe a substantial variation in CSO responses at the individual country level. In both countries, we observe examples of responses related to three of the four response types. When examining the CSO responses and comparing the two countries, we find, however, that Swedish CSOs tend to be more oriented towards rejecting populist governance and offering a more systemic critique. With the reservation that our case study is based on a small number of CSOs (11 for each country), these results suggest that the national context does indeed matter concerning how CSOs react to populist governance.

One possible explanation for the differences could be an ongoing normalisation of populist governance in Italy, a country where CSOs have been dealing with these policies for a longer time. Such a mechanism of normalisation may not yet have had an impact on CSOs in Sweden. An orientation of the civil society sector in Italy towards provision of services may also make CSOs less likely to criticise the government than a more advocacy-oriented sector would be, such as the one in Sweden. Examining public institutions, we might also consider that in a country where the state directly controls civil society funding, as is the case in Sweden, populist governance aimed at obstructing oppositional CSOs has a more direct effect on them, which reasonably sparks a stronger reaction.

> **Can CSOs serve as a counterweight to populist governance?**

The answer to this question is not easy. It is essential to note that liberal governments have implemented restrictive measures against CSOs in well-functioning liberal democracies with no direct link to populist parties. It is hence not surprising that many CSOs in different contexts perceive a shrinking of civic space. The increasingly limited room for manoeuvre is accompanied by restrictive policies targeting many groups and issues with which operationally effective CSOs work. The extent to which CSOs can uphold a position as being effective while also assuming a critical position towards public policy has been a central topic in civil society studies. The issue becomes topical in times of populist governance, which may lead to democratic backsliding and a shift towards more autocratic rule. Furthermore, CSOs may become less likely to pursue a critical advocacy function due to the normalisation of populist governance and right-wing discourse. Further studies are needed to explore the structural and organisational preconditions for the activities of CSOs in times of populist governance, as well as in other national contexts. ◼

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> Anticolonialism
in History and Social Theory

by **Anaheed Al-Hardan**, Howard University, USA, and **Julian Go**, University of Chicago, USA
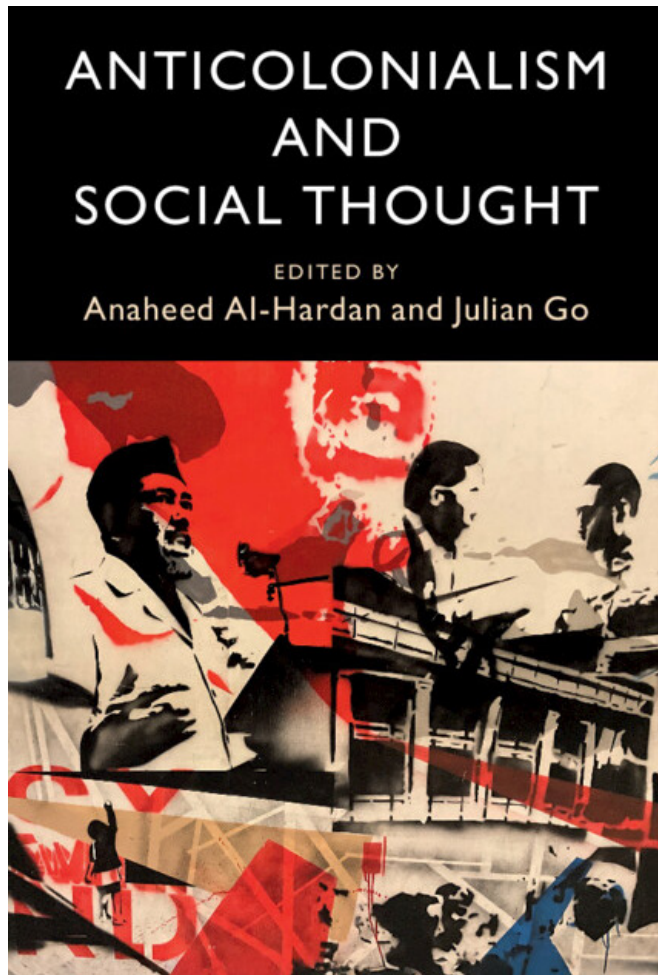
Anticolonialism and Social Thought, *edited by Anaheed Al-Hardan and Julian Go, Cambridge University Press. Expected online publication date: August 2025.*

Efforts to "globalize" social theory, overturn the limitations of dominant sociological perspectives, and rethink the canon have been underway for decades. We suggest that anticolonial thought should be brought to the fore as a principal source for this project. Anticolonialism, as a stance against empire and imperialism, has produced and continues to produce novel, innovative, and vital social thinking. Amidst their struggles to change the imperial world in the twentieth century, anticolonial actors leveled devastating critiques against it. They challenged the racism, economic exploitation, political exclusions, and social inequalities of empire. They also sought to understand the world they were struggling against better, developing new concepts

and theorizing the world in new ways. Anticolonialism has thus produced novel social analyses, concepts, and theories relevant for understanding society: a truly critical and dissident sociological imagination. We suggest that learning from anticolonial movements and thinkers is one strategy for overcoming the limitations of many dominant sociological perspectives.

> ### Situating anticolonial thought

Modern European and United States imperialism began in the fifteenth century through the conquest of the Americas. With colonialism as one of its main instruments of political and economic domination, modern imperialism reached its height in the twentieth century, when the vast majority of the world's inhabited spaces consisted of colonial empires and former colonies. Imperialism continues to structure the world today, in the form of continued colonialism or neocolonialism. Yet, it has also always faced resistance, whether from peasants, bonded laborers, and the enslaved, or activists, writers, artists, and intellectuals contesting European and later US domination and its inequalities. In the present, as neocolonialism and colonialism persist, anticolonialism from Standing Rock to Gaza continues to trouble imperial powers. Coming in diverse forms and complex genealogies – ranging from indigenous resistance to settler–colonial rule in the Americas, the Haitian Revolution against France, the numerous armed struggles of the decolonization era against faltering European empires in the aftermath of World War II, or the more recent Black Lives Matter movement and the global university occupations for justice in Palestine – anticolonialism has a rich and multifaceted tradition and constitutes continued struggle that inspires and challenges the world.

While historians have revealed some key aspects of anticolonial movements, illuminating their complexity, contradictions, and struggles, our goal is to recover the theoretical and epistemic aspects of anticolonialism. As explained in a forthcoming book published by Cambridge University Press that we co-edited, titled *Anticolonialism and Social Thought*, anticolonialism has produced and continues to produce novel, innovative, and vital social thinking through the process of challenging empires and imperialism. Anticolonialism has long been an active field for a social imagination that remains relevant today and provides what we argue is a distinct genre of social thought and social

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theory. We therefore suggest that anticolonial thought derived from anticolonialism in history should be brought to the fore as a source for social theory. We define anticolonialism as a political stance that carries certain cultural, social, and economic commitments to reverse the inequalities generated by colonialism and imperialism, which initially emerged from and is conditioned by the experiences of colonial subjugation by empires. Historically and today, this stance encompasses an array of critical views and projects. Our project recovers the social – and sociological – dimensions of this stance.

> ### Challenging the imperial standpoint

There are two principal premises behind our contribution. The first is that most of the social theory that circulates in sociology departments and the social sciences broadly originate in a long imperialist tradition and subtly or explicitly embeds an "imperial standpoint." What is today called sociology and the expression of its abstract principles, "social theory," were formed within the context of European and US imperialist global expansion, as outlined above. Born in, of, and for empire, social theory thus addressed particular kinds of questions, formulated distinct concepts and theories, and conducted research that reflected the interests, concerns, and experiences of elites in the imperial metropoles. Where anti-imperialist voices did exist in the hearts of empires, such as that of W.E.B. Du Bois, they were sidelined.

The social sciences today continue to carry the imperialist imprint of earlier eras, which can be found in their analytic categories, underlying assumptions, and research questions that still reflect the interests and concerns of imperial metropoles. Constituted from an imperialist standpoint, conventional strands of social theory are still tethered to its provinciality, erasures, and blind spots. As many critics have argued in recent years, much of the disciplinary social sciences, from theorizing to research methods, has suffered from an inability to take its own relationship to imperialism and racism seriously, its persistent Eurocentrism and Orientalism, and its occlusion of the experiences, interests, and concerns of the majority of the world's populations. At the same time, vast swaths of social theory and sociology more broadly continue to internalize the limited lenses of the imperial gaze, running into problems of essentialism, analytic bifurcations, and metrocentric assumptions. This includes the theories of dominant theorists taken to be "critical," from the Frankfurt School thinkers to Michel Foucault. Even in the so-called "postcolonial" world, much of social theory and the modern social sciences carries the legacy of European and US imperialism – not least because in many countries around the world, the social sciences were first created within the culture of European and later US empires.

The second premise is that overcoming the pernicious legacies left by social theory's foundational connection to empire and imperialism requires us to reach beyond existing attempts in the discipline to make sociology and its theoretical arm less provincial, more global, and more open to the diversity of the world's experiences. These include projects that lay claim to "indigenous sociology," "southern theory," or "southern epistemologies." Other projects likewise seek an "autonomous tradition" of social science or try to recover distinct regional and national traditions outside Europe. These epistemic projects are all valuable and have propelled the conversation forward in important ways. But they have particular foci and limitations that we think can be overcome by turning to anticolonialism in history as a source of social thought with ongoing relevance for today.

> ### Global capitalist political geography is not essential to anticolonial theory or political commitments

The main limitation of existing approaches is that they are aimed at one narrowly-defined problem, Eurocentrism, and therefore seek geographically-based remedies. According to these existing approaches, the problem with dominant social theory is that it originates in Europe or "the West." Therefore, the remedy lies in finding "non-Western" or "non-European" ideas or thinkers. The goal is to locate and use "non-Western," "indigenous," "Asian," "African," or "Southern" thinkers, seeking intellectual spaces "exterior" to or "outside" the "West" and "Global North." These approaches thus challenge the geographic origin of thought rather than its content, while assuming that the latter is determined by the former. If a social thinker resides or originates in a "non-Western" or "non-European" location, their ideas are necessarily to be valued (only because of that geographic location).

These critiques of European social science rooted in geography certainly do make some sense. Historically, the political economy of imperialism has roughly translated onto a global geography in which its capitalist core, Europe and later the US, frequently understood as the "West" and more recently the "Global North," has dominated the "East" or more recently the "Global South," both materially and epistemologically. However, this rough geography of the global capitalist political economy does not fully account for the reality of the colonized and racialized within imperialist centers. Indigenous communities and other descendants of the colonized and enslaved reside in the Global North as well as in the Global South. Moreover, European settler–colonists and their descendants reside in formerly or contemporarily colonized spaces too.

The related limitation is that geographical locations do not neatly map onto political commitments or knowledge formations. Not all social thinkers nor all theories stemming from the formerly colonized world are anticolonial. Social discourse in the formerly colonized world can still internalize the imperialist standpoint, not least due to the

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history of imperialism that has served to spread and institutionalize imperialist assumptions, and the geopolitical configuration of contemporary knowledge production, which serves contemporary imperialist interests and reproduces a neocolonial global structure of knowledge production. By the same token, not all theorists in "Europe" or the "Global North" are necessarily and by default part of the hegemonic imperialist episteme. They have not all supported, nor do they all continue to support, imperialism and colonialism; they do not necessarily operate from an imperialist standpoint. Anti-imperialist movements, not least those influenced by Marxist thought, have proliferated in the metropoles, in conversation with their comrades in the colonies, and our book demonstrates the fruitful and productive diffusion and rearticulation of concepts from different traditions along anticolonial political lines.

Thus, what these geographically-based approaches fail to do is offer an alternative to or critique of the imperialist standpoint; and by doing so, they unwittingly reproduce imperialist assumptions. They essentialize regions, cultures, peoples, or societies into distinct geographically defined categories while presuming certain epistemic attributes of those distinct geographic spaces. This "geoepistemic essentialism" is merely the expression of the kind of essentialism that has long been part of the imperialist episteme, and which Edward Said long ago warned against, most notably in his *Orientalism*.

> ### > The promise of the anticolonial standpoint

We do not discard the discursive and linguistic traditions of thought of particular thinkers or theories, nor do we claim the institutional context of the development and circulation of ideas is completely irrelevant. Nevertheless, we contend that geography and identity alone are not sufficient categories with which to define and categorize dissident social theorists and social theory. Therefore, our book frames our understanding of social thinkers and theorists in terms of an opposition to colonialism rather than of geographical identity or location. To offer a true alternative to the imperialist standpoint, we are interested in the anticolonial standpoint (defined as a sociopolitical position against imperialism and its main forms of colonialism and neocolonialism) which generates a diverse tradition of social thought and theory that can be fruitfully labeled "anticolonial."

Unlike "indigenous", "non-Western," or other forms of thought that some epistemic projects seek to recover, this body of thought grounded in the anticolonial standpoint is not and cannot be "outside" or "exterior" to so-called Western thought. On the contrary, anticolonial thinkers critically engaged European traditions of thought as they struggled against European and later US imperialism. Anticolonial thought and theory were forged in a critical re-

lation to the ideas and discourses of the imperial standpoint. Anticolonial thinkers' attempts to expand upon or rectify strands of Marxist thought, metropolitan sociology, or European philosophy are prime examples of such engagement. Furthermore, anticolonial thought was not and is not geographically delineated to single spaces in the "Global South." Anticolonial social thinkers and their ideas circulated widely, both between metropole and colony and across the colonial world. A case in point here is Maoism, whose ideas traveled from the Chinese anticolonial as well as revolutionary war of liberation, to be taken up and interpreted by anticolonial thinkers and activists across Africa and Asia. This is not to deny the structuring power relation of the center; it is rather to recognize that anticolonial social theorists formulated theories and modes of thought that circulated through the peripheries, and to emphasize relations that were also vertical and not necessarily always already horizontal in relation to the center of the global configurations of power.

> ### > The need for anticolonialism is as urgent as ever

We do not romanticize or uncritically valorize the anticolonial standpoint. The anticolonial task of reordering the colonial world has never been a pristine or pure undertaking. It is also true that certain strands of anticolonial thought have not been immune to essentialist identity claims, or hierarchical and fundamentalist tendencies. We are not interested in anticolonial thought because we assume it is untainted ideologically or politically, but rather because of its theoretical and political potential. It offers insights, imaginaries, concepts, and categories; and raises vital questions and problems that the imperial standpoint and its expression in conventional social science suppresses and overlooks.

Finally, we do not mean to imply that imperialism and conversely, anticolonialism, are over. Imperialism in the form of continued colonialism and neocolonialism persist today. There are still territories that remain as formal colonies. Puerto Rico, Martinique, and Anguilla are some of them. In fact, the United Nations considers sixteen territories as still under colonial control, accounting for a total population of about two million people. Other examples of persistent and direct colonialism can also be found in the ongoing Palestinian struggle for national liberation from Zionist settler–colonialism. Indeed, as in the past, enduring imperialism and colonialism in its various forms have been met with novel forms of anticolonial resistance today, both in the hearts of the metropole and in our neocolonial world. This situation demands powerful theoretical tools and critical lenses which we argue can only be derived from anticolonial social thought and theory, which remain as urgent as ever. ◼

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> Darcy Ribeiro
and a Global Theory from the South

by **Adelia Miglievich-Ribeiro**, Federal University of Espirito Santo, Brazil

Darcy Ribeiro and Oscar Niemeyer visiting the University of Brasília (UnB) in 1985. Credit: Central Archive/UnB.

Brazilian social scientist and public intellectual Darcy Ribeiro (1922-1997) left a legacy of nearly 1,000 pages of written work. It is still underexplored, even within Brazilian academia, despite the 90 editions of his work published in dozens of languages – a rare achievement among Latin American authors. The relative silence surrounding his theses may be attributed to ideological disagreements and discomfort with his staunch advocacy of the engaged intellectual and his persistent commitment to general theory at a time when such endeavors were considered outdated.

Ribeiro stood for President João Goulart in Brazil when the 1964 military coup ousted the government. Like Goulart, he went into exile, during which he became what he called a "Latin American citizen." After

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his return in 1979 under amnesty, he joined the Brazilian Labour Party (PTB) and dedicated himself to the reconstruction of democracy.

> ### A long-term perspective: the civilizational process

Ribeiro was driven by a desire to understand Latin America's authoritarian tendencies and persistent developmental delays, which he saw as relegating its peoples to the status of an "external proletariat." Yet, to grasp this historical singularity, he first sought to situate Latin America within a global civilizational process, tracing approximately 14,000 years of development.

How do we classify Indigenous peoples in relation to each other, ranging from advanced civilizations to pre-agricultural hordes who reacted to the conquest according to the level of development they had reached? How do we position the Indigenous peoples and the Europeans, and the Africans who were uprooted from groups at different stages of development to be transported to America as slave labor? How do you classify the Europeans who governed the conquest? Did the Iberians, who arrived first, and the Nordics, who came later – succeeding them in dominating vast areas – represent the same type of sociocultural formation? Finally, how do we classify and relate the American national societies based on their degree of incorporation into the ways of life of agrarian-mercantile civilization and now, industrial civilization?

In his youth, Ribeiro was deeply influenced by Marx's *Grundrisse*, especially by his analysis of ancient hydraulic civilizations of the Near East, a mode of production where land was owned by the pharaoh and administered by bureaucrats who orchestrated agricultural planning and labor distribution. Ribeiro provocatively inserted Iberia and the Americas into this global civilizational framework, replying to critics: "Nonetheless, I reserve the right to believe that, despite everything, I am Marx's heir."

He advocated for reshaping scientific discourse through close attention to both social contexts and the positionality of the observer. Like Marx, Ribeiro emphasized the need to observe, compare, and interpret with a view toward transformative possibilities. "It is with this posture that we wrote *The Civilizational Process*…"

In his early work, Ribeiro conducted a critical history of technology, identifying twelve civilizational processes and eighteen sociocultural configurations over fourteen millennia. Aware of the risks of overgeneralization, he nonetheless insisted on theorizing totalities – synthesizing synchronic and diachronic analyses. He aimed to construct a robust comparative framework that avoided hierarchical rankings and instead favored relational explanation.

> ### Singular civilizational process and technological innovations

Ribeiro adopted multilinear neo-evolutionism (a dissidence from classical evolutionism), distancing himself from monocausal and teleological models. He argued for an evolutionary conception of history – "not necessarily evolutionist" – which he considered essential for understanding social change, including industrial and socialist revolutions. In his view, evolution referred to how groups creatively build their existence within the limits set by their environments and historical events, which can be crystallized as relatively uniform structures but temporary.

Ribeiro operated across multiple levels of abstraction. He used the concept of civilizational process (akin to Alfred Weber), focused on singular civilizational processes (similar to Sorokin's cultural super-systems), and identified technological revolutions as more limited in scope than the broader cultural revolutions discussed by Gordon Childe and Leslie White. He termed "cultural-historical configurations" what Julian Steward called cultural types in his studies on cultural ecology.

Technological revolutions, for Ribeiro, referred to qualitative transformations in human interaction with nature, implying qualitative changes in societies. These revolutions shaped civilizational paths through changes in energy use, which conditioned but were also shaped by humans. Evolutionary stages did not occur linearly but emerged through successful adaptation to environmental complexity. Technological innovations were never isolated events but part of a triadic system, each one having an internal structuration: a) adaptive system: production and reproduction of material conditions of life; b) associative system: regulation of production relations; c) ideological system: all forms of symbolic communication/language, knowledge, beliefs, values, social norms, ways of life, and behavior.

> ### Reflexive modernization and evolutional acceleration

Ribeiro stressed that technological inventions could emerge internally or be adopted through diffusion. Each civilization had its unique mode of reception. He developed two key concepts from this: reflexive modernization/historical incorporation, and evolutionary acceleration.

The former denotes "the compulsive engagement of peoples to the technologically more evolved sociocultural systems, from which derives the loss of autonomy or even the destruction as an ethnical entity". The concept of incorporation or reflexivity accounts for regressive movements concealed as progress without being so. The concept of evolutional acceleration is the alternative to reflexive modernization/historical incorporation.

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Reflexive modernization/historical incorporation is stagnation, not development. Proper development, for Ribeiro, requires people to have the ability to define their own goals.

Poverty, hunger, genocides, and species extinction have never been a sign of progress in the eyes of the critical intellectual. Not always "what comes afterward" indicates greater prosperity, as illustrated by the destruction triggered by the "super-utilization of an efficient technology." Systems that collapsed did not make any meaningful progress in adapting to weather conditions. Instead, they were overwhelmed by them – stagnating, regressing, and ultimately disappearing.

These insights are especially relevant today amid calls for degrowth. Technological development can deepen inequality and externalize harm to weaker societies. Europe's prosperity, for instance, was secured through colonial violence, while much of the Global South suffered deepening poverty, wars, catastrophes, and persistent conflict.

> **Darcy Ribeiro and contemporary
  global sociology**

Revisiting Ribeiro's work today enriches global sociological debates on center and periphery. Ribeiro conceptualized these not as fixed locations but as dynamic processes: the center as movements of evolutionary acceleration, and the periphery as processes of reflexive modernization.

This invites us to engage with contemporary thinkers. Niklas Luhmann, for instance, following Maturana and Varela, conceptualizes evolving systems interacting with their environments – offering parallels with Ribeiro's civilizational frameworks. One might ask: are civilizations ultimately successful modes of communication among societies, individuals, and the environment?

Ribeiro's ideas also resonate with Latin America's Marxist dependency theorists – Ruy Mauro Marini, Vânia Bambirra, Theotônio dos Santos – and Immanuel Wallerstein's world-systems analysis. All grappled with the crisis of global capitalism, center-periphery dynamics, and anti-systemic movements.

In global sociology, the call for symmetrical dialogue is urgent. As S.F. Alatas argues, Southern theories should avoid "naive nativism" and cultivate insurgent, cosmopolitan sociologies instead. Sujata Patel's *ISA Handbook of Diverse Sociological Traditions* exemplifies this pluralism, fostering dialogue across national and regional traditions.

Moving forward, it is essential to connect Anglophone postcolonial studies with Latin American decolonial thought, Black studies, subaltern feminisms, and Amerindian epistemologies. These "new epistemic subjects" – marginalized both geopolitically and socially – bring critical insight to foundational concepts like the state, nation, capitalism, development, and democracy.

Within this pluriverse, Darcy Ribeiro's work stands out as a bridge between North and South, theory and practice. A border-crossing intellectual, he was simultaneously a social scientist, an Indigenous anthropologist, a public figure, and, unexpectedly, a literary author. ◼

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> Instrumentalization of Antisemitism
and Multifaceted Repression of Palestine Solidarity in Germany

* The authors wish to remain anonymous for fear of repercussions they may face at their respective institutions of employment, from the German media, and from politicians and the German state machinery in general.
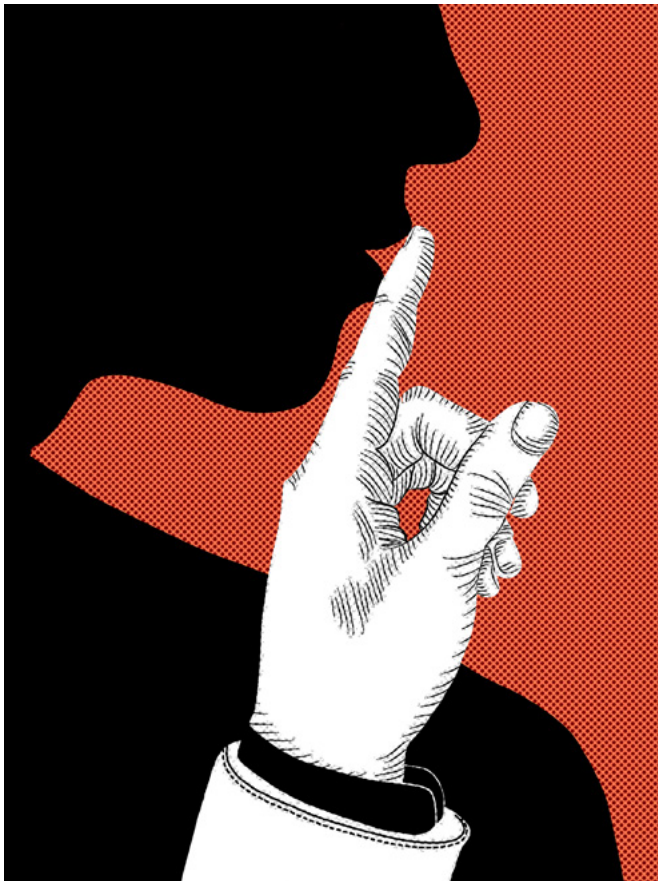
Credit: Freepik.

The United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Occupied Palestinian Authorities, Francesca P. Albanese, was invited by professors and students of the Free University of Berlin to speak on "Conditions of Life Calculated to Destroy: Legal and Forensic Perspectives on the Ongoing Gaza Genocide" on February 19, 2025. Stating security concerns, the university rector canceled the in-person talk at short notice. Given these circumstances, the talk was held in a different location and live-streamed at the university. Political actors in Germany had labeled Albanese antisemitic for her position on Israel committing genocide in Gaza. Pressure to cancel the event came from the Berlin mayor, Berlin's Senator for Science, and the Israeli Ambassador who called the potential event a "training camp for Hamas supporters". German media reporting of the scheduled event included calling Albanese a "fanatical Israel hater who is criticized worldwide." A week before, the Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich also canceled a talk by Albanese on similar grounds. After these cancelations, Albanese stated: "I've never seen universities caving so massively under pressure but also I've never seen that much pressure." The cancelation of Albanese's talk is one of many examples of silencing in Germany.

> ## > The silencing of dissent

As part of the global social movement against the genocide in Gaza and in solidarity with Palestine, Germany has seen a high degree of mobilization of protests and related activities since October 7, 2023. The movement has faced an unprecedented level of silencing by German authorities. Following literature in political sociology and social movement studies, silencing refers to the systematic suppression, marginalization, or delegitimization of voices, perspectives, or other forms of expression – often through institutional, political, or discursive mechanisms – that challenge dominant narratives or power structures. There

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have been [over 200 (publicly reported) cancelations](#) so far. These include talks, academic appointments, prizes, cultural events, film screenings, and art performances. It also includes violent repression of street protests by the police and even forbidding the use of Arabic at demonstrations in Berlin.

In this article we discuss the use of antisemitism as a tool for silencing criticism of the genocide in Gaza and expressions of solidarity with Palestine in German academia and beyond. We focus on a specific mechanism: the instrumentalization of a particular and strategically constructed idea of antisemitism in Germany as a vague and flexible tool to legitimize silencing. [Donatella della Porta](#) characterized the contentious politics of antisemitism in Germany as moral panic, and [Peter Ullrich](#) speaks of authoritarian anti-antisemitism. These different concepts imply that porous boundaries around accusations and framings of actions and speech as antisemitic have been an ideological, political, and strategic instrument employed to silence – carried out in a variety of ways across different spaces and settings. We do not suggest antisemitism does not exist in Germany; it certainly does and is reflected in the long-standing anti-fascist and anti-racist struggles in the country. Our point is that critical discourse is suppressed if the label of antisemitism is used to de-legitimize *all* criticism of the Israeli government or solidarity with Palestine. Undiscerning accusations of antisemitism prevents discussion of war crimes, genocide, human rights violations, and harmful Israeli policies and politics enacted against Palestine and Palestinians, preventing an honest and open debate that is critically needed in Germany.

> ## > Why the silencing?

Many observers outside Germany are puzzled by the lack of resistance to and awareness of the misuse of antisemitism as a tool of silencing in the country. Indeed, accusations of antisemitism are also used as a tool of repression in other countries, most prominently the US; however, there are distinct aspects to the German context.

First, part of the explanation for a unique German phenomenon is the relationship of the Holocaust to German identity and institutions, which have been constructed to reflect significant responsibility to the Israeli government and link the security of the state of Israel to the *Staatsräson* of Germany. As part of its historical responsibility for the Holocaust, combating and preventing antisemitism has been proclaimed a priority of the German government. It is deeply ingrained in legal frameworks, political discourse, and the education system.

Second, these very institutions shape social rules, norms, and values in German society, leading towards a particular self-identity. Parts of the German left even adopted a so-called ["anti-German" awareness](#), which views Germany's national identity as inherently tied to its fascist and anti-semitic past, and positions itself as pro-Israel – framing criticism of Israeli policy as inherently antisemitic. Such a collective memory culture based on historical guilt over the Holocaust is manifested through largely unquestioning and uncritical support to the Israeli government by German institutions, public media and large parts of society, across political divides. This creates a reluctance to engage with nuanced perspectives on Israel.

Third, the far-right key promoters of antisemitism in Germany also strongly support silencing actions of solidarity with Palestine: doing so provides strategic cover for their racist anti-migrant, anti-Arab and Islamophobic ideas and politics. It helps them further legitimize racism against Muslims and minorities in general.

Finally, many others in the mainstream, who do not strongly lean towards these political identities or groupings, remain silent out of fear of "saying the wrong thing." It also needs to be pointed out that the close and unwavering relationship between the German state and the Israeli state, from a political-economy perspective, is also shaped by strong and lucrative long-standing business investments and trade. Germany is Israel's largest trading partner in Europe. Germany has also been the second largest arms supplier to Israel for decades, increasing significantly from 2022 to 2023, benefitting German industries greatly. The two countries have a [long history of military cooperation](#).

Large parts of the media have not engaged in open debates and critical inquiry. There has been unbalanced and biased coverage of Israeli perspectives while minimizing or omitting reports by Palestinians and on Palestinian suffering and deaths. Expressions of support for Palestine and the Palestinian people are labeled as antisemitic or being made by "[Hamas supporters](#)" or "[Israel-haters](#)."

> ## > The construction of antisemitism as a flexible and vague tool of repression in Germany

The definitional roots of the instrumentalization of antisemitism is legitimized by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) [Working Definition of Antisemitism](#), widely adopted by institutions in Germany. Indeed, the IHRA definition is criticized as [too vague](#) in its understanding of antisemitism, thereby rendering any criticism of Israel as [potentially antisemitic](#). The definition lacks clarity on "the difference between antisemitic speech and legitimate criticism of Israel and Zionism," according to the authors of [the Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism](#). This vague and unclear IHRA delineation of what actually counts as antisemitic allows for its widespread and (politically and ideologically) strategic misuse in Germany.

Two recent government resolutions passed in the German Parliament (unanimously by all major political parties:

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on November 7, 2024 *"Never Again is Now – Protecting, Preserving, and Strengthening Jewish Life in Germany"* and January 30, 2025 *"Countering anti-Semitism and hostility towards Israel (Israelfeindlichkeit) at schools and universities and securing the free space for discourse"*) are directed at public institutions, including academic and cultural organizations, in order to identify antisemitic speech and acts based on the IHRA definition, and allow for sanctioning mechanisms. The second resolution in particular provides detailed specifications for sanctions such as banning persons and activities calling for boycotts including "activities of the 'Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions' (BDS) movement and similar movements." The IHRA definition is being used as an instrument to silence dissent. Much of this is targeted at universities.

International human rights organizations such as Amnesty International, academics, lawyers, and scholars of antisemitism have severely criticized both resolutions for their restrictions on academic freedom. Instead of aiming "to protect Jewish life" as the resolutions claim, they amount to authoritarian-style instruments to prevent intellectual exchange and knowledge building. Critically, they open the door for future political interventions in the education sector, such as normalizing the profiling of academics both within and outside Germany for accusations of antisemitism. This can further the chilling effect of self-silencing and restricting international exchanges across universities in Germany. Recently, one of the authors of the IHRA, Ken Stern, stated that "it was not drafted, and was never intended, as a tool to target or chill speech on a college campus".

> **Silencing in academia**

There is a long list of publicly available information about cancelations of speakers, conferences and workshops, academic appointments and positions, and research grants tied to support for Palestine, which is documented by the Archive of Silence. For example, a visiting professorship by Professor Nancy Fraser was revoked by the University of Cologne. Dr. Ghassan Abu Sittah, a British-Palestinian surgeon and rector of the University of Glasgow, was barred from entering Germany. However, we know less about silencing that occurs behind the scenes and informally, which is not publicized: it is difficult to gather systematic data on activities which are kept silent. We believe silencing takes place in universities all across Germany. Academics regularly discuss experiences and information of incidences in different German universities with each other. We would like to share some examples from people who wish to remain anonymous:

• A researcher who signed a public letter calling for humanitarian assistance in Gaza was informed by the Dean about a call by an anonymous parent (of a Jewish student) labeling them "anti-Jewish" and a safety concern to Jewish students. To avoid jeopardizing their job contract, the researcher retracted their signature.
• A guest professor was discouraged from inviting pro-Palestinian speakers due to fears of repression from university leadership and media backlash.
• Screening of a Palestinian documentary was canceled for security reasons.
• A lecture series on (de)colonialism and Palestine was not approved due to fear of hate speech.
• University leadership intervened in the scheduling of an event discussing the BDS movement.
• A genocide scholar was prohibited from using the term "settler colonialism" in a course, due to potential student distress.

All of these cases were faced by individuals in precarious academic positions, such as PhD students, postdoctoral researchers, and non-tenured professors, and the majority were non-Germans. In general, the different incidences of silencing were fueled by fear of media exposure or the belief of causing emotional harm to students.

Some universities have become focal points of student protests. University leaderships have called on the police to violently remove student protestors, and several universities have filed legal challenges resulting in court cases and fines for students. Some universities, such as the University of Hamburg and the Free University of Berlin, have banned student protests. The German press, in particular the tabloid BILD, have pressured universities to remove professors who signed a letter supporting the right of students to protest, labeling it as antisemitic hate speech. In a rare case, the president of Alice Salomon College in Berlin, who did not call the police to remove student protestors, was accused by the media of violating a duty to care for university staff and students; conservative politicians called for her resignation. Most recently, in April 2025, the Berlin immigration authorities began deportation proceedings against four non-German students due to their protest activities on college campuses.

> **Silencing in street protests**

Since October 7, 2023, protests against the genocide in Gaza have spread worldwide, including Germany. Protests include various activist groups, NGOs and grassroots organizations, the peace movement, international human rights and solidarity movements (including Jewish organizations), and anti-racist and pro-democratic groups in Germany. These street protests, by being labeled antisemitic, face repression involving significant physical suppression by police and legal restrictions by local governments, often with strong backing from tabloid and some mainstream media.

In Berlin, a city with the largest Palestinian diasporic population in Europe, over 100 protest events took place between October 2023 and October 2024. They have faced

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heavy riot policing, physical violence, arrests and bans. The police have frequently used escalatory tactics, leading to hundreds of arrests (including children) under various charges including incitement, signs of terrorism, and accusations of supporting Hamas. In some cases, accusations led to deportation proceedings against non-citizens.

Different tactics have been used to silence protests. In February 2025, local authorities in Berlin banned the use of Arabic in slogans (vocally and on signs). Drums were also banned so that the police could hear any chants in Arabic. Some press, for example the tabloids BILD and BZ, not only supported the language ban but also called for harsher crackdowns. Arabic is criminalized and portrayed as a language of "propaganda offenses," further feeding into anti-Muslim and anti-Arab sentiments.

The heavy repression is based on widespread accusations of antisemitism based on chants, symbols, and slogans. Using generalized accusations of antisemitism to legitimize violence and repression against protestors also overshadows local contexts. In Berlin, for example, many protests occur in the Neukölln and Kreuzberg districts, which have large Arab and migrant populations and which are long-standing centers of activism and political mobilization. These areas have been labeled "problem districts" due to their high immigrant populations, and clashes between police and protesters have historically been common. The repression of protests in these areas has been connected to racialized policing in the past. This pattern of repression not only curtails freedom of assembly but also reinforces racialized policing and broader state control over dissenting voices.

> **The instrumentalization of antisemitism**

The stakes are high: the instrumentalization of antisemitism to suppress legitimate criticism of Israeli policies, military actions, and genocide fosters an increasingly authoritarian societal and political climate in Germany. The implications of this are vast and manifold. It allows for political–ideological influence over research and education, posing a direct threat to academic freedom. It enables the implementation of a double standard to the right to assemble and protest by criminalizing migrant communities – particularly those that are Arabic-speaking – thereby exacerbating anti-Muslim and anti-Arab racism in German society. This contributes to the normalization of the far right, which exploits this dynamic to divert attention away from its own far-right antisemitism. In this way, the politicization of antisemitism as a silencing tool can also deter people from combating genuine antisemitism in Germany.

The discursive space for substantive discussions on racism, xenophobia, and antisemitism in Germany is today significantly constricted, creating a precedent for further restrictions on civil society. The multifaceted and strategic deployment of antisemitism as a political and ideological tool of silencing in Germany places it on a perilous trajectory that risks reinforcing the country's international isolation, reminiscent of the German *Sonderweg* (German exceptionalism). In this global context, the developments in Germany serve as both a cautionary tale and a call to action, emphasizing the need to protect freedoms of speech, protest, and inquiry, thereby preserving the principles of worldwide justice against war and genocide everywhere. ■

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> The Fragmented City: A Critique of Anti-Women Urbanism in Iran

by **Armita Khalatbari Limaki**, independent researcher, architect, and designer, Iran

The Red Scarf, Tehran – Niavaran Complex, 2014. Credit: Armita Khalatbari Limaki.

Dealing with the place of women in urban development and their invisibility in the process of major urban decisions necessitates a comprehensive debate, especially when faced with a country with religious laws. This short essay will touch on a sample of the injustice that has been done to women in this context and delve into the stark difference between people's lifestyle and what is written in laws and papers. My methodology is theoretical in nature, and by employing a critical lens, I aim to discuss the complex interplay between women, urban areas, and social justice within a specific cultural framework.

> No sign can evoke a feminine environment

Approximately 20 years ago, in Iran, an urban plan called "Ladies' Park" was proposed with the idea of strengthening women's freedom and social vitality in the public space. The aim was to create a sense of security and comfort for women by allocating them certain sections of urban public space. Parks with lush green trees, fountains, and colorful flowers were designed, but the laws in force conveyed very different ideas, at odds with the fundamental goals of recreational spaces. As a result, except for a few individuals who sought to be present in these parks, the majority of women perceived the security and tranquility in these spaces as an artificial and unrealistic construct, imposed on them through a process that was oppressive and unjust.

The reason behind the failure of the plan and its lack of popularity can be found in the flawed assumption that certain things which are fundamentally inseparable can actually be separated. There are qualities that cannot be confined to a limited space; characteristics that must flow through the very DNA of a city. However, the attempt to

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assign a specific location to such dynamic qualities, and to imagine capturing what is perpetually in motion, only led to a sense of disconnection, and hence failed. In the same way that there is no need for a sign or label to evoke a sense of masculinity in the city, the mere presence of a sign at the entrance to a park was insufficient to create a feminine environment.

> ### Intangible and fluid qualities confined within boundaries lead to fragmented emotions

When the allocation of public spaces is considered for creating a sense of vitality and enthusiasm in specific areas of the city, similar problems arise. I am not suggesting that there is anything fundamentally wrong with the zoning of land for different uses. Here I am pointing to a more fundamental gap, namely the "emotional zoning" that is essential and ubiquitous, and fundamentally uncontainable. The existence of such qualities as satisfaction, delight, transparency, and familiarity with the environment, which are considered essential components of a healthy city, is not subject to any law or regulation.

When the spatial system is compartmentalized by allocating specific geographic areas to these intangible and fluid qualities, instead of enjoying them as an integral part of the cityscape, we only allow them to manifest within limited boundaries, resulting in an ineffective and incomplete product. This means tacitly accepting that the city should be divided into segments, and expecting from each segment a specific behavior, but not beyond it.

Consequently, although the overall volume of "pleasant life experiences" increases with the expansion of public parks and recreational centers, a cohesive emotional landscape cannot grow throughout the city in these circumstances. Instead, there will be fragmented emotions scattered throughout the city, with no underlying thread between them, and citizens left with no choice but to search for and internalize them in specific locations in order to appreciate those feelings. Ultimately, one cannot expect moderate behavior from such an environment, and

achieving collective satisfaction and contentment under such conditions is virtually impossible.

> ### A city will always reflect its inhabitants, who cannot be transformed by hierarchical planning

The object of my criticism here is that such decisions aimed at reducing this chaos in reality only add to the existing malaise. By prioritizing visual order over the inner order of life, they create, despite their inherent disciplining nature, a new form of tension in tandem with familiar and legitimate motifs such as law and conventional contracts. In fact, it is precisely for this reason that rigid and static zoning schemes, which neglect the dynamic nature of human behavior, are doomed to fail: they are either rituals of display and magnification of a trait that is rarely found, or methods for avoiding responsibility.

Such a hierarchical system, which remains silent in the face of social inequality and seemingly strives to measure all individuals against a single, fixed standard, ultimately gives rise to a segmented society, divided into distinct classes, where some are content with the order imposed upon them, while others are left out. In this scenario, poverty emerges as an intractable problem, behavioral violence as well as crime and delinquency become commonplace, and widespread satisfaction turns into a rare and precious jewel.

This suggests that the hierarchical structure determined by one's physical location, first and foremost, leads to gradual changes in a person's mental state. In fact, these urban rules should first be aligned with the existing cultural norms, values, and social codes of a city, rather than expecting the city to conform to their unfamiliar instructions. Consequently, despite the necessity for laws and regulations to control urban development, the lack of existential meaning and commitment to the unique characteristics of the host community will render them invalid and valueless, making cultural transformation an unrealistic expectation. ■

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