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Rural rage: the roots of right-wing populism in the United States*

Chip Berlet  and Spencer Sunshine 

ABSTRACT

In the United States, right-wing populism is a major factor in national politics, as evidenced by the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States in 2015. Right-wing populism is defined by an appeal to 'people' (usually white, heterosexual Christians) to rebel – against both liberal 'elites' from above and 'subversives' and 'parasites' from below – by engaging in a hardline brand of conservative politics. There are a variety of right-wing populist political currents in the U.S. One of the most visible is the contemporary 'Patriot' movement, which is the successor to the Armed Citizens Militia movement which swept the across the nation in the 1990s. Today, the core Patriot movement groups are united by an interpretation of the Constitution that derides federal power (especially regarding environmental regulations, public lands, and progressive taxation) and advocates for a radical brand of right-wing decentralization. This opposition to federal government policies is framed in a way that inflames preexisting White, Christian nationalism (including anti-immigrant xenophobia and Islamophobia), as well as Christian Right support for patriarchy and opposition to LGBTQ rights.


KEYWORDS

Militias; patriot movement; populism; islamophobia; white nationalism; xenophobia


Introduction

Right-wing populist movements are flourishing around the globe. They base their political claims on constructions of national identity which must, by design, include and exclude people based on ethnicity, religion, race, gender identity, class, or political beliefs (Betz 1994; Taras 2009, 2012; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2014, 2017; Abromeit 2016; Scoones et al. 2018). The election of Donald Trump as President of the United States in 2016 involved complex relationships linking right-wing populism to pre-existing organized White supremacy, Christian nationalism, and white nationalism (Berlet and Lyons 2000; Hardisty 1999; Neiwert 1999, 2003, 2009, 2015).

And U.S. right-wing populism shares many core features with similar movements in Europe as well as with populist nationalist movements around the world (Wodak 2015; Müller 2016; Baier, Canepa, and Himmeltoss 2017). Central to this is a ritualized

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demonization of an 'other' seen as unravelling the threads that weave together the idealized unified 'traditional' national culture and the core ethnic stock. In the United States this is referred to as Nativism (Higham [1955] 1972).

Margaret Canovan (1981, 294) argues that all forms of populism 'involve some kind of exaltation of and appeal to "the people," and all are in one sense or another anti-elitist.' A populist movement uses 'populist themes to mobilize a mass constituency as a sustained political or social force' (Berlet and Lyons 2000, 4). Since the United States was founded, a variety of populist movements have appeared on the both political left and right. These have swept through rural America, engaging farmers and ranchers – but have also appeared in the cities by appealing to the industrial and wage-based working class, as well as finding followers among small entrepreneurs and the urban-suburban salaried middle classes (Berlet and Lyons 2000; Kazin 1995; McMath 1993). Catherine McNicol Stock notes that, 'the roots of violence, racism, and hatred can be and have been nourished in the same soil and from the same experiences that generate ... movements for democracy and equality' (Stock 1996, 148).

The current populist revolt in the United States is in part due to the economic stratification of society. Ninety percent of Americans between 1980 and 2012 received no rise in salary while dividends from a rising GDP rose dramatically for the top 10% (Economic Policy Institute 2014; Political Research Associates 2017). Since the election of President Ronald Reagan in 1980, the 1% has enriched itself while pushing most of us into a downward spiral of exported jobs, lower wages, unsafe working conditions, and tax breaks for the wealthy. Government social services such as public health and food stamps have been slashed. Public works projects, from bridges to sewers, have been gutted. Shifting tax dollars to private charter schools has strangled public education.

This process has been happening in communities of color for decades. Now it is front-page news, and research shows it is devastating White working class – and even middle-class – communities (Chen 2015; Devega 2015). The growth of right-wing populist anti-government movements in the Midwest and Rocky Mountain states in the late 1970s and early 1990s shadowed two collapses of the farm economy, and the resulting anxiety and fear in hard-pressed communities which saw farm families being squeezed off land owned by them for generations (Davidson 1996).

In both periods organized White supremacist groups interacted with apocalyptic survivalists and right-wing populists to spawn many militant quasi-underground formations. These movements included some people who called themselves 'Patriots' or formed armed insurgent groups such as Armed Citizens Militias (Gallaher 2003). Patriot movement groups base much of their analysis on the earlier work of the right-wing and conspiratorialist John Birch Society, which wraps patriotic symbols and references around right-wing libertarian complaints about 'big government' (Zaitchik 2010). The movement incorporates various forms of economic libertarianism which claim that federal government regulations and programs will pave 'The Road to Serfdom' (Hayek [1944] 1960).

For some of the U.S. right-wing ideologues in the 1950s, the collectivism of labor unions and 'big government' inevitably led to totalitarian tyranny like that under Hitler's Nazi genocidal form of fascism and Stalin's brutal repressive communism. This was implied in Hayek's 1944 book *The Road to Serfdom*, which was based in part on the theories of his ally, economist Ludwig von Mises. But neither Mises nor Hayek had any control over the spread of right-wing conspiracy theories about the Democrats and increased

government spending that flourished in the 1950s and 1960s in the US (Hofstadter 1965). Nor could they envision this conspiracism overlapping with Christian apocalypticism in the United States and buttressing the Patriot movement (Berlet 2017a, 131–173). However, ‘Reaganomics’ was ostensibly based on their theories; and ‘President Ronald Reagan honored the work of both men, as did President George H. W. Bush. Moreover ... the Tea Party and Fox News idolized’ Hayek and Fox News pundit Glenn Beck ‘caused Hayek’s *The Road to Serfdom* ([1944] 1960) to become a national best seller in 2010’ (Lindley and Farmelant 2012, 132). Hayek’s economic theories were used to defend opposition to civil rights and affirmative action (Katznelson 2017).

But the historical record shows that the militias are not unusual. The United States has seen a number of right-wing, armed insurgent groups throughout its history (Lyons 2017, 2018). Most have used some sort of ‘populist’ rhetoric. The most noted and lethal of such groups was the Ku Klux Klan (KKK), founded after the U.S. Civil War. The Klan claims five core periods of activism: 1865–1871, 1920–1925, 1950–1965, 1980–1988, and the present time. Patriot movement groups have often intersected with groups further to their right, in particular members of the racist and antisemitic Christian Identity sect. For example, a farm crisis in the late 1970s and 1980s caused widespread bankruptcies in small farms. Members of Posse Comitatus, which had been founded by a Christian Identity minister, successfully wooed a part of the protest movement that arose. And activists who belonged to this religious sect were influential in the Patriot movement throughout the 1990s (Stern 1996).

In the 1990s, the militia movement spread over the United States. It became notorious when two movement members bombed the Oklahoma City federal building in 1995, killing 168, but the movement itself continued through 2001. And between 2014 and 2016, there were four Patriot movement armed occupations and standoffs in rural areas: two at mines, and two involving ranchlands. Rural imagery involving the Wild West, an emphasis on wrenching public lands out of federal hands and giving control to local authorities, and appeals to workers in rural industries (especially miners, loggers, and ranchers) are consistent propaganda themes (Ambler 1980; Larmer 2016; Thompson 2016). Western states with high levels of public federal land ownership have tended to have vibrant Patriot movement activism. Residents of poor rural areas are receptive audiences to the movement’s claims that the federal government cannot control public lands, enforce environmental laws, regulate mining claims, or grant grazing permits.

Contemporary right-wing populist movements in the United States are clustered into two models of activism: first, partisan political activism in support of right-wing politicians in the Republican Party and some smaller right-wing political parties and groups; second, insurgent political and social movements (which are suspicious of both the Republican and Democratic Parties) that believe the current government might be controlled by subversive and treacherous elites (Lyons 2018). In this latter group, many social movement activists may either vote for the most militant right-wing politicians in the Republican Party, vote for third party candidates, or abstain from voting.

There is a ‘rural consciousness’ in the United States that is exploited to forge a ‘politics of resentment’ which scapegoats ‘less deserving social groups’ who are portrayed as parasitic – rather than being the victims of ‘broad social, economic, and political forces’ (Cramer 2016, 9). Central to this process is ‘producerism,’ a rhetorical tool built around a conspiracy theory of history that in the United States encourages racist, xenophobic, antisemitic,

heteropatriarchal, and other forms of bigoted narratives (Kazin 1995, 35–36, 52–54, 143–144; Herman 1997; Berlet and Lyons 2000, 4–6). It is often visually portrayed as a vice squeezing the middle class (Berlet 2017b; Allen with Abraham 1971).

This resentment is shared in different formulations across the United States (Alexander 2017). For example, Republican Presidential Candidate Mitt Romney, running against Democrat Barack Obama in 2008, spoke of the ‘Makers’ versus the ‘Takers,’ and claimed 47% of the U.S. population was composed of the ‘Takers’ (Gupta and Fawcett 2018; DiBranco and Berlet 2016). Obama’s 2008 election enraged some conservatives who were angered by a black liberal president. Conspiracy theories also became prominent across the right, including the notorious ‘Birther’ allegations which falsely claimed that Obama was not born in the United States (Berlet 2010; Public Policy Polling 2009). A more general climate of Islamophobia and anti-immigrant xenophobia also was growing internationally as the politics of resentment took center stage (Taras 2009, 2012).

The Patriot movement sprang back to life very suddenly at the end of 2008, with new organizing forms and groups. Observers of right-wing movements have offered several factors for the movement’s dramatic revival. They include the 2008 economic collapse; the federal bank bailouts and economic stimulus package which followed were particularly egregious to a movement which opposed almost all government regulation of the economy and trafficked in conspiracy theories about the role of finance capital. The rise of the Tea Party and Sarah Palin’s 2008 candidacy for vice president at the same time showed the strength of angry populist resentment in the Republican base, which rejected the party’s neoconservative managerial approach to the economy and international relations (Scher and Berlet 2014). The Republican’s aggressive foreign policies (including the Afghanistan and Iraq wars and occupations), commitment to transnational free trade agreements, and acceptance of LGBTQ rights also helped to alienate the right-wing populists. All of this happened as a series of right-wing populist movements grew across Europe and elsewhere starting in the mid-1990s (Betz 1994; Betz and Immerfall 1998; Taras 2009). Activists and scholars had been warning about this trend in the United States for over two decades (Hardisty 1999; Berlet and Lyons 2000; Durham 2000; Chomsky 2010).

American exceptional peculiarities

White nationalism

In June 2015, Dylann Roof – a young white man – came to a bible study group at a historically black church in Charleston, South Carolina. Before murdering nine people by shooting them at point-black range, he told them, ‘I have to do it. You rape our women and you’re taking over our country. And you have to go’. Roof’s attack was at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church. By the early 1800s, it was at the center of black resistance to slavery in Charleston, according to Gerald Horne. Horne believes that Roof inherited the fear of murderous blacks raping White women from a common historic narrative of White supremacy inspired in part by slave rebellions in the 1800s (Horne 2015). Black people, Roof feared, threaten the existence of the White race; therefore, he wanted the nation to be a White nation. Roof was acting out the ideology of White supremacy in support of White nationalism (Berlet 2015a, Horne 2015).

The term ‘White Supremacy’ is often used by scholars and activists to describe a constellation of racist ideologies and practices. (There is no consensus on the use of

different terms by scholars and activists who study right-wing politics; even the authors of this study use the terms differently). For this paper, we will use the following terms to separate the concept into component parts:

- **White Nationalism** claims that the essence of the United States as a nation is carried exclusively in the social, cultural, economic, and political practices of early European settlers.
- **White Superiority** is the specious idea that White people are a uniquely talented 'race.'
- **White Supremacist System** refers to the systems, structures, and institutions of a nation that give White people special privileges and powers, whether or not they want these privileges or harbor a dislike of people from other races.
- **Organized White Supremacist Groups** are social and political organizations with the goal of ensuring White people exercise power over people of color. These may work through legal means inside of the democratic system as it exists now to maintain or increase the 'White supremacist system'; advocate forming an all-White state; or seek to exterminate or expel people of color. These groups almost always rely on antisemitic conspiracy theories for a theoretical core, and often display intense misogyny.

Biologists reject the popular concept of 'race.' The perception of biological racial differences, however, plays a central role in historic and current power relationships in our nation. The original British settlers, who were followed by northern Europeans, assumed that White Anglo-Saxon Protestants (WASPS) were a superior racial and religious community. These days a muted – sometimes coded – version of White nationalist claims are routinely broadcast on cable TV news and AM radio talk shows.

Until the Civil War the United States was governed by a White supremacist system and was a form of White nationalism. This was true legally, but also in the dominance of the political, cultural, social, and economic arenas of public life. The post-war Reconstruction period was a brief interlude, and in 1868 the 14th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution was passed; it granted birthright citizenship, which made the freed slaves U.S. citizens. The White racist backlash to allowing black Americans legal rights spawned the Ku Klux Klan, an armed terrorist group that throughout its history has killed black people as well as those working for civil and human rights, regardless of their background. The struggle for equality for all has continued to this day, frequently lurching between successes and losses. It is made more complicated as the racial categories themselves are also fluid; they change, contract, and expand. As Noel Ignatiev (1995) shows in *How the Irish Became White*, a group that at one point in U.S. history was considered non-White can later include members who express support for White supremacy. In its most moderate form, White nationalism assumes all citizens need to 'act White' by being willing to adopt the behavior, ideologies, culture, social arrangements, and preferred economic practices common to middle- and upper-class White people. The rhetoric of White nationalism and organized White supremacy can be very similar. Groups such as the Ku Klux Klan and neonazis press for very aggressive measures – which have included murdering people of color; civil rights advocates; LGBTQ people; mixed-race couples; and religious minorities like Jews, Muslims, and Sikhs. The neonazi movement in the US is still active today (Langer 1990).

Organized White supremacist leader David Duke explains White nationalism this way:

I think the basic culture of this country is European and Christian and I think that if we lose that, we lose America ... I don't think we should suppress other races, but I think if we lose that White – what's the word for it – that White dominance in America, with it we lose America. (Berlet and Quigley 1995; Bridges 1994)

Compare this to Pat Buchanan, who regularly appears as a pundit on national television. Buchanan refers to a looming 'culture war,' and says:

The question we Americans need to address, before it is answered for us, is: Does this First World nation wish to become a Third World country? Because that is our destiny if we do not build a sea wall against the waves of immigration rolling over our shores ... Who speaks for the Euro-Americans, who founded the USA? ... Is it not time to take America back? (Berlet and Quigley 1995; Bridges 1994)

White nationalism is a system of power that shapes our daily activities and is extolled not only by organized supremacist groups and armed insurgents, but also major media figures and political leaders. When we talk about institutional racism, this is what we mean: the institutions, systems, and structures of power that give White people unfair advantages – even when they personally reject the idea of racism.

As the first black U.S. president, Obama was a lightning rod for White nationalist rhetoric. One of those murdered in Charleston was the church's pastor, Reverend Clementa Pinckney. He also served as a South Carolina state senator and was an acquaintance of Obama. President Obama traveled to Charleston and led the congregation in singing 'Amazing Grace' after an 'extraordinary' eulogy (Follman and West 2015). Obama also said 'the apparent motivations of the shooter remind us that racism remains a blight that we have to combat together.' He noted that 'we have made great progress, but we have to be vigilant because it still lingers. And when it's poisoning the minds of young people, it betrays our ideals and tears our democracy apart' (Lee and Rios 2015).

It would be easy to dismiss racist White nationalism as limited to fringe groups on the extreme edges of civil society, but this is sadly not true. Organized White supremacist groups do not cause prejudice in the United States – they exploit it. What we clearly see as objectionable bigotry surfacing in racist social and political movements is actually the magnified form of oppressions that swim silently in the familiar yet obscured eddies of 'mainstream' society. Racism, sexism, and hostility toward LGBTQ people (Burack 2008), immigrants and refugees, Muslims, and Jews still persists as forms of supremacy that create oppression. Thus, these forms of prejudice defend and expand inequitable power and privilege – whether or not there is activity by organized White supremacist groups.

Prejudice is an ideology while discrimination is an act. Colette Guillaumin suggests it is important to realize that ideologies generate activities. Ideologies shape the actions of individuals, groups, movements, and societies (Guillaumin 1995; Noël 1994). Thus, in the United States, the ideological notion of White superiority and the lingering ideologies embedded in an inherited White supremacist system results in White nationalism being practiced consciously or unconsciously in our daily routines (Guillaumin 1995; Noël 1994). And it saturates the country's politics – from the major political parties to right-wing populists and armed insurgent factions.

A conspiratorial storyline often added by White nationalist ideologues paints a picture of betrayal and subversion of the 'American Dream' by parasites picking the pocket of

‘productive’ citizens. The ‘parasites’ are often portrayed as people of color or immigrants. Sometimes this bigoted narrative is linked to the claim that treacherous plotters in the government are secretly planning to impose a totalitarian tyranny. This government conspiracy message is spread by the John Birch Society, Glenn Beck, Alex Jones, the late Tim LaHaye, and others. And the neo-Nazi form of White supremacy goes even further: it revolves around a core of antisemitism while advocating a messianic national rebirth as the opposition to what is seen as a society in decay (Postone 1980; Griffin 1991).

Antisemitism has a long and ugly history in the U.S. Auto magnate Henry Ford circulated tracts drawn from the antisemitic hoax document, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (Bronner 2000; Cohn 1967; Silverstein 2000). In the 1950s a group inside the US Army began to investigate the ‘Jewish Threat’ (Bendersky 2000). In the United States, interactions between the left, the right, conspiracy theories, anticommunism, and antisemitism can be complex (Berlet 1988, 1989, 1992a, 1992b, 1992c, 1993a).

Apocalyptic millennialism: fears of subversion in the U.S. Christian right

Christian Right voters mobilized to elect Ronald Reagan President in 1980 (Hardisty 1999). Central to U.S. Christian Right mobilizations of political and social movement constituencies was opposition to gay rights and abortion (Berlet 1993b; Guillaumin 1995; Hardisty 1999; Young-Bruehl 1996). In 2008, the Christian Right opposed the election of Democrat Barack Obama (Toslon 2008a, 2008b). Many of these devout Christians have absorbed apocalyptic narratives from religious sources. During the Presidential administration of Barack Obama (2009–2017), 15% of Republican voters in New Jersey told pollsters in his first year in office that they thought it was possible Obama might be Satan’s agent on Earth, known as the Antichrist. An additional 14% were sure of it (Public Policy Polling 2009). What can possibly explain these startling statistics?

These and other surveys over many decades reveal that domestic and foreign policies in the United States are shaped in part by conservative Protestant evangelicals (and a few Catholics) who view history as an existential battle between Godly Christians and evil forces in league with Satan (Clarkson 1997; Diamond 1989, 1995, 1997, 1998; Domke and Coe 2008; Kintz 1997; Martin 1996; Phillips 2006). This is more likely among the most doctrinaire wing of U.S. evangelicalism, the fundamentalists (Marty and Appleby 1994; Melling 1999). This influence on politics is not likely to vanish any time soon (Black 2016) and is part of a larger longstanding millenarian phenomenon internationally (Worsley 1968).

Protestant evangelicals and fundamentalists have historically connected apocalyptic prophecies in the Bible’s book of Revelation to current political and social events (Boyer 1992; Fuller 1995). Robert C. Fuller notes that trying to match real life political figures with the evil Antichrist (prophesied as the sidekick of Satan in Revelation) became something of an ‘American obsession’ in certain circles. Elaine Pagels quips, ‘Satan has, after all, made a kind of profession out of being the “other”’ (1996, xviii).

Christians who use apocalyptic timetables sometimes justify an attempt to seize control of secular society and ‘purify’ it, and thus hasten the end of time when Jesus returns in triumph (Quinby 1994, 1997, 1999). The idea of welcoming the End Times is known as the impulse to ‘hasten the eschaton’ (Baumgarten 2002, 230–233; Frankel 1991, 210–211; Henze 2011, 161; Sarris 2011, 260). In Greek, *eschaton* means ‘last.’ This End Times

impulse to control secular society is present in contemporary America (Barron 1992). This all may seem obscure to many readers, but the role of apocalyptic frames and timetables is important inside large portions of the three 'Abrahamic' religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (Berlet and Aziz 2003). Most Christians do not buy into this precise scenario – but millions – perhaps tens of millions – take seriously the possibility that the End Times are near, and that the battles that rage in the Middle East might be part of the war between good and evil prophesied in the book of Revelation.

It is easy to overlook the roots of a longstanding fear of a socialist or communist takeover in the United States (Heale 1990, 1998; Navasky 1980). For many Christian evangelicals and fundamentalists, communism and anarchism were literally tools of the devil. According to Frank Donner, 'Bolshevism came to be identified over wide areas of the country by God-fearing Americans as the Antichrist come to do eschatological battle with the children of light,' as prophesied in Revelation. Although based in Christianity, this apocalyptic anticommunist worldview developed a 'slightly secularized version,' explains Donner, and it was 'widely shared in rural and small-town America,' where leaders of evangelical and fundamentalist groups regularly 'postulated a doomsday conflict between decent upright folk and radicalism – alien, satanic, immorality incarnate' (Donner 1980, 47–48).

Apocalyptic Biblical prophecy warning of conspiracies in high places during the 'End Times' played a major role in right-wing Protestant movements between World War I and World War II. It also helped frame the rhetoric used by the leading spokesmen for what Ribuffo calls the 'Protestant Far Right:' William Dudley Pelley, Gerald B. Winrod, and Gerald L. K. Smith (Ribuffo 1983).

It is the drive to bring heaven to Earth that sparks the activist form of apocalypticism and spawns a wide variety of utopian religious, political, and social movements (Berlet 2008; Landes and Katz 2011; Scafi 2006). This is because dualistic apocalyptic narratives long ago slipped away from Christian religious theology and began to influence secular belief systems and ideologies in the United States in what some scholars refer to as a culture of conspiracy theories (Goldberg 2001; Barkun 2003).

Conspiracy theories are a narrative form of demonization and scapegoating and are central to both right-wing populism and fascism (Berlet and Lyons 2000). They goad people into action by naming the evil threat and attaching it to a need to act because 'time is running out.' This is the classic apocalyptic timetable. Robert C. Fuller (1995) sees a connection between millennialist expectation and the societal use of demonization and scapegoating, especially in terms of the public identification of Satan's evil End Times agent – the Antichrist.

Many efforts to name the Antichrist appear to be rooted in the psychological need to project one's 'unacceptable' tendencies onto a demonic enemy. It is the Antichrist, not oneself, who must be held responsible for wayward desires. And with so many aspects of modern American life potentially luring individuals into nonbiblical thoughts or desire, it is no wonder that many people believe that the Antichrist has camouflaged himself to better work his conspiracies against the faithful. (Fuller 1995, 168)

Fuller notes that 'Over the last two hundred years, the Antichrist has been repeatedly identified with such "threats" as modernism, Roman Catholicism, Jews, socialism, and the Soviet Union' (Fuller 1995, 5). Mooney (1982) looked at an early example of this process in *Millennialism and Antichrist in New England, 1630–1760*.

Perhaps due to an unusually large percentage of Protestant Christian evangelicals and fundamentalists in the United States, there is a cornucopia of apocalyptic titles with a focus on preparing for a confrontation with evil. Examples of Protestant apocalyptic literature in post-WWII America include *Approaching Hoofbeats: The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* by the well-known Rev. Billy Graham (1983) and *Apocalypse: The Coming Judgment of the Nations* (JR Grant, 1994). A book credited by several authors as sparking a renewed interest in millennialism among Christian Fundamentalists is *The Late Great Planet Earth* by Hal Lindsey and CC Carlson (1970); which was followed by *The Terminal Generation* (Lindsey and Carlson 1976). Lindsey also penned *Satan Is Alive and Well on Planet Earth* (1972); *The 1980s Countdown to Armageddon* (1981); and the novel *Blood Moon* (1996). The magazine *Midnight Call* (Ongoing Serial) is a typical example of Protestant apocalyptic expectation.

A prolific scribe in the apocalyptic genre is Christian family counselor Tim LaHaye (1975, 1980, 1982). As the year 2000 approached, LaHaye wrote *Revelation Unveiled* (1999). When it was clear that the end of time had not happened, LaHaye and David A. Noebel published *Mind Siege: The Battle for Truth in the New Millennium* (2000). LaHaye gained international fame when beginning in 1995, he and writer Jerry B. Jenkins produced a series of more than a dozen books in the 'Left Behind' series of novels that have sold more than 70 million copies (LaHaye and Jenkins 1995). Scholarly critiques of LaHaye's theology include Gorenberg (2000) and Frykholm (2004).

The politicized religious view of politics in the United States by conservative Christian evangelicals and fundamentalists with millennial expectation need to be taken seriously by scholars, journalists, and activists. The concept of this sort of politics with religious-like fervor emerges in the late 1920s. A key theorist of these militant political processes was Eric Voegelin, whose essays were collected and published in 1952.

Land conflicts in the rural West

The Western frontier

To understand rural conflicts in the Western states, it is important to consider that many of the participants – regardless of their actual professions – cast themselves in the role of farmers and ranchers who see the federal government as a distant and annoying force (Ambler 1980). In doing so, they 'recycle old Western fantasies' of resistance and rebellion (Larmer 2016).

Sagebrush rebellion

The roots of opposition to federal public land holdings and regulations go back the early 1900s, when the federal government first started reserving public lands and water rights (Larmer 2016; Thompson 2016; Swearingen, Schimel, and Wiles 2018). The 'Sagebrush Rebellion' started in 1976, when the federal government finally stated it would retain the remaining public lands it held from the original western expansion of the country. Legislators in the western states, where most of these lands were, made unsuccessful attempts to gain control of the lands. These politics appeared again during with the 'county supremacy' movement during the Clinton Administration, which sought to curtail public land grazing, mining, and logging. His use of the controversial Antiquities Act, which also placed more restrictions on public lands, also spurred opposition.

Finally, the election of Obama brought on the latest iteration of the movement, with renewed calls for public land transfers to states or counties, and rising anti-federal sentiment, such as that exhibited by the Malheur occupation (discussed below).

Extractive resource industries and ‘wise use’

Starting in the late 1970s, a coalition of various right-wing political, social, religious, and corporate leaders set out to create a ‘New Right’ in the United States to roll back what they considered ‘Big Government’ intrusions into the society (Himmelstein 1990; Diamond 1995). In 1988, Ron Arnold, a writer for a logging industry publication, presided over the ‘1988 Multiple Use Strategy Conference’ which organized an anti-environmentalist social movement (Ramos 1995, 1997). This became known as the ‘Wise Use’ movement (Arnold and Gottlieb 1993; Burke 1993; Helvarg 1997; Wise Use Resource Collection 2018). According to Tarso Luís Ramos (1997),

On the heels of the conference, Arnold’s group published a manifesto, The Wise Use Agenda, which includes an index of over two hundred organizations that attended or supported the conference and ‘mandated’ the publication of the agenda. The index includes various resource corporations and associations, including Boise-Cascade, Du Pont, Exxon, Georgia Pacific, Louisiana-Pacific, Nevada Cattlemen’s Association, Washington Contract Loggers Association, and Western Forest Industries Association. The index also lists activist groups, such as the National Center for Constitutional Studies, which seeks to institute biblical law in the United States, and the American Freedom Coalition, a Unification Church front group in which Arnold was deeply involved.

Arnold explains that he first studied scholarly social movement theories based on leftwing movements, and converted them to create a movement on the right. Arnold says he tried to tamp down calls for armed confrontations, which he says he also opposes in current rural movements on the Right (author Berlet interview with Arnold, 2018).¹ However, Ramos argues that ‘bullying, threats, and conspiracy theories’ have always been ‘alive and well in the Wise Use movement,’ and that under the banner of Wise Use there have been acts of violence (author Berlet, interview with Ramos 2018).

Patriot movement oppositional organizing

There exists in the United States an overlapping series of right-wing oppositional movements, which consist of national organizations, media outlets, and diffuse activists who sometimes form structured groups and sophisticated media outlets (Kintz 1997; Kintz and Lesage 1998). Sara Diamond (1989, 1995, 1998) refers to the broad sector as ‘Americanist’ movements with the Christian Right sector engaged in ‘spiritual warfare’ against liberals (1989, 1995, 1998). These self-described patriotic movements in the United States are overwhelmingly shaped by twentieth century anti-communism and Cold War politics (Berlet and Lyons 2000, 287–304). They share similarities with earlier xenophobic movements such as Nativism in the late 1800s and the ‘100 Percent Americanism’ of the 1920s (Berlet and Lyons 2000, 85–103; Berlet 1988, 1989). The Populist movement in the late nineteenth century was primarily progressive, but some activists embraced conspiracy theories about Jews, Freemasons, or Catholics. Cas Mudde (2017) points out

¹See also: Arnold and Gottlieb (1993).

various historical popular U.S. Nativist movements, groups, and campaigns: the ‘Know Nothing’ movement, an 1850s anti-Catholic movement; the 1920s and 1950s Ku Klux Klan; the John Birch Society, which formed in 1958; and George Wallace’s 1968 and 1972 presidential runs. James Aho (1990, 2016) uses the term ‘Christian Patriots’ to specifically analyze the movement that combines Americanist patriotic beliefs with the claim that America is a Christian Nation, and weaves in conspiracy theories that consider the U.S. government to be illegitimate. For almost all participants, this involves claims of a conspiracy which is either openly antisemitic, or derived from antisemitic narratives.²

Basic patriot movement beliefs

One of the most well-known Americanist movements today is the Patriot movement. It uses the trappings of the U.S. political tradition – including patriotic symbols and appeals to founding documents and structures – to forward a conspiracy theory-driven version of right-wing populism. Despite outward appearances, theoretically it has little relationship to the liberal tradition that the United States was founded on. The movement seeks to implement a radical form of decentralization to advance right-wing economic, social, and cultural aims. This includes dismantling almost all aspects of federal government regulation of the economy, such as the minimum wage, as well as civil rights guarantees for historically oppressed groups (Burghart and Crawford 1996; Katznelson 2017; Kimmel and Ferber 2000). Despite lip service to the Constitution, it is common for the movement to deny that Muslims deserve First Amendment protections for their religion (Sunshine 2016).

Some commentators incorrectly refer to movement members as ‘anarchists’ (Conroy 2017). But the Patriot movement appeals to the authority of county sheriffs, county commissions, and the U.S. Constitution for legitimacy – institutions which are incompatible with all varieties of anarchism. And while movement members seek to abolish most of the federal government’s structure, they want to keep certain parts. Although the details vary among participants, typically this includes activities related to the military, foreign affairs, immigration control, and laws guaranteeing private property and unregulated markets. Local governments will be able to reject federal laws, essentially rendering them optional.

The movement uses several different tactical approaches. The most well-known is the formation of militias and other paramilitary forms. The Three Percenters, for example, were founded in 2008 by a 1990s militia movement veteran who wanted to create a new kind of paramilitary that could avoid infiltration by law enforcement (Sipsey Street Irregulars 2009). These paramilitaries have engaged in a number of high-profile confrontations with federal authorities.

The movement frequently uses ideas based on ‘nullification,’ originally formulated by pro-slavery advocates in the 1830s, which holds that lower-level governments can reject the rules of higher-level ones (Levitas 2002). The doctrine of ‘county sheriff supremacy,’ which advocates that county sheriffs can decide which laws are constitutional (and hence enforced), is an example of this. So is ‘coordination,’ which is a term that appears in some federal land use acts, but is interpreted by the Patriot movement to

²For an earlier analysis see Hofstadter (1965).

claim that counties and other local governments can veto federal law use rules (Sunshine 2016, 29–32). Another example promoted by the movement is ‘jury nullification,’ where trial jurors are told they can decide guilt or innocence based on their own beliefs, and not the law.

In addition to paramilitaries, the movement has set up structures that ape governmental functions. These include Committees of Safety, which are activist organizations that claim to have the powers of a county government. There are also a number of self-proclaimed judges, juries, and sheriffs (Sunshine 2016). Another common belief in the Patriot movement, based on an idiosyncratic reading of Article 1, Section 8, Clause 17 of the U.S. Constitution, is that the federal government is only allowed to own what is known in movement jargon as ‘ports, forts, and ten square miles’ of Washington, DC. Movement members who follow this line of reasoning do not acknowledge the federal government’s power to regulate grazing, mining rights, or logging rights on federal lands – since they do not acknowledge the government’s right to assert jurisdiction and control these lands (Sunshine 2016). These fictional legal positions were invoked to support the armed Patriot confrontations in both Nevada and Oregon (detailed below).

Sovereign Citizens, a subset of the Patriot movement, adhere to a series of arcane legal arguments which hold that the current U.S. government is illegitimate. They believe they can opt out of paying taxes and other obligations by declaring themselves to be a different – ‘sovereign’ – citizen. Their ideas originate in Posse Comitatus movement, which spun legal fantasies that combined an idiosyncratic reading of the U.S. Constitution, English common law, and White supremacist interpretations of the Christian Bible (Levitas 2002; Zeskind 2009). In courts, Sovereign Citizens have claimed they are immune from everything from traffic laws and zoning regulations, to child support orders and kidnapping, and even theft and murder. Unsurprisingly, none of their central contentions have been accepted by mainstream legal scholars or the judicial system.³

The masculinist warrior motif is central to Patriot movements in the United States (Berlet 2004b; Gibson 1994, 1997; Kimmel and Ferber 2000; Lembke 1998, 2003). Originally these movements were exclusively for men, although the Ku Klux Klan did have a women’s auxiliary that sewed robes. A small number of women participated in the 1990s militias, if they had a reputation for handling guns expertly and safely – which men often were not required to prove. And while over the decades most leaders have been men, the militia movement was organized nationally using online resources developed by Linda Thompson (Berlet and Lyons 2000, 292).

Rural economic crises

The 1970s and 1980s

In the late 1970s a serious and devastating farm crisis bankrupted thousands of small farms, and transnational agribusiness swooped in to buy them out. The crisis was caused by Federal Reserve interest rate increases, rising petroleum and input prices,

³The term Posse Comitatus comes from Latin, and refers to ‘the bodily force of the county,’ as in a body of men assigned power over a county. The term ‘county’ is derived from the territory under the control of a Medieval Count; and the leader of the force of men would be a Sheriff. The term ‘Sheriff’s Posse Comitatus’ was used by the founders of the movement. The common translation of Posse Comitatus as ‘Power of the County’ lacks this explanatory information (Southern Poverty Law Center n.d.; Berlet 2018).

and the cessation of grain sales to the Soviet Union following the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan (Davidson 1996; Greider 2000). Additionally, the wave of mergers and acquisitions which started with Reagan-era deregulation enabled a concentration of economic power in large urban areas – to the detriment of non-agricultural industries in both rural areas and small cities (Cramer 2016; Alexander 2017).

This led to the farmers protest movement; its main group, the American Agriculture Movement, organized a ‘tractorcade’ protest of farmers in Washington, DC in 1977 and 1979. However, the White supremacist group Posse Comitatus, as well as followers of the right-wing cult leader Lyndon H. LaRouche, Jr., became involved in the movement and spread a conspiratorialist message that scapegoated Jewish bankers as the cause of farm crises. They were able to attract a number of disgruntled farmers, although the majority rejected the most bigoted allegations and violent tactics being promoted (Levitas 2002, 168–182). Nonetheless, antisemitic and racist contentions became a regular topic of discussion in the farm belt for several years. And so while few farmers joined organized White supremacist groups, there was sometimes an appreciation of the fact that these White supremacist groups were paying attention to the hardships created by the collapsing family farm economy (Berlet 1986; Corcoran 1995).

Despite the Patriot movement’s hostility to federal programs, rural areas receive a disproportionately large share of federal and state-level expenditures – meaning the urban zones, where wealth has become more consolidated in past decades, are effectively subsidizing them. On the other hand, the collapse of family farms and the growth of giant agribusiness has meant that these federal dollars seldom reach the bank accounts of local farm families. The global agribusiness sector is huge (McMichael 1998). The multi-national giant agribusiness Cargill is singled out by Brewster Kneen (1995, 2002) as a major exemplar of this trend that accelerated farm crises over many decades. ‘Cargill is building the kind of industrial agricultural systems it can best profit by,’ explains Kneen, ‘not necessarily the one that serves the farmers or the public best [nor] the system that ensures everyone everywhere is adequately nourished’ (2002, viii). Suicide rates in the farm belt rose along with reports of abuse and mental illness during the downward spirals.

As right-wing populist groups spread conspiracy theories in the farm belt, for the most part corporate media and policy makers ignored the plight of the residents as they saw their way of life devastated (Davidson 1996; Dyer 1997; Neiwert 1999). As one song sung to raise funds for the annual ‘Farm Aid’ concert put it, these rural farm families were being ‘weeded out’ (M. Roche, Roche, and Roche 1985). Farm Aid, which originated during the crisis, is an ongoing effort to raise funds to save the family farm and provides a website that explains the issues. In part, Farm Aid seeks to challenge those elements of the protest movement that blamed the farm crises on elaborate conspiratorialist theories involving international Jewish bankers and their minions who they falsely claim control the U.S. banking system through manipulating the Federal Reserve. These theories have circulated since the 1930s; they were popularized by the White supremacist Eustace Mullins in the 1950s and spread by Posse Comitatus in the 1970s and 1980s (Berlet and Lyons 2000, 194–195).

1990s: armed citizens militias

The Armed Citizens Militias are a part of the broader Patriot movement; in the 1990s they spun off the movement as an armed wing. The militias were locally based armed

paramilitaries which vowed to resist a looming New World Order and other nefarious and non-existent conspiracies alleged to be goals of the federal government (Berlet and Lyons 2000, 287–304; Berlet 2004a, 2004c). The militias took many of their basic political positions and organizing forms from the Posse Comitatus (Levitas 2002; Berlet 2004a), and most conducted armed training exercises at rural encampments. The rapid expansion of the militias occurred around 1993, after a second wave of the devastation of many rural economies (Gibson 1994; Berlet and Lyons 1995; Van Dyke and Soule 2002; Berlet 2004c). The specific instances which spurred the movement were anger over Ruby Ridge and Waco (see below) – as well as the 1993 Brady Bill, which established tighter gun controls (Hamm 1997; Freilich, Pienik, and Howard 2001; Levitas 2002; Zeskind 2009). The movement became infamous in 1995 when two members, Terry Nichols and Timothy McVeigh – the latter of whom was tied to its neonazi wing – bombed the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, killing 168 people (Hamm 1997; Berlet and Lyons 2000). Contrary to many reports, the militia movement continued to grow for at least a year after the bombing, reaching its peak in 1996 (Southern Poverty Law Center 2001).

The militia movement was ignited by government errors and abuses of power during confrontations that resulted in needless deaths at the Weaver family cabin in Ruby Ridge, Idaho, and the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas. Randy Weaver and his wife Vicki and their children, who lived in a remote location in the mountains, were adherents of Christian Identity (Berlet and Lyons 2000, 290–291). The discovery by the Weavers of a secret government surveillance team quickly escalated into a deadly 1992 shoot-out in which a federal marshal, and Weaver's wife and son, were killed. Randy Weaver and a friend were wounded (Hamm 1997).

The Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas was a Christian fundamentalist church and survivalist retreat. In 1993, their leader David Koresh was decoding Revelation as an End Times script and preparing for the Tribulations (Samples et al. 1994; Reavis 1995; Tabor and Gallagher 1995). In this apocalyptic timetable many Christian evangelicals (and their more doctrinaire and literal cousins the fundamentalists) argue over the exact timetable heralding the imminent return of Jesus of Nazareth, seen by Christians as the son of God. In some readings of the Bible's Book of Revelation, Jesus returns, there is a confrontation (called the Tribulations), and when this is over, only true Christians are saved, while an angry God vanquishes and eliminates all non-believers.

It is likely that Koresh and his followers believed that the government forces might be agents of Satan in the End Times (ibid). The U.S. government failed to comprehend that the Davidian worldview was part of a rising tide of millennialist expectations generated by the approach of the calendar year 2000. A series of miscalculations by government analysts in April 1993 cost the lives of eighty Branch Davidians (including twenty-one children) and four federal agents (Hamm 1997).

After Ruby Ridge and Waco, the Armed Citizens Militia Movement quickly spread through all fifty states. There were over 200 militia units by the mid-1990s, with between 20,000 and 60,000 active participants at its peak. The broad Patriot movement influenced as many as five million Americans, who shared its belief that the government was manipulated by subversive secret elites that planned to use law enforcement or military force to repress political rights (Berlet and Lyons 1995, 2000, 287–304). Martin Durham (2000, 146) observed that the militia-style Patriot movement was 'divided in strategy and

exhibits both authoritarian and libertarian impulses' and that 'aspects of each have the potential to bring its adherents into conflict, sometimes bloodily, with a federal government that they see as a threat to their rights and a servant of their enemies.'

During this period, there were widespread fears that the U.S. federal government was about to impose a draconian tyrannical dictatorship using jack-booted thugs delivered in black helicopters sent by the United Nations (Berlet and Lyons 2000, 287–304; Berlet 2004a, 2004c, 2005, 2009a, 2009b). John Keith Akins likened militia conspiracy theory to an ideological octopus.

In this analogy, the body of the octopus represents the New World Order theory; each tentacle represents a specific concern, such as firearm ownership, abortion, or prayer in schools. Each tentacle of this octopus reaches into a pre-existing social movement, yet each connects with the others at the body, the New World Order. (Akins 1998, 144–145)

In the United States, these theories have been openly discussed on network television, and by elected representatives on the state and federal level (Berlet 2009b). Using conspiratorialist and producerist rhetoric, the militias identified numerous scapegoats. Each unit, and in some cases each member, could pick and choose targets. These included: federal officials and law enforcement officers, abortion providers and pro-choice supporters, and environmentalists and conservation activists. In a few cases, militias also targeted Jewish institutions, LGBTQ organizers, people of color, immigrants, and other vilified targets (Stern 1996; Southern Poverty Law Center 2001; Southern Poverty Law Center n.d.).

At its peak in 1996, the number of militia units reached 858, according to the Southern Poverty Law Center. The numbers dropped each year after that, and by 2000 there were only 194 units (Southern Poverty Law Center 2001). After the November 2000 presidential election of Republican George W. Bush and the September 11, 2001 terrorist attack, their voices faded to a murmur.

The 2008 banking collapse

For most Americans the word 'collapse' holds more resonance, but the Federal Reserve likes to call what happened to the economy in 2008 a 'recession.' In one article, the Federal Reserve Bank in Kansas City, Kansas, in the heart of the farm belt, reported that 'Recession Catches Rural America.' After claiming that in rural economies in 2008 'the financial crisis was less severe than on Wall Street,' the authors admitted that the 'foundations of rural economic strength in 2008 – high commodity prices, robust export activity, and rising ethanol demand – were crumbling' (Henderson and Akers 2015, 65). According to Lorin Kusmin, 'rural employment in mid-2015 was still 3.2% below its pre-recession peak in 2007' (2015). In some rural areas there was a 'backlog of vacant and abandoned properties' continuing through at least 2014 (Chuck Wehrwein, quoted in Housing Assistance Council 2014a). A detailed look shows that between 2000 and 2012, rural home ownership declined as follows: White Not Hispanic –0.5%; Hispanic –1.0%; Native American –2.9%; and African American –5.2% (Housing Assistance Council 2014b).

The Patriot movement's 2008 revival was closely associated with the rise of the Tea Party movement, which emerged at about the same time (Altemeyer 2010; Cox and Jones 2010; Scher and Berlet 2014). Tea Partiers supported right-wing Republican candidates against the alleged 'socialism' of the Democratic Party, but several studies also

showed antipathy toward immigrants and people of color (Berlet 2010, 2012; Burghart and Zeskind 2010; Parker 2010). Over time Christian Right participation in the Tea Party increased. Ann Burlein (2002) has explained how the Christian Right and White supremacy can converge. The Tea Party idea originated with supporters of uberlibertarian Ron Paul, but the franchise was scooped up by conservative billionaires who funded trainings and rallies around the country. Over time Christian Right activists played a leading role in local Tea Party groups, helping shift the focus to a toxic blend of Nativist, anti-immigrant, and anti-Muslim rhetoric coupled with homophobia and anti-abortion propaganda (Berlet 2012; Scher and Berlet 2014). By 2015 the Tea Party grassroots was heavily populated by organized White supremacists (Burghart and Zeskind 2010).

Folks who support the Tea Party and other right-wing populist movements are responding to rhetoric that honors them as the bedrock of American society (Hochschild 2016). These are primarily middle- and working-class White people with a deep sense of patriotism who bought into the American dream of upward mobility. Now they feel betrayed. Trump and his Republican allies appeal to their emotions by naming scapegoats to blame for their sense of being displaced by ‘outsiders’ and abandoned by their government (Scher and Berlet 2014).

Contrary to some reports, the Tea Party activists, despite garbled language and unsupported accusations, had reasons to be angry. As author Berlet put it:

They see their jobs vanish in front of their eyes as Wall Street gets trillions. They see their wages stagnate. They worry that their children will be even less well off than they are. They sense that Washington doesn't really care about them. On top of that, many are distraught about seeing their sons and daughters coming home in wheelchairs or body bags. (Berlet 2010)

Emotions matter in building all social movements, and have specific meanings in ‘Right-Wing America’ (Kintz 1997). The linkage of emotion and politics are at the heart of a multi-year study of rural right-wing conservatives by Arlie Russell Hochschild (2016), who moved to Louisiana for several years and conducted conversations with Tea Party members in the South, where the movement was strongest. Many she spoke with had long doubted that Obama was American; even after the publication of his long-form birth certificate, some still suspected he was a Muslim who harbored ill will toward America. Hochschild observed that this set of beliefs was widely shared among people who otherwise seemed reasonable, friendly, and accepting. How, she wondered, could we explain this? Hochschild’s premise is that all political belief is built on a set of emotions that shape a deep internalized narrative story that writes a script for people’s political beliefs and voting actions. Previous scholarship has pursued similar lines of inquiry into right-wing social movements, especially in the U.S. South (A. Wilson 1996, 2013; Hardisty 1999; Durham 2000; A. Wilson and C. Burack 2012).

The role of Islamophobia

The Islamophobic ideas that Hochschild documented were not limited to the Tea Party. After Barack Obama’s 2008 election, the internet was flooded with conspiracy theories about his alleged subversion and treachery. They claimed that he was, alternately: a secret Muslim; not a citizen of the United States – and so his election as president should be overturned; a puppet of a cell of Jews and Communists in Obama’s Chicago

neighborhood; and/or was the tool of a New World Order plot to establish a North American Union (Berlet 2009a).

These claims recycled longstanding attacks on progressive politicians and public figures in the United States as being secret Jews or communists, or both; for example, they were directed in the 1930s and 1940s at President Franklin D. Roosevelt (Dilling 1934, 1936, circa 1941). However, it was Donald Trump who moved Islamophobia into the center of U.S. political discourse (Berlet 2015b). A common Islamophobic claim is that Islam is not a religion with varying interpretations, but instead is a violent, subversive, and unified political ideology (Berlet 2011, 2012, 2013; Esposito and Kalin 2011; Lean and Esposito 2012; Taras 2009, 2012). U.S. Muslims are often described in right-wing media as secret sleeper cells, who have infiltrated the country in order to lay plans for a takeover. Even attempts by Muslims to assert democratic rights are portrayed as attempts at subversive infiltration of legal systems in Europe and the United States. Islamophobes in the United States cast Muslims as being in alliance with a 'politically correct' Left, and together they conspire to destroy the nation from within (Cincotta 2010, 2011). This conspiracy theory is often packaged with the claim that there is an attempt in the United States to establish Sharia Law.

In many ways, contemporary Islamophobia in the United States uses many of the same narratives of subversion that can found in prior antisemitic or anticommunist rhetoric tracked by scholars. These ideas are widespread in the Patriot movement as well.

When right-wing populists use the narrative claiming Muslims are terrorists, they are engaging in a psychological projection. Polls show that many Americans assume that Muslims carry out the majority of terrorist acts in the United States. But studies show that between 2008 and 2016, 'White Nationalist Perpetrators' carried out 115 violent incidents, while 'Muslim Perpetrators' were involved in sixty-three incidents (Neiwert 2017; Neiwert et al. 2017; Valverde 2017). In 2018, a major study showed that 'almost two-thirds of the terror attacks in the United States' during a year of study 'were carried out by right-wing' perpetrators (Morlin 2018).

Patriot movement: 2008 to present

In the 1990s, the Militia movement's reputation was damaged by its ties to organized White Supremacist groups. The resurgent Patriot movement publicly distanced itself from these associations, which may have been the result of a self-conscious shift in attitude and/or a reframing for public relations. It also prefers to traffic in the more socially acceptable Islamophobic conspiracism rather than recycled antisemitism. So while it remains an overwhelmingly White, Christian, right-wing project, today's Patriot movement can dodge accusations of White supremacy and antisemitism more easily than in the past. Current prominent Patriot movement figures who have links to organized racism are usually members of the older movement, such as Richard Mack (founder of the Constitutional Sheriffs and Peace Officers Association) and Larry Pratt (founder of the Gun Owners of America). While many of the Patriot movement's goals were consciously formulated as racist positions by the Posse Comitatus – especially the notion that county sheriffs could ignore laws they deemed to be unconstitutional – these tactics are given a different reasoning by today's activists. Nonetheless they retain the same potential effects.

The Patriot movement also uses an inside/outside political strategy. At same time that is has formed armed units and parallel governmental structures, and has encouraged

government employees to follow its reading of the U.S. Constitution, it also has made inroads into the Republican Party. Especially in the western U.S. states like Oregon, Washington, Nevada, Utah, and Idaho, some city and county officials, including county sheriffs, are movement adherents. There are also openly sympathetic elected state officials. In 2017 in Multnomah County, Oregon (which includes Portland), the Republican Party passed a resolution approving the use of Oath Keepers and Three Percenters as security (Shepherd 2017; J. Wilson 2017). In Oregon in 2016, after the Malheur occupation (detailed below), several Patriot movement candidates ran for office, although with limited success. But many activists were elected as Precinct Committee People, the lowest level position in the party. At least five Patriot movement activists and sympathizers were elected to either state party positions or as delegates to the national convention at the Oregon Republican Party's June 2016 convention. And in 2017, one of these, paramilitary leader Joseph Rice, ran for head of the state party – although he came in a distant second (Sunshine 2016, 55–56; 2017b).

Organizational clusters

The Patriot movement is very decentralized, and is divided up into different organizations and identities. For example, Armed Citizens Militias, similar to the ones in the 1990s, still exist, primarily in rural areas. In addition to the militias, core Patriot factions include the following:

- The Oath Keepers are a membership-based organization that recruits former and current members of the military, law enforcement, and first responders (although others can join as associate members). They swear they will not help implement ten unconstitutional government orders – which are mostly staple right-wing conspiracy theories about coming concentration camps and foreign invasions.
- The Three Percenters started as a decentralized paramilitary to provide an alternative to the more structured militias. Individuals can declare themselves as Three Percenters, but local and national groups exist as well. The groups draws their name from the disputed claim that only 3% of colonists fought in the American Revolution, implying that a small minority can successfully wage an armed revolutionary struggle. More recently, some Three Percenter groups have become more traditionally organized local political groups, albeit ones that are heavily armed.
- The Constitutional Sheriffs and Peace Officers Association (CSPOA) seeks to recruit county sheriffs and other law enforcement to the Patriot movement. Their founder, Richard Mack, believes that county sheriffs can decide which laws are constitutional, and therefore should be enforced.

All of these groups have members who advocate defying federal laws they think are unconstitutional, and most are armed with guns. They frequently carry lethal weapons openly at public rallies, such as knives, pistols, and long guns (including semi-automatic rifles). Patriot groups regularly find allies among Tea Party groups, the John Birch Society, Gun Owners of America, the Tenth Amendment Center, and the American Lands Council – the latter of which is funded by the fossil fuel billionaires Charles and David Koch to promote the transfer of public lands out of federal hands to encourage

exploitation by extractive industries (Taylor 2017). Across several sectors and factions is a conspiratorial shared belief about U.S. Constitutional Law referred to as Sovereign Citizen ideas, which is discussed above.

Guns and armed land use conflicts

Internally, the most important issue for the Patriot movement is an aggressive defense of unrestricted gun rights, even though the United States has some of the loosest gun ownership laws among the industrialized countries. The Three Percenters, for example, refuse to accept any new restrictions on private firearm ownership (Vanderboegh 2009). One of the early projects of the CSPOA was the publication of a list of 485 sheriffs who it claimed, 'have vowed to uphold and defend the Constitution against Obama's unconstitutional gun measures' (Constitutional Sheriffs and Peace Officers Association 2014). The first of the Oath Keepers 'Ten Orders We Will Not Obey' is: 'We will NOT obey orders to disarm the American people' (Oath Keepers, n.d. a). Despite the centrality of this issue to the movement, however, its most popular issue has been armed interventions into public lands conflicts.

The first high-profile armed land use conflict from the revived movement was in 2014 and involved Nevada cattle rancher Cliven Bundy, who was accurately described in the media as an 'anti-government activist' who lived near the aptly named town of Bunkerville, Nevada (Egan 2014). Bundy had refused to pay grazing fees on public lands, and when federal agents came to seize his cattle, hundreds of Patriot movement paramilitaries came to his ranch and engaged in an armed standoff (Sunshine 2016). The confrontation pitted heavily armed federal agents at the gates of corrals where several hundred Bundy cattle had been rounded up, against men with assault rifles on an interstate overpass and hundreds of protesters in a dry riverbed below (Egan 2014). Bundy follows a version of conspiratorial political Mormonism that is intertwined with Patriot movement beliefs, popularized by writers like W. Cleon Skousen, himself close to the John Birch Society (Sunshine 2016). Far from being marginalized, these views are aired on television and radio in the United States by popular media figures such as Glenn Beck (Lind 2010; Zatchik 2010; History News Network 2010).

The second major armed conflict started on 2 January 2016, when a small group of armed men – led by Cliven Bundy's sons Ammon and Ryan Bundy, as well as Arizona rancher LaVoy Finicum – seized the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge headquarters in Oregon (Sunshine 2016). The occupation lasted 41 days and resulted in Finicum's death. The initial issue involved two local ranchers who had received unusually stiff sentences under a terrorism act for arsons that burned federal land to aid grazing (Anti-Defamation League 2016). Soon, however, the occupiers started to demand that the federal government relinquish the refuge lands entirely. Self-proclaimed judges and courts were established at the refuge, and the armed occupiers unsuccessfully tried to convince local ranchers to renounce their federal grazing permits (Sunshine 2016).

Some early media reports from the Oregon confrontation had trouble sorting out the beliefs of the Patriots. These two armed actions by the Bundy family ended up with no direct consequences for them. The family members were acquitted by the jury in the Oregon trial. Charges were dismissed in the Bunkerville trial, when a judge found that there were flagrant government abuses of the constitutional processes (Levin 2018).

This hobbled the campaigns of environmental groups who had pressed state agencies and the federal government to prosecute land grabs and intimidation. According to Kierán Suckling, executive director of the Center for Biological Diversity, ‘it’s just a horrific outcome ... an absolute disaster. This is going to empower both the militia and the politicians who want to steal America’s public lands’ (Carney 2018; Levin 2018).

Nativism: anti-immigrant and anti-refugee activism

Today’s Patriot movement does not organize by making overt appeals to White racial purity, which is the ideological hallmark of the organized racist movement. While individual Patriot movement members have associations with organized racist groups, they are fairly small in number and not usually in leadership positions. The Patriot movement’s relationship to the organized White supremacist movement is a complicated dance. The John Birch Society presented itself as separate from organized racism, but derived many of its ideas from antisemitic conspiracy theorists, and many racist leaders (including Tom Metzger, Willis Carto, and William Pierce) got their start in the group. William Potter Gale, the founder of Posse Comitatus, was a Christian Identity minister. And this racist legacy directly continued for decades. The authors estimate that in the 1990s, perhaps a quarter of militia movement groups were involved in explicitly White supremacist politics – although sometimes these positions were challenged by other movement members.

Today most Patriot movement groups adopt a ‘colorblind’ approach and say they are not racist. The Oath Keepers bylaws specifically bar members from belonging to an openly racist group (Oath Keepers, n.d. b). But starting in February 2017, the Oath Keepers, Three Percenters, and other Patriot movement groups appeared at several rallies across the U.S. with ‘Alt-Right’ and other related political actors. These have included fascists and White Nationalists such as Identity Evropa (Europa) and the League of the South (Lyons 2017; Lyons 2018). Other rallies attended by Patriot movement groups include those opposed to the removal of Confederate memorials in the South, and the nationwide Islamophobic ‘March Against Sharia’ in June 2017. The Oath Keeper leadership denounced the organized racists involved in these events, but continued to act in concert with them through July 2017 (Sunshine 2017a). Militia groups – although notably not the Oath Keepers – also attended the violent ‘Unite the Right’ rally in Charlottesville, Virginia on 12 August 2017, where they claimed to be a neutral party. However their uniformed followers, armed with semi-automatic rifles, guarded the perimeter of the fascist-led rally and faced counter-protestors.

And while the Patriot movement tries to separate itself from organized White supremacy, it nonetheless radiates an implicit White nationalism. But since it does not verbalize it, and even goes to some lengths to deny it, what is this unspoken underlying structure? The movement directly engages in issues whose successful outcome would both support maintaining White racial demographics at current levels and stymie the redistribution of social and economic power across racial lines. The groups the Patriot movement addresses its appeals to also reflect its implicit White nationalism. For example, its appeals to farmers and ranchers are limited to farm operators – who are 96% White. But the migrant labor workforce, which obviously includes a high number of undocumented workers, is completely ignored (Sunshine 2016, 33–34).

Some of this is the logical conclusion of utilizing approaches and tactics established by White supremacists to thwart laws that ensured civil rights. Anti-immigrant organizing and Islamophobia are central issues for the Patriot movement, helping solidify its links to the mainstream Republican Party as it has shifted right on these issues under Trump. This is true even though Christian evangelicals reported many reasons for voting for Trump in 2016 (Renaud 2017; Silk 2017).

In one notorious action, the Oath Keepers sent members to Murrieta, California, in 2014, to help block buses carrying immigrants – including children – being taken to a detention center. The Patriot movement is closely linked with vigilante border patrols as well. The patrols tend to be independent groups without formal affiliations to larger organizations, but individuals are often activists in the broader Patriot movement. A number of them are Three Percenters, and several border patrol activists travelled to Oregon to take part in the Malheur occupation (Bauer 2016; Sunshine 2016, 42).

The Oath Keepers also embrace this approach. One article on their national website says that ‘many’ ‘Third World immigrants and refugees’ have ‘later proven to harbor terrorist intentions,’ and therefore allowing them entry ‘is a form of assisted national suicide.’ Migration is fueled by ‘various subversive agencies and foundations striving to “consume the host” with “seedlings”’ [i.e. the United States and immigrants, respectively]. In turn, organizations supporting immigrant rights are often said to be controlled by liberal financier George Soros (Codrea 2015). In other right-wing media, Soros often is tabbed as the leader of an international Jewish conspiracy (Cherry 2016).

Islamophobia is rampant in the Patriot movement, largely replacing the epistemological role open and coded antisemitism played in the 1990s militia movement (Sunshine 2016, 28). In 2014, Oath Keepers leader Stewart Rhodes wrote that Mexican drug cartels are taking over towns on the U.S. border, while ISIS members ‘freely’ cross into the country (Diffey 2014; see also Haas 2016). Arizona’s John Ritzheimer was a well-known Islamophobic organizer who came to Oregon as part of the Malheur occupation. In October 2015, he had organized a ‘Global Rally for Humanity’ which targeted Muslims (Neiwert 2015). Another participant at the Malheur occupation, Blaine Cooper, made a video of himself wrapping pages of the Koran in bacon and setting them on fire (Boddyxpolitic 2014). The 3% of Idaho group deployed armed members to Burns, Oregon during the Malheur occupation to gain publicity for themselves and build support for the Patriot movement. In 2015, they had held a number of public rallies in Boise and Twin Falls, Idaho opposing the potential settlement of Syrian refugees.

This activism that opposed the resettlement of refugees fleeing the civil war in Syria was a combination of two Nativist strains coming together: anti-immigration and Islamophobia (Sunshine 2016, 73–74; Sunshine et al. 2016). In contrast to the otherwise libertarian economics – but pandering to their base – some Patriot movement activists have claimed that refugees should not be allowed in the country because they argued that federal funds that supported them should go to veterans instead. Their slogan was ‘Vets Before Refugees’ (Sunshine 2016, 28).

Patriot movement activists also like to compare themselves to Civil Rights movement activists. At his trial for leading the Malheur occupation, Ammon Bundy compared his armed actions to Martin Luther King, Jr.’s protest activities (Brown 2016). Stewart Rhodes made similar claims, saying ‘Ammon Bundy’s occupation of an empty building

is essentially the same as civil-disobedience sit-ins that the political left has engaged in for decades, from anti-war and Civil Rights protesters in the 60s and 70s' (Rhodes 2016). Richard Mack claimed that during the Civil Rights movement, constitutional sheriffs could have protected Rosa Parks and that, 'Today, that constitutional sheriff does the same for Rosa Parks the gun owner, or Rosa Parks the rancher, or Rosa Parks the land-owner, or Rosa Parks the homeschooler, or Rosa Parks the tax protester' (Thompson 2016). This ignores the historic fact that local southern sheriffs were pillars of the resistance against the Civil Rights movement, and were notoriously linked to the Ku Klux Klan (Wade 1987; McVeigh 2009). Mack's argument gets even more bizarre when one takes into consideration that the idea of empowering the county sheriff to decide what laws were constitutional was originally formulated to encourage them to nullify federal Civil Rights laws.

Conclusions

A sense of unease over the future of the United States was prevalent during the 2016 presidential election. Both democratic socialist Bernie Sanders and right-wing populist Donald Trump gained large followings in comparison to the neoliberal candidates in both the Democratic and Republican parties. But, especially with his victory, Trump's immigrant bashing, rabid Islamophobia, bellicose ultra-nationalism, authoritarianism, and embrace of conspiracy theories undermined the mainstream of the Republican Party – and its base has shifted dramatically to the right (Altemeyer 2016; DiBranco and Berlet 2016). Since before the election of President Obama in 2008, right-wing media fed unverified claims to major national media outlets such as Fox News and scores of right-wing AM radio talk shows. This 'fake news' flooded the Internet and especially social media (Benkler et al. 2017; Berlet 2017b). By 2019, President Donald Trump was spreading conspiracy theories about Democrats and the Left on an almost daily basis (Murphy 2016; Helinger 2019).

Even the 'mainstream' media took notice of the messaging sophistication of the loose network called the Alternative Right. Dubbed the Alt-Right, it was described as a:

... weird mix of old-school neo-Nazis, conspiracy theorists, anti-globalists, and young right-wing internet trolls – all united in the belief that white male identity is under attack by multi-cultural, 'politically correct' forces. (*The Week* 2017)

A key figure behind Alt-Right is Steve Bannon, who was a pit bull at the rabidly right-wing Breitbart News website. Bannon became a top advisor to Republican Presidential candidate Donald Trump (J. Wilson 2017). It was later revealed that a Bannon-affiliated stealth propaganda-generating media company had been hired by the Trump campaign to surreptitiously suppress voter turnout for Democratic Presidential nominee Hillary Clinton as part of a strategy bankrolled by a snake pit of shadowy right-wing funders and Russian intelligence agencies.

This has mainstreamed the views held by the Patriot movement and created a fertile organizing climate both for it and other right-wing populists. There are multiple audiences being targeted and complex factors shaping the messaging content (Giroux 2017). The rhetoric of right-wing populism is a core component of fascism – old and new (Berlet 2005; Griffin 1991; Snyder 2017a, 2017b, 2018). This requires a new public conversation

(initiated by Snyder) concerning the relationships linking antisemitism (and other forms of demonization) to right-wing populism and neo-fascism. Demonization of an 'other' can lead to 'scripted violence' (Berlet 2014). The resulting violence is called 'Stochastic Terrorism' because the specific identities of the actual perpetrators and targets are unpredictable (Hamm and Spaaij 2017).

Patriot movement groups were active on the streets in 2017, 2018, and 2019, joining the frequently violent pro-Trump street rallies which are also attended by organized White supremacists. And although the Patriot movement's tactics are still fringe, they are also inching toward the mainstream under Trump's presidency. While not exclusively a rural phenomenon, the current right-wing populist backlash against diversity and human rights has established a strong foothold in the United States in rural areas with economies based on farming, ranching, the timber industry, and mining. In April 2017 the Farm Aid website published an article warning of another 'Looming Crisis on American Farms' (Harvie 2017). The article warned: Farmers are enduring a multiyear slump in crop and livestock prices that is pushing many to the financial brink. Since 2013, America's farmers and ranchers have weathered a 45% drop in net farm income, the largest three-year drop since the start of the Great Depression.

The strain in today's farm economy is no accident; it's the result of policies designed to enrich corporations at the expense of farmers and ranchers. If the American family farmer is to survive, farm policy needs a massive shift in direction – one that delivers fair prices to farmers that allow them to make a living. With the cascading crises of the Trump Administration, once again the plight of family farmers and rural Americans has been plowed under the media gaze.

Too often media reports of new research into the Trump phenomenon, the rise of the Right in the United States, or the relationships between right-wing populism and neofascism, promote mono-causal explanations. This is media publicity glitter and is often pegged to a new book or news report. This is distracting us from a deeper and more historically grounded and complicated analysis that can be traced back decades if not to the original founding settlers. No single individual, book, organization, or movement created the massive cluster of right-wing forces in the United States (Hardisty 1999). Explanations about Trump's election and the post-war rise of the right should consider race, gender, and class (Dibranco and Berlet 2016). White racism and anti-immigrant xenophobia were clearly the salient factors for many White Trump voters. Research after Trump's election showed that both White racial antagonisms and fears or the actual experience of economic downward mobility were both statistically significant. Christopher Parker and others established the statistical data regarding White racial antagonism in a series of studies starting with the Tea Party (Parker 2010; Parker and Barreto 2010; Parker 2013).

After Trump's election, Shannon Monnat and David Brown (2017) found that while place of residency 'mattered in the 2016 U.S. presidential election' it was clear that 'rural, suburban, or urban residence per se was not necessarily the causal factor' to consider, but rather 'the disproportionate distribution of adverse economic, health, and social conditions in some rural towns and small cities is an important key to understanding the 2016 election results.' In addition to racism and economic anxiety, antipathy toward abortion rights and the LGBTQ movements were also significant factors (Human Rights

Campaign 2016; Gayle 2018). The environment has suffered as well. Kierán Suckling, executive director of the Center for Biological Diversity, said after Trump was elected:

Donald Trump is a disaster for public lands, wildlife and climate. But America is a nation of laws, not men, and virtually all his environment-destroying policies run contrary to our nation's bedrock environmental laws. In the face of Trump's disturbing authoritarianism, the Center for Biological Diversity today redoubles its commitment to upholding the rule of law and the right of all Americans to clean air, clean water, healthy forests, rivers and deserts, and thriving wildlife. (Center for Biological Diversity 2016)

Sociologists have shown that right-wing movements tend to flourish when power and prestige are seen as being threatened in political, economic, and/or social arenas (McVeigh 2009; McVeigh, Cunningham, and Farrell 2014). Cas Mudde, a leading scholar of global right-wing populism, warns us to pay attention not just to right-wing movements in the streets, but also the attacks on human rights, civil society, and democracy from inside the federal governments. Mudde (2017) says we should

focus on all aspects of the populist radical right challenge, including from inside the political establishment, not just on the populism of the outsiders. Because under the cover of fighting off the 'populists,' the political establishment is slowly but steadily hollowing out the liberal democratic system.

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Spencer Sunshine has a PhD in sociology and studies organized racist, fascist, and antisemitic movements and organizations. He is the author of the guide *40 Ways to Fight Nazis: Forty Community-Based Actions You Can Take to Resist White Nationalist Organizing* published by Showing Up for Racial Justice (SURJ). Sunshine and Jessica Campbell (with Daniel HoSang; Steven Beda; and Chip Berlet) wrote *Up in Arms: A Guide to Oregon's Patriot Movement* published by the Rural Organizing Project and Political Research Associates, online. Sunshine is also the executive director of Action Against Fascism and Xenophobia (AAFJ). His website is at <https://spencersunshine.com/>.

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