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Left-wing radicalism in Australia: The complexities of the radical left's (non)violent struggle against fascism

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> "...the question is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists we will be. Will we be extremists for hate or for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice or for the extension of justice?"
>
> Martin Luther King Jr.

Abstract

Acknowledging the multifaceted nature and long history of radical left movements, this chapter examines contemporary far-left radicalism through one of its most central and unifying areas of political action: its struggle against fascism and far-right extremism. The escalation of street protests and violent clashes between radical left and far-right groups around the world has created a perception that radical left antifascism is merely reactive and violent. As a result, antifascism and the actions of Antifa have been associated with (criminal) gang activities or even terrorism, drawing false equivalences with far-right extremism.

This chapter presents empirical findings from two Australian studies exploring far-left mobilisation. The first draws on interviews and ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Victoria to examine radical left offline mobilisation against the rise of the far-right between 2015-2019. The second analyses content from nine Australian Antifa Facebook accounts (2019-2020) to map their use of online messaging, iconography and narratives.

Both studies found evidence that challenges public perception of radical and militant antifascist movements as inherently violent. While antifascist direct action remains an option, violence plays a limited role in their activism. The use of violence is internally debated also because of strategic concerns that it could hamper the larger mission of building a broad community movement against fascism.

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This research highlights that notwithstanding the interplay between radical left antifascism and the rise of the far-right, antifascism is not merely a reactive phenomenon but shaped by the deeper ideological convictions of anti-capitalism, anti-imperialism and the pursuit of a working class-led democracy.

Introduction

Throughout its long history the far-left has never existed as a coherent movement or ideology with a singular political vision, or agreement on the aims or strategies to be used for its attainment. This unbounded and diverse character is as true today as it was in the past. Indeed, there remains a lack of clarity around the key characteristics of the far-left, as well as the precise point at which leftist movements can rightly be termed either "radical" or "extremist". Scholars have been unable to reach consensus on how to define far-left political movements or left-wing extremism and radicalism, with the very attempt being described as a "potential terminological minefield" (March & Mudde, 2005, p. 24).

The wide array of terminology used reflects this conceptual confusion. An incomplete list of terms adopted over the past 70 years or so includes the "far-left", the "radical left", the "extreme left", the "sectarian left", the "authoritarian left", and "left-wing authoritarianism" (Peucker, 2020). This is not to mention descriptions such as Marxist, communist, anarchist or Maoist, referring to the political philosophies of far-left movements, groups and individuals. Terms such as "antifascism" have gained currency to describe notable and highly visible militant and activist movements, themselves sometimes identifying with broad international collectives or brands such as Antifa[2] or the Black Bloc (Dupuis-Déri, 2010; Copsey, 2018). Opposition to fascism has been a central ideological marker of most, if not all, far-left groups since the 1920s. Recently, however, militant antifascism has become a conceptual lens through which a significant portion of the far-left self-identifies.

With a history spanning the globe and reaching back to at least the late 19th century, it is hardly surprising that the core values of the radical left have been diverse, shifting and unsuitable as a platform upon which to build any robust or inclusive definition. As this chapter illustrates, to attempt to define the far-left today in any monolithic or static manner is to do injustice to its ideological diversity, as well as the flexibility and situational contingency of its expressions. For the purpose of this chapter, however, we propose the following heuristic definition: the common denominator of the far-left is their pursuit of a radical version of anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist egalitarianism (March & Mudde 2005; Visser et al., 2014; McCoy, Jones & Hastings, 2019).[3]

This chapter presents empirical findings from two Australian studies on far-left mobilisation. Both studies focus in particular on radical left opposition to fascism and racism, which has been a central area of activity for radical left groups around the world for almost a century. The first study draws on interviews and ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Victoria to examine radical left offline mobilisation against the rise of the far-right through the second half of the 2010s. The second study analyses content from nine Australian Antifa Facebook accounts between 2019 and 2020 to map their online messaging, use of iconography and narratives.

Public, and to some extent academic, debates around antifascism within far-left movements have been dominated by two interconnected claims, which we discuss in order to contextualise the presentation of our research findings in the second part of this chapter. The

[2] Antifa is a constriction of the term "anti-fascism", and refers to an international left-wing, anti-racist, and anti-fascist movement comprised of a decentralised collection of autonomous groups. While diverse, its members share a common commitment to stopping fascism through direct action rather than through a political process.

[3] We do not include single-issue movements such as environmentalist or animal protection movement although the people involved in these are predominantly left-leaning and some radical left groups may support these movements.

first is the portrayal of the antifascist struggle as a fundamentally *reactive* form of political activism. The second is the allegation that this form of antifascism is inherently *violent* and physically confrontational, which has led some policymakers to label antifascist groups as street gangs (allegedly void of any ideological agendas) or domestic terrorist (allegedly driven by an extreme ideology) (United States White House, 2021).

Reactive antifascism?

While much research on the radical left in Australia and elsewhere is historically-focused, revealing a complex interplay between leftist radical and extremist movements and left-wing politics through the 20th century and beyond, contemporary debates have often been dominated by a concern with militant and at times violent antifascist movements. These became increasingly active and visible in the 2000s (Dupuis-Déri, 2010), and more so after 2015. Such a narrow focus on contemporary and highly visible forms of antifascism has resulted in framing the radical left as a fundamentally reactive phenomenon emerging purely in response to the growth of far-right politics and extremism. In effect, this preoccupation with confrontational antifascism as a reactive outgrowth from right-wing extremism not only suggests an artificial equivalence between the two, it also obscures the wider ideological diversity and aims of radical left antifascism. More broadly, it ignores the diversity of the contemporary radical leftist *milieu* and cuts it off from the deep historical continuum of leftist activism from which it draws its sense of history, identity and mission.

It is difficult to appreciate the diversity of the contemporary radical left without first situating it within its historical context. Members usually consider themselves to represent a direct continuation of international revolutionary leftist political movements spanning the past century or longer (Vysotsky, 2020; Guerin 2020, p. 23). The 20th century provides a kaleidoscope of differing, and at times antagonistic, strands of leftist political thought, activism, and revolutionary fervour that provide the ideological and cultural foundation and inspiration for the contemporary radical left milieu. These include various strands of Marxism and socialism, the most influential being the Leninist, Trotskyist, and communist doctrines, as well as Chinese Maoist thought (Thompson, 1996). In some contradiction to these is the tradition of anarchism and its offshoots, deriving from late 19th century Europe and the works of Russian thinker Mikhail Bakunin (Anderson & O'Gorman, 2005).

Although socialist and anarchist activists are capable of collaborating on unifying causes such as antifascism, the ideological differences between them, specifically their differing visions of political philosophy and its implementation, makes it impossible to reduce the radical left to a single unifying ideology. What (revolutionary) socialist or anarchist radical-left and antifascist movements do often have in common, is their dedication to framing the source of contemporary social injustice and fascism as the international capitalist political economy and a commitment to its removal, possibly through direct action and (eventual) revolution.

Recent research on Antifa and the wider far-left antifascism movement have revealed it to be more than simply a "quintessential reactive phenomenon" (Copsey, 2016, p. 158), focused only on confronting and eradicating fascism (Arlow, 2020; Vysotsky, 2015; Bray, 2017). Antifascism encompasses a broader and more ambitious series of goals drawn from a deeper set of ideological currents. At times, these ideological perspectives can be contradictory. Vysotsky (2020) argued that in the USA, Antifa, while anarchist in orientation, attracts individuals from across the radical left, including socialists, communists and Marxists, as well as those advocating a range of environmental, pro-working class, and social justice causes. The fluid nature of Antifa's organisation and the need to build broad coalitions across the ideological spectrum of leftist politics to meet the immediate challenge of the far-right makes it an ideologically diverse movement.

Rather than reducing anti-fascism to a purely reactive movement, it may be more appropriate to understand it as a platform that has come to bridge a range of sectarian divisions from

across the radical left in response to a looming single-issue crisis, similar to the way in which the Vietnam War and conscription temporarily unified the Australian radical left 50 years earlier (Marks, 2019). In this case, however, the crisis is the perceived global rise of far-right extremism and fascist-like authoritarian government (Vystosky, 2020), which is regarded as being inherently linked to the capitalist system.

As noted by Arlow (2020) in his study of Antifa in Ireland, where the far-right threat is less significant compared to other countries, Antifa nonetheless provides a space for the broad convergence and unity of radical factions that transcends the notoriously fragmented ideological landscape of leftist activism. This convergence is more than simply a pragmatic alliance of convenience but reflects a common culture and history of left-wing struggle. This situation of antifascist movements within a deep tradition and shared cultural history is emphasised by Vysotsky (2020) and Bray (2017). Vysotsky (2020) is at pains to emphasise Antifa as simultaneously a social movement, a subculture, and a militant antifascist organisation. Bray (2017, p. xiv) argues that antifascism as a counter-movement is best understood as "a method of politics, a locus of individual and group self-identification, and a transnational movement that adapted pre-existing socialist, anarchist and communist currents to a sudden need to react to the fascist menace".

The role of violence

One central aspect of the divergent operational strategies adopted by the multifaceted radical and extreme left revolves around the use of violence by segments such as Antifa or the Black Bloc (Dupuis-Déri, 2010). The notions of "direct action" (Vysotsky, 2015, p. 238) and "diversity of tactics" (Dupuis-Déri, 2010, p. 63; Vysotsky, 2020, pp. 92-96), which includes the option of violence, are central to this question. The use of violence is one tactical option available to radical leftist antifascist movements, but one that is rarely used, certainly in contemporary Australia.

This has not prevented public commentary, as well as some academic analyses, from focusing on the radical left's use of violence. Indeed, since the mid-20th century conservative elements in the Australian press have emphasised the anarchy, chaos and violence of leftist movements and protests (Marks, 2019). More recently, media commentary on antifascist movements (such as Antifa) have regularly reduced the complexity of the radical left to violent "thugs", "gangs" and even "terrorists" (Pyrooz & Densley, 2018), often suggesting an equivalence between them and the militant far-right.

This stands in contrast to much more nuanced findings of emerging empirical work undertaken within far-left *milieus*. Although the scholarship on contemporary left-wing extremism or radicalism is still underdeveloped, there is evidence that suggests a reductionist analysis through the lens of violence ignores the multifaceted nature of these movements' *modus operandi*, their ideological rationales (Copsey, 2018), and personal and systemic motivational drivers (Dupuis-Déri, 2010; Juris, 2005; Vysotsky, 2015; Bray, 2017).

Such diversity of opinion on the appropriateness of using violence has long been expressed among Australia's radical left. In the 1960s and 1970s, for example, Australia did not experience episodes of mass state violence against protesters as occurred in the United States or Western Europe (Marks, 2019), and violence from the radical left was also minimal (Campion, 2020). By the late 1980s and 1990s violence was adopted as part of a tactic by antiracism groups in Victoria. Fox (2019) recounts how seminal experiences of the successful confrontation of fascist groups in Melbourne solidified a commitment to direct action among the activist left. Violence crystallised a theoretical commitment to the historical struggle against fascism into a direct and empowering praxis. Yet, even as groups such as the Melbourne-based Campaign Against Nazis (CAN) developed a militant strategy to confront fascism, any commitment to violent action was complex, ambiguous and debated. Over time, CAN rejected

violent confrontation and shifted its strategy to non-violent tactics such as deplatforming (the attempt to boycott a person and their views through blocking their access to public spaces). According to one of its 1997 broadsheet articles, ‘‘CAN does not believe in the use of terrorist style tactics against [neo-Nazi group] National Action. NA are a political problem that requires a political solution” (Fox, 2019, p. 237).

Overall, Australian antifascist groups have used militant tactics such as direct confrontation during protests and “squadding” (the patrolling of streets and targeted attacking of those deemed “fascists”). However, they have done so in a limited, often situational manner, and not without reservations. As shown in the case studies below, violence is not considered to be effective in the long-term, being counter to the need to build a broader community-based movement that can attract and unite disparate left-leaning groups willing to stand up against racism and injustice. Violent tactics are generally neither categorically condemned nor advocated but wielded strategically and situationally. The result is that violent tactics may be used in different ways and at differing times, depending on specific local circumstances.

One of the limitations of much public discourse and academic analysis of the radical and extreme left has been its approach through the lens of terrorism or violent extremism studies (Geifman, 2013; Allington et al., 2019; for a critical perspective Conway et al., 2018; LaFree, 2018). Survey-based research in Europe has revealed a connection between those who identify as “very left-wing” and a support for violent protest and violence against anti-democratic groups (Allington et al., 2019). However, a reductive focus on abstract support for violence obscures a wider agenda and relatively limited and situational use of violence. Certainly, a historical perspective on the extreme left through the late 19th and 20th centuries provides numerous examples of anarchist and Marxist inspired terror groups (Malkki, 2018). According to David Rapoport’s influential wave theory of the evolution of terrorism, the first three waves, “anarchist”, “anti-colonialist”, and “new-left”, were all fundamentally left-wing in orientation; this only changing with the introduction of a proposed “religious” wave in 1979 (Rapoport, 1999). Today, however, radical and extreme left-wing movements in the West do not seem to engage in terrorist activity, despite the rhetoric of political leaders such as former US President Donald Trump (United States White House, 2021), and their use of violence is, as we have seen, contested.

Case studies

Below we discuss initial findings from two current research projects. The first examines radical left offline mobilisation against the rise of Australia’s far-right and their attempt to dominate public spaces in the second half of the 2010s. The second study focuses on the online messaging of nine Australian Antifa groups on Facebook and their strategic use of international iconography and narratives to fit local contexts.

Study 1: The offline struggle of the radical left against the far-right

The findings discussed here are part of a larger research project examining the dynamic interplay between radical left and far-right groups and movements in Australia. It was conducted between 2019 and 2021 by Victoria University in partnership with the Institute for Strategic Dialogue as part of their involvement with the international think tank consortium Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies. The following section draws on extensive ethnographic fieldwork within radical left *milieus* in Australia and a series of informal and three formal in-depth interviews with activists who consider themselves Socialists and/or Marxists. It discusses radical left antifascist offline activism between 2015 and 2019 in the state of Victoria.

Over the past century, the radical left in Australia has encompassed a range of diverse grass-roots movements, mobilisation agendas, groups, and political parties. Next to indigenous rights, anti-nuclear power, women's and queer emancipation, to name a few (Piccini, Smith & Worley, 2018), antifascism has remained a continuous sphere of action for the radical left since the 1920s (Cresciani, 1980). The first two decades of the 2000s, especially since the mid-2010s, saw the re-emergence of overt far-right movements in Australia, initially through anti-Islam movements such as Reclaim Australia, but quickly spreading to White supremacist and neo-Nazi groups such as Antipodean Resistance (Peucker & Smith, 2019). With it came a corresponding growth in antifascist action (Fox, 2019).

In the following we provide an overview of how the radical left responded to this rise of the far-right between 2015 and 2019, a time when physical confrontations occurred frequently, especially in the context of street protests.

There is consensus among academics (Dean et al., 2016; Peucker & Smith, 2019), most public commentators, and intelligence agencies (ASIO, 2020) about the rise of Australia's far-right since the mid-2010s. These groups have sought public visibility on and offline, holding street protests across the country. The state of Victoria alone saw almost two dozen such events between April 2015 and January 2019, organised by far-right groups agitating against Islam, refugees, alleged "African crimes", "men's rights" or simply their exclusivist version of an (ethno)nationalist Australia (Peucker et al., 2020).

With organisational structures already well established, the radical left responded in 2015 by organising counter-protests and opposing the far-right more broadly. A central feature of this left-wing countermovement was the emergence of new local antiracism and antifascism networks, such as #No Room for Racism and the Campaign against Racism and Fascism (CARF). These newly established networks and coalitions have strong ideological and personal links with socialist and other radical left groups, differentiating them from other antiracist organisations.

CARF, which soon became the main actor within this counter-movement in Victoria, claimed they held 20 counter-protests against the far-right between 2015 and 2019 (*CARF event August 2020*). In most cases, civil society or community groups not linked to radical left ideologies were less involved or at least less visible during these counter-protests. Thus, the public image of these reactive antifascist mobilisations, which mostly outnumbered their far-right opponents, were dominated by antifascist, socialist placards, slogans and, as one socialist activist proudly stated, "rowdy, confrontational tactics" (*activist #3, August 2020*).

The rise of the far-right and their street rallies mobilised the radical left and provided them with a sense of urgency. One activist maintained that the different groups involved in the first counter-protest in April 2015 ‘‘came together and said we really need a serious and ongoing opposition to this kind of [fascist] ideology and the political environment" (*activist #3, participant observation, online, 11 August 2020*). This marked the beginning of a new phase in the evolution of Australia's radical left, with countering fascism moving into the centre of their agenda for years to come.

According to our interviews and ethnographic fieldwork, there have been ongoing internal debates about the form this opposition should take, with answers shifting over time. One basic tenet everyone in the antifascist radical left seems to agree with was: Do not *debate* the far right or try to win over individuals who subscribe to far-right ideologies. "The project of the left, and of antifascism more generally, is not to engage with the ideas of them [on the far-right] as though they are logical […] Sitting down with them and discussing ideas is a really bad approach" (*activist #6, participant observation, online, 20 September 2020*). During a CARF meeting, one activist emphasised the approach of publicly confronting, disrupting and exposing the far-right as fascists: "We want to isolate fascists and not convince them to be non-fascist. Challenging their access to public space, demoralising them psychologically" (*activist #1; participant observation, Melbourne 11 August 2019*). This echoes the aim of CARF, as outlined in their *Welcome to CARF* brochure, "to directly confront [the far-right] in the street and prevent them from controlling public spaces" (CARF, n.d.). It also resonates with international research on antifascist movements that describe their direct actions as a

response to the political, physical and spatial threat presented by the far-right (Vysotsky, 2020, pp. 134-141).

While there seemed little disagreement about the physically confrontational nature of their antifascist actions, activists highlighted ongoing internal debates about the use of explicitly violent tactics. As one female activist (*activist #6, participant observation, online, 20 September 2020*) stated: "some think we just have to find fascists out there and beat them up. Violence is the only language they understand – the brutal fist of the antifascist fighter […] I see the appeal of that, but that is only part of the answer."

What is more important than situational confrontation, she argued, is to "broaden out the movement" by "finding allies in different movements including trade unions and among everyday working-class people" (#6). She, like others, pointed to the successful tactics of the Anti-Nazi League in the late 1970s and early 80s in Britain. In their view, this antifascist and socialist group was "not afraid to be confrontational". More importantly, however, the group allegedly managed to establish a broad left-wing working-class mass movement, "exposing the radical right", whilst "trying to implement *being antifascis*t as part of a left-wing consciousness" (activist #7, *participant observation, online, 20* September 2020).

The key element of the radical left strategy against the far-right is not violent confrontation but to "build the forces of antifascism of the left, of progressive movements, of antiracist movements, of anti-capitalist movements. which give some indication about how society can fundamentally be transformed for the better" (#7). This resonates with Copsey and Merrill (2020, pp. 129-130) who found in their research on militant Antifa in the US, where a representative of Portland's Rose City Antifa highlighted the importance of having "community support" and building and maintaining positive relationships with other groups beyond militant antifascism.

According to another long-standing antifascist activist (*activist #8, participant observation, online, 20 August 2020*), there had been internal debates early on within the antifascist movement in Melbourne about the role of squadism, often associated with militant Black Bloc tactics (Dupuis-Déri, 2010). He described "squadism" as the action of small antifascist activist groups who "organise secretly, wear masks and go and punch a fash [fascist] […] find them in pubs and bash them". He, like others in the group, was critical of these tactics, and he extended his criticism to the initiation of violence by individual antifascists during standoffs with the far-right or police in the streets. He mentioned two reasons for this.

The first resonates with the prefigurative politics of socialist movements, which, in the case of the radical left, pursue a radically democratic political system (Vysotsky, 2015). "It's very un-democratic, you know, out of a large group of [antifascist protesters] one throws a brick at a cop and everyone gets pepper-sprayed […] they had no say and were used as a cover for the little adventure [of that one person]" (#8). Similarly, Copsey and Merrill (2020, p. 129) in their study on Antifa in Portland, USA, argue that their "internal culture of horizontal consensus gives space for the expression of a variety of concerns, but it also means that no single individual can dictate tactical decisions".

The second reason is that squadism "runs counter to the idea of building a mass movement" (#8). Another activist (#3; *participant observation, online, 20 August 2020*) emphasised that they work towards a grassroots movement with "mass involvement" across "broad layers of society", rejecting "state-based solutions to the threat of the far-right", such as police or government intervention. This criticism towards government and police intervention was expressed frequently during meetings, typically in conjunction with accusations of police violence and government complicity in the allegedly increasing threat of fascism.

According to our fieldwork, violent tactics are generally viewed with skepticism. When they do occur, they tend to be situational and rationalised as a form of self-defence against a fascist threat (Copsey & Merrill, 2020, p. 127; Vysotsky, 2015, p. 249). Militant direct actions are neither categorically rejected nor generally endorsed. They are subject to ongoing internal debates, with shifts depending on context. Pointing to the dynamic interplay between movement-countermovement actions (Busher & Macklin, 2015), our findings demonstrate that

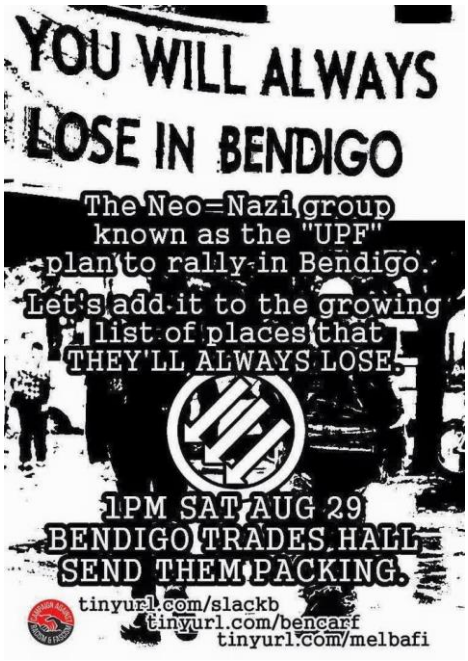
during times when far-right groups showed little constraint in their performance of physical violence on the streets, antifascist counter-protesters were prepared to act more physically. One antifascist activist (#1; *participant observation, Melbourne, 11 August 2019*) stated, "we fight when necessary, we are not pacifist".

However, despite this endorsement of *situational* reactive militancy in segments of the radical left, a consensus prevails among those involved in our fieldwork on the problematic optics and lack of long-term effectiveness of violence. This argument has been extended to wearing face masks at protests. "CARF does not condemn, but we also don't promote these tactics", as the CARF *welcome brochure* states: "Not wearing a mask or using bloc tactics is part of having an open, outward-looking orientation that attracts everyone who has anti-racist/-fascist ideas, not just hardened experienced activists" (CARF, n.d.).

While antifascist counter-protests against far-right mobilisation in the streets continued to be dominated by radical left groups, the composition of these counter-protests shifted between 2015 and early 2019, when the far-right held their (at the time of writing) last large public protest. Parallel to these changes, the level of physical escalation diminished.

Initially, especially in 2015 and 2016, there was a significant and visible presence of Antifa and some "Black Bloc type of people" at these counter-events, and public flyers to promote antifascist counter-rallies contained Antifa iconography such as the three arrows or the black-and-red flag next to CARF's logo (Image 1). Such Antifa symbols did not feature on later counterprotest posters, although this is not to say that Antifa was not in attendance. Several CARF activists confirmed that people who identify as Antifa used to be more present at CARF but their engagement diminished significantly in 2016 *(activist #2, interview, Melbourne, 18 November 2020*) as CARF expressed unease with Antifa actions and optics at protests.

Image 1: Antifascist counter-protests flyers in 2015/16 (CARF and Antifa)



Source: CARF Facebook account

The nature of the counter-rally in St. Kilda in 2019 was different. Physical clashes were less violent, and the group of counter-protesters was more diverse, including a significant proportion of other left-leaning, progressive individuals ("liberal antifascists") and groups (e.g., The Greens). Initially, the counter-protest at a public park resembled a large public picnic. This offered a glimpse of what a broader mobilisation against the far-right might look like.

This St. Kilda counter-protest, however, shed light on the inherent tensions within radical left movements in Australia seeking to build a mass movement that is opposed to fascism but also

radical in its anti-capitalist stance. What Antifa, CARF and other socialist or anarchist antifascist movements in Australia have in common is their ideological dedication to system change; to "smash" the capitalist system. However, many of the more mainstream protesters against far-right mobilisation may disagree with this explicitly revolutionary agenda.

The struggle against the far-right is linked to this anti-capitalist agenda in two intertwined ways. First, most antifascist activists seem closely affiliated with socialist groups and political parties. "Everyone involved in CARF, as far as I know, is also anti-capitalist", one activist stated during a meeting (*activist #8, participant observation, online, 20 August 2020*). Hence, the struggle against the far-right is underpinned by individuals' anti-capitalist worldviews. Second, capitalism is seen as a core element of the "political economy" (*antifascist meeting, 10 August 2020*) that allegedly emboldens or produces the far-right and facilitates the rise of fascism (Guerin et al., 2020). While stopping short of equating capitalism with fascism, both are described as "inseparable." As long as we live in a capitalist system, we will have to fight fascism", one activist (#8) asserted, describing capitalism as a system that "brings into existence fascism." As a consequence, there was broad agreement that fighting the far-right is part of "a much more general struggle for a complete overthrow of the capitalist system" (*activist #4, participant observation, online, 20 August 2020*). This is illustrated by the following assertion of a socialist activist:

> For us today the challenge is to build a socialist movement with people ready to engage in direct confrontation but, more generally, able to build a current for an argument for a different kind of world. We can't just be reactive, but also need to be able to make an argument about how we can have a fundamentally different kind of society (activist *#6*, *participant observation, online, 20 September 2020*).

For almost half a decade the radical left activists in our fieldwork had been focused on primarily reactive tactics of confrontation to the far-right. Since 2019, however, public far-right mobilisation has significantly diminished, and so have antifascist counter-protests. This allowed many radical left groups to redirect the focus of their anti-fascist commitment seeking to "upskill and grow the movement" (*CARF meeting, August 2020*), supporting other progressive movements (such as refugee rights and environment action), and confronting the far-right online.

Study 2: Australian Antifa online

For this study a qualitative thematic analysis of Australian Antifa accounts on Facebook was conducted in 2020. Acknowledging that there is no unanimously agreed conceptualisation of Antifa, we use the term Antifa to refer to what Vysotsky (2020, p. 51) called "formal" antifascist groups, or "affinity groups operating to achieve the goal of opposing fascist mobilisation". Formal antifascism refers to a political movement similar to what Bray (2017) and Testa (2015) call "militant" antifascism, which they distinguish from liberal antifascism. According to Testa (2015, p. 4), liberal antifascism is a label used for those prepared to work with government and police to oppose fascism and far-right mobilisation, while militant antifascists reject such collaboration. Thus, the term "militant" does not necessarily imply the endorsement or use of violence

The aim of this study was to identify dominant themes and narratives used on Australian-based Antifa Facebook accounts and to explore what role global and local issues play in their mobilisation in the Australian context. The analysis paid particular attention also to the iconography and symbols used by Australian Antifa groups online. The Australian sample was drawn from Facebook, the most commonly used social media platform for Antifa in the country (in contrast to Antifa groups in the US and UK that commonly use Twitter).

The content from nine Australian Facebook accounts was manually captured for the period between February and June 2019 and the corresponding period in 2020. The accounts were selected according to their use of traditional icons associated with Antifa such as the two flags (usually black and red: black representing anarchism, red representing socialism) or the inclusion of Antifa and/or antifascist descriptions in their profiles. Accounts were required to

be based in Australia, post in English and be publicly accessible without privacy restrictions. The selected accounts relate to groups from five different Australian states: Tasmania, New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland, and South Australia. These accounts range in age and activity, with some being recently created within the last two years, while others had been active for over a decade.

The names of the selected accounts included the city, state or region where the group is based, with "Antifa Australia" the only nationwide account. Seven of the accounts adopted either "Anti-fascist Action" or "*Antifaschistische Aktion*" in the profile imagery drawing a direct historical link either to pre-war Germany, where *Antifaschistische Aktion* was launched to unite socialist and communist militants to defend working class communities (Testa, 2015), or to Anti-Fascist Action, which operated across the UK throughout the 1990s. This use of labels connected historical struggles with the contemporary actions of groups, situating the accounts as part of a long-standing global antifascist tradition.

In a similar manner to Antifa accounts in the US (Vysotsky, 2020), Australian Antifa groups adopted Antifa icons and symbols to illustrate their political beliefs and situate them within their specific local context. Seven of the nine accounts used a variation of the two overlapping flags of Antifa in their profile pictures, while the remaining two maintained the consistent visual styling of red-and-black imagery enclosed by a black circle (Image 2). The choice of symbols placed within these circles was innovative, with flags being replaced with red-and-black computers in one case, and the image of a guillotine in the other.

Image 2: Selected profile logos of Australian-based Antifa Facebook accounts

Source: Facebook (Antifa Australia, Anti-Fascist Action Melbourne, Antifaschistische Aktion Tasmania; Anti-Fascist Action Albury/Wodonga)

This choice of logo reflects key themes associated with different Antifa groups. Computers, for example, align with the goals of the local group to "inform the public about fascism" (Antifascism Tasmania), highlighting the important role of online activism and identifying far-right members online in a region where street protests have been extremely rare. The Antifascist Action Albury/Wodonga's adoption of the guillotine symbol, associated with the French Revolution, reflects the group's particular focus on opposing government.

Victorian-based "Melbourne Antifascist Info" adopted the traditional two overlapping flags as their profile image but replaced the traditional red-and-black flags with the blue Eureka flag. The Eureka flag has its origin in the 1854 Eureka Rebellion against British colonial authority in the Victorian gold-mining town of Ballarat, and is associated with the Australian union movement, and traditions of resistance, democracy and protest (as well as, ironically, being adopted by some far-right nationalist groups). The use of the Eureka flag in the context of Melbourne Antifascist Info resonates not only with its geographic base in Victoria but also with the group's advocacy for workers' rights, strong unions and a united working class.

In addition to the traditional two flags icon, Antifa Australia adopted a laurel wreath and gears representing both a working-class orientation as well as a subcultural leaning (Vysotsky, 2020, p. 114). Geographic adaptations can be seen with the Queensland-based "Antifascist Gold Coast Crew" which used iconic representations of the Gold Coast, the beach, waves and buildings in combination with the two flags, the Iron Front (three parallel arrows) and laurel. Overall, Australian Antifa iconography is adaptive, drawing on Australian national themes, an international history going back to pre-war foundations, and local visual symbols and popular

imagery. In this way it serves to mark diverse ideologies, groups and spaces as antifascist (Vysotsky, 2020, p. 115).

A qualitative thematic analysis of account content, including textual content from posts and comments as well as imagery and videos, was performed to identify key narratives. A total of 1,625 posts were examined, with 1,211 posts from 2019 (February and June) and 414 posts from the corresponding five-month period in 2020. Significant global events occurring during these times impacted the themes present. In March 2019, to name a particularly significant event, an Australian committed a right-wing terrorist attack on two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, killing 51 people. In 2020, the coronavirus pandemic impacted the globe, and in late May the popular Black Lives Matter (BLM) protest movement spread from the US to Australia and beyond.

Three *a priori* themes were used in the thematic coding, drawing from a review of pertinent literature: the far-right, opposition to government, and opposition to police. These themes were expanded through the adoption of a grounded theory approach which identified themes within the data in an iterative way. This content analysis identified four dominant themes occurring across all accounts as well as secondary themes present on only some accounts.

The dominant themes aligned with topics identified in wider research, but with the one Australia-specific addition of Indigenous rights. The four dominant themes were:

1. concerns with the far-right,
2. opposition to government
3. Indigenous rights, and
4. opposition to police.

Concerns with the far-right emerged as the dominant focus in the posts (20% of all posts), including posts related to specific far-right individuals and groups in Australia and internationally. A focus on the actions of far-right individuals, including posting about their associations and/or arrests, was described as a form of digital activism. Terms such as “coward”, “germ”, “scum”, and “thugs” were used to describe key individuals, while the emerging threat within countries such as the US, Bulgaria and the Ukraine reinforced the international threat posed by the far-right.

Opposition to the government (11% of posts) and specific Australian political figures was prominent. Many posts referred to politicians such as cabinet minister Peter Dutton or Senator Pauline Hanson and Fraser Anning as representing a political system complicit in wider systemic injustice and oppression. Posts relating to One Nation and Clive Palmer’s Australia First Party often highlighted the allegedly racist nature of these parties. Opposition to, and direct action against, the political establishment was demonstrated in posts showing campaign flyers being burnt and signs being vandalised, rather than specific calls for violence or threats.

In the context of Indigenous rights (9% of posts), grievance narratives relating to Australia’s history of colonialism and imperialism as well as alleged police oppression were common. Images and memes celebrating the killing of Captain Cook, rather than Valentine’s Day, on 14 February were common, as was the sharing of images of graffitied colonialist monuments.

Opposition to police (7% of posts) was expressed frequently and was often raised in the context of the mistreatment of Indigenous individuals and communities. For example, Australian BLM protests focusing on Indigenous deaths in custody and the police removal of traditional custodians from their lands were common. These posts were linked to structural issues of systemic racism and the ongoing effects of colonialism.

In 2020, the coronavirus pandemic had a significant influence on the posting activities of Antifa groups. The qualitative analysis demonstrated that posts referring to the pandemic were commonly linked to opposition to the government and police (e.g., power overreach), anti-capitalism, solidarity with working class people (who were particularly affected by the pandemic) and the existence of structural racism within Australia. In this way, the pandemic

was used to emphasise existing ideological narratives rather than prompting the discussion of new issues.

In addition, the content analysis identified several secondary themes that occurred frequently across many but not all accounts and were often connected to the above-mentioned four dominant themes. These included highlighting the power of community organizing, support for refugee and immigration rights, and the importance of a strong and united working class. The power of community organizing was frequently illustrated through images of peaceful protest, people gathered with banners and signs often expressing solidarity with local and international issues. This was also shown through the concept and practice of mutual care and support of others within the community. Support for refugee and immigration rights was often shown by highlighting the mistreatment of refugees in offshore detention centres or the frequent mental health issues experienced during long periods in detention.

The importance of a strong and united working class to defend worker's rights was emphasised. While images depicted people at protests or pickets with banners and flags, these were often representative of Unions, and individuals within the image were often shown with a raised clenched fist. The frequent mobilisation around these issues demonstrates that Antifa in Australia is driven by a deeper ideological agenda beyond only its opposition to fascism, government, and police.

Of note was the importance placed on community organising and protest to bring about social change towards the creation of more self-reliant communities. This was illustrated by the following 2019 post from Antifa Australia: "Dangerous conservative extremists threaten innocent people. Defend our community from violence-minded conservatives. Defeat the bigoted hate groups through people's protests and organizing." This approach challenges the conceptualisation of Antifa as violent and merely reactive. Indeed, there was a marked lack of explicitly violent narratives found across the data.

Sharing videos and images is an important element of the posting activities of a number of Australian Antifa groups. Many regularly posted visual content related to antifascist actions in public spaces, such as graffitiing. In general, graffiti is used as a form of political communication to convey identity, political messages and allegiances. In public spaces this form of messaging often serves as a territorial marker and a declaration of presence and control by a certain group in the area (Matusitz, 2015, p. 120). Posting images of graffiti online appears to be aimed at promoting these offline activities and extending their reach to a wider audience. It not only visually demonstrates the offline activism and presence of Antifa groups but also underscores the connectedness and solidarity between Antifa movements across the globe. This is particularly the case when images of antifascist graffiti from other countries are shared locally, as illustrated by a post that depicts antifascist graffiti on the side of a building in Germany. Translated into English, the spray-painted message on the side of the building states: "Antifa is not a gang or a youth culture but an abbreviation of antifascism."

Posting images of antifascist icons and phrases in public spaces was also a common way to deliver a political message. In the dataset this included anti-police and anti-government narratives, for instance, acronyms and numeric symbols such as "ACAB" and "1312" for coded representations of the phrase "all cops are bastards", and the phrase "no gods no masters no prime ministers" (Finklestein et al., 2020).

Australian Antifa groups also incorporate significant local and global events into visual imagery. Following the Christchurch terrorist attack, for example, murals dedicated to victims of the attack were posted online as expressions of solidarity. Another example is the sharing of images of graffiti and memes celebrating the actions of Will Connolly or "egg boy", who became a local and international symbol of resistance following his "egging" of far-right politician Fraser Anning. Similarly, images of milkshakes emerged, and were shared widely following a publicised incident in the UK where a milkshake was thrown at a prominent far-right figure. These events, which illustrate the symbolic nature of physical confrontation, were incorporated into offline tactics and shared through online messaging, becoming symbols of direct action and resistance to the far-right (Image 3).

Image 3: Online posts of offline Antifa graffiti

Source: Adelaide antifascist memes and news; Antifascist Gold Coast Crew; Northern Suburbs Antifascists

Overall, Australian Antifa groups, whilst demonstrating their specific local identity, situate themselves within the global antifascist movement and adopt the common icons, symbols and themes of antifascist mobilisation worldwide. These include an opposition to fascism and the far-right, to the government and police, as well as advocacy for minority groups. Explicit calls for violence were absent in the data set, which resonates with other recent studies on Australia's far-left online (Guerin et al., 2020; Peucker & Davey, 2020), as well as US Antifa's "rhetorical restraint" (Copsey and Merrill, 2020). This assessment contrasts with the widespread association of Antifa and their "direct action" with violence (Pyrooz & Densley, 2018), an association that is academically and empirically contested.

Conclusion

While the scholarship on contemporary anti-globalist, environmentalist, animal rights and other left-leaning, progressive movements has become more extensive (Peucker, 2020), empirical research on the antifascist radical left is still emerging. The two studies presented in this chapter, both part of larger projects, contribute to this scholarly endeavour in the Australian context. Findings are preliminary but point to two central insights.

First, the public perception of the radical left, and in particular militant antifascist movements, as inherently violent – either by labelling them criminal gangs (Pyrooz & Densley, 2018) or associating them with terrorism – is misplaced. While antifascist militant direct action remains a behavioural option in Australia, violence plays a very limited role in the contemporary radical left. The use of physical violence against the far-right in public spaces is internally debated and highly context-specific. When it occurs, it is generally regarded as a form of reactive defence against a fascist threat. While security agencies have considered far-right extremism in Australia to be an increasing security problem, its presence in public spaces has diminished since 2019. Accordingly, there is little evidence for militant direct action, defensive or otherwise, by Australia's far-left, although the situation in other countries such as the US may be different.

Another reason why militancy is discouraged within Australia's contemporary radical left is related to the optics of violent actions, which are considered counterproductive for their larger mission of building a broad community movement against fascism and capitalism. This community building and organising aspect was highlighted in both studies and is often overlooked in public debates.

These findings are linked to the second main conclusion of our studies, challenging the characterisation of far-left (militant) antifascism as being merely reactive. Most of those actively engaged in the far-left's antifascist struggle have a broader vision of how society should look. The convictions of anti-capitalism, anti-imperialism and a working class-led democracy are obvious among those who come from socialist and Marxist backgrounds, but they also apply to anarchist elements and to Antifa in general (Bray, 2017). The socialist revolution may not be the main reason why a militant Antifa group confronts the far-right during a street protest (Copsey & Merrill, 2020), but the struggle against capitalism and related oppression and injustice around the world are central to the agenda of the Australian radical

left. This is especially the case at a time when the Australian far-right is no longer seeking to dominate public spaces to the scale that they did in the late 2010s.

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