Returning Nuance to Nostalgic Group Studies:

Understanding White Supremacy as a Hegemonic Force

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Understanding White Supremacy as a Hegemonic Force

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About the Author

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Acknowledgements

Abstract

A dominant analytical frame has emerged in extremism studies that attributes nearly all right wing, far right, or nostalgic group ideology[1] and action to white supremacy. Some versions of this narrative further posit that these extremist groups intentionally and consciously effect white supremacy through a "cohesive social network based on commonly held beliefs," a "white power movement."[2] However, these conceptions sometimes lack definitions of social movements, white supremacy, and other key concepts that are central to their arguments.[3] This has led to over-generalizations about nostalgic group actors' motives and goals in a way that downplays both the power of white supremacy as a hegemonic system and the specific harms caused by overtly supremacist actors. This paper clarifies a social science understanding of the key, but sometimes taken-for-granted, terms necessary for understanding these dynamics and demonstrates how faulty or unclear usage of this terminology leads to both analytical problems and the perpetuation of power structures that the field of extremism studies hopes to address. Specifically, I argue that improper conceptualization of white supremacy and related terms creates risks falling into three categories: analytic accuracy and predictive capacity, preventing near-term harm, and perpetuating white supremacy's power structure and radicalization.

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[1] This paper uses "nostalgic" groups to capture the dynamics reflected across these groups. As I discuss elsewhere, labels like "patriot movement" or even "far right" and "extreme right" sometimes fail to capture the political and other characteristics contained within the myriad groups on this spectrum. What all such groups do have in common is the valorization of an imagined version of the past, even though the precise time point they reference varies. For more, see Cooter, 2024

[2] Belew, 2018

[3] Mondon, 2023

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1. Introduction

Academics frequently argue over terminology, and it is rare that there is perfect consensus on what a given term means within a scholarly field or within activist circles. Terminology that enters mainstream discourse, as it is prone to do when connected to important and contested social issues, becomes even more stretched or distorted as the general public employs. This can occur if the public lacks a full understanding of its context, or because some actors intend to contort its meaning to weaken meaningful discussions about important issues.[4] It is crucial that researchers clearly define and engage with accepted understandings of key concepts, even when challenging that shared understanding. Language influences thinking,[5] which means that language has a role in shaping both what we find worthy of study and how we study it. If extremism researchers define all extremist actors as "white supremacist," that means, for starters, that other independent and intersecting motivations for extremist harms are downplayed and possibly ignored in data collection and analysis, providing limited and perhaps incorrect ideas about prevention and restorative approaches.

Shifting to a framework where white supremacy is described as an overt, common glue across nostalgic groups while sometimes excluding other variables relevant to these groups has led arguments such as, "ideology does not matter, outcomes do." In some sense this is true. If our goal is to help migrants at the US southern border, it does not matter if some actors are there purely because of xenophobia, racism, and outright hate while other actors are there because they genuinely believe undocumented migrants pose economic or criminal threats to citizens: they are working toward the same end, which, whether desired or not, could result in violence and general harm to migrants entering the US.

If, however, our goal is to understand why and how people come to believe these things and, in some cases, take time off of work and travel from out of state at their own expense to performatively protect the border, we cannot neglect ideology. We likewise cannot neglect narratives, life variables, and disparate motives that form and support that ideology, and we cannot have a

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[4] A recent, poignant example of a term whose original meaning has been contorted, often intentionally is "woke." For quite some time, this word had, within Black communities, positively connoted possessing an awareness of racism and oppressive structural barriers. In the early 2020s, the word entered more mainstream parlance following high profile racial justice protests, after which some conservative politicians and other actors effectively appropriated the word to derisively refer to ideas of inclusion, equality, or attention to race and Blackness in the workplace, schools, and society in general (Alfonseca, 2024; Robinson, 2022).

[5] Boroditsky, 2001; Zhou, 2023

one-size-fits-all approach to addressing and mitigating these underlying variables if we want to strive for long-term, durable change.

> *The harms caused by white supremacy are not monolithic, and successfully addressing those harms requires us to understand their perpetrators are not monolithic, either.*

After exploring the social science definitions of ideas necessary to this conversation, starting with social movements then moving to racism, white supremacy, and other related concepts, this paper discusses the impact of this narrowing, which includes conceptual difficulties and, more importantly, practical harms that contradict the aims of extremism studies. Rather than a single, coordinated social movement premised on conscious racism or white supremacy, nostalgic groups are comprised of actors who are motivated by a variety of factors, and focusing exclusively on individual white supremacy limits our predictive and analytic capacity while limiting our ability to understand the full range of harms posed by white supremacy as a system. The harms caused by white supremacy are not monolithic, and successfully addressing those harms requires us to understand their perpetrators are not monolithic, either.

2. Social Movements

Sociologists typically define social movements as "conscious, concerted, and sustained efforts by ordinary people to change something using extra-institutional means."[6] Social movements do not necessarily require a clearly recognized leader or a large temporal or geographic footprint. They are also fluid, and the exact moment a group becomes a social movement is difficult to identify, even in retrospect.[7] Some entities may be considered social movements at certain points of their life span but not at others, potentially

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[6] Goodwin & Jasper, 2003, p. 3

[7] Nuanced analyses of social movement lifespans additionally make distinctions between social movements, social movement organizations, social movement sectors, and other entities that both cooperatively and antagonistically create social movement outcomes. The purpose of this brief introduction is not to explore every possible social movement building block but rather to demonstrate why an uncritical application of "movement" to describe a broad group of actors is problematically removed from accepted understandings of movement definitions and dynamics.

moving in and out of this categorization more than once depending on their organization, goals, and tactics over time.

It is incredibly common for social movements, especially ones that span large geographic areas, to be beleaguered by infighting. Individual components within a movement may vehemently disagree with each other (or with some nationally recognized leader) about their motivations, tactics, and even short-term goals. What individual components within a movement must have in common is at least one shared long-term goal even if they have different reasons for acting and different strategies for achieving this same end.

This internal disunity is true even within what is often considered the quintessential social movement: the US Civil Rights Movement. It is only through the retrospective and rather literal whitewashing of the Civil Rights Movement that many people have come to believe that all of its participants were in agreement about short-term aims and exclusively using non-violent protest action.[8] Participants and their respective groups did share the long-term goal of achieving equal rights for Black people by removing political, legal, and economic barriers to this outcome; where they often differed was the optimal tactics for pursuing this change and on which structural targets should take precedence over others.[9]

The amorphous nature of social movements makes it an easy and tempting label to capture the entire extremist right. When this label is applied to nostalgic groups as a singular entity, the implication is often that all nostalgic group actors are fundamentally motivated by racism and conscious, coordinated efforts to maintain "white power."[10] To understand why this label is both reductive and harmful to endeavors to reduce extremist violence, it is important to first understand the layers of white supremacy before returning to consider the right's social movement status.

3. Racism

For many people in the US, hearing the word "racism" brings to mind stark, painful images of segregation and discrimination of the pre-Civil Rights Era—the kind of racism that is legalized and institutionalized, is easily observed through physical barriers or signage, and is enforced through both hooded and

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[8] Goff & McCarthy, 2021

[9] McAdam, 1990, 1999; Weiss, 1986

[10] The most notable and frequently cited of the arguments notes that "white power" is "one very small and violent component of that broad and complex category" of white supremacy but otherwise leaves "white power" undefined; Belew, 2021, p. 5.

open violence. White citizens in particular often believe that racism largely disappeared from US society after the Civil Rights Movement's successes made that kind of racism illegal.[11] These people believe that racism still exists, but that it is the province only of tattooed neo-Nazis or similar individuals whom they perceive to be rare social outliers, clinging to a rejected era, and thus not worthy of concerted attention.[12]

The logical outgrowth of this belief is that we, as a society, don't really need to talk about race or the history of racism, that if we ignore these outliers, racism will simply disappear on its own. Despite clear evidence that racism does not, in fact, magically disappear over time, people who believe in its rarity feel that conversations about it are not only unnecessary but also belligerent. They often become immediately defensive and suggest that people who want to discuss racism and its ramifications are "living in the past" or merely want to attack white people who, in their view, have no responsibility for past racist harms nor receive any contemporary benefits from racism.[13]

The reality of racism is, of course, substantially more complicated. Social scientists know that racism did not simply evaporate in the wake of Civil Rights Movement wins, but instead evolved. So-called "old-fashioned" racists certainly still exist and may again be on the rise.[14] But scholarly and activist attention has expanded our understanding of contemporary racism to span the micro (individual) and macro (structural) levels. As sociologists Matthew Clair and Jeffrey S. Denis say, racism can be best understood as "individual- and group-level processes and structures that are implicated in the reproduction of racial inequality in diffuse and often subtle ways."[15]

Scholars use different terminology to refer to the forms of racism that emerged after Civil Rights Movement wins, deploying terms like "symbolic, "modern," "laissez-faire," or "color-blind" racism to capture different but complementary aspects of racism's evolution.[16] Regardless of precise focus, one emerging consensus is that our scholarly and activist focus should be most concerned with how racism remains embedded in our social institutions and systems in ways that become patterned, entrenched, and frequently invisible to people who are not on the receiving end of that racism.[17]

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[11] Johnson, 2022; Norton & Sommers, 2011
[12] Omowale, 1999; Quarles & Bozarth, 2022
[13] Mills, 2017; Oliphant, 2017; Younge, 2012
[14] Luneau, 2024
[15] Clair & Denis, 2015
[16] Bobo et al., 1997; Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Brown et al., 2003; Feagin, 2006. Also see Clair & Denis, 2015 for an excellent overview of how social scientists understand and label the nuanced manifestations of contemporary racism.
[17] Clair & Denis, 2015; Du Bois, 2014; Min, 2024; Norton & Sommers, 2011

Contemporary racism at the individual level thrives precisely because it is less overt than the old-fashioned variety; as many scholars analyze, in this form it asserts claims of inferior culture rather than inferior biology.[18] These culture-based claims are premised on two core ideas that, while heavily influenced by a US-specific analysis, are very helpful for understanding the appeals made by nostalgic groups in the US and beyond. The first claim is that many white people still hold negative beliefs (stereotypes) and feelings (prejudices) about racial outgroups.[19] The second claim is that people generally believe in the American Dream–the idea that we truly have equality of opportunity such that anyone can succeed financially and otherwise if they work hard enough. The logical, inverse conclusion of this Dream is that people who continue to struggle to achieve markers of success like home ownership or college educations must necessarily be failing to appropriately pursue those status-climbing activities. When people who ascribe to this blame-seeking model then see statistics about racial group disparities, their racist stereotypes intersect with this negative aspect of the Dream, leading them to conclude that struggling racial groups must be culturally deficient as an explanation for their supposed failures.[20]

People who arrive at this conclusion can tap into a degree of surface-level deniability that their stance is not "really" about race. They do this by insisting that they are not talking about biology (i.e., how people *are* in some physiological, inherent, immutable way), but rather about culture (i.e., how, they say, people *choose* to be). Detractors of various kinds of social welfare employ these arguments, often insisting that there is nothing physically (biologically) wrong with many people who receive such aid, that recipients unfairly take advantage of people who are hard workers, pay their bills and their taxes, and thus properly pursue the Dream. Welfare recipients face allegations that they, in contrast, are "lazy," do not understand the value of hard work, or simply do not care about how their supposed freeloading harms others, thus implicating behavioral choices that could be changed.[21] Notions of choice and self-control are thereby deeply rooted in this conception of real Americanism such that these allegations are not merely about someone's own failure to succeed but also about that person's alleged cultural deficiency and failure to be a good American.[22]

[18] Bobo & Charles, 2009
[19] Allport, 1979; Priest et al., 2018
[20] Blum, 2023; Bobo & Charles, 2009; Bobo & Fox, 2003; Feagin, 2006; Persell, 1981
[21] Nadasen, 2007
[22] More on how a particular white Christian nationalist outlook informs the perceived connections between whiteness and Americanness can be read in Butler, 2021 and Jones & Cooter, 2024.

3.1. White Privilege

It is important to understand, however, that the availability of the Dream's pursuit as an accessible story, a cultural script,[23] means that many white people who make such arguments do not have to think deeply, if at all, about the racist implications that are just below the surface of these assertions. This simplified attribution to cultural characteristics is in actuality a perspective steeped in white privilege and, sometimes, a genuine lack of understanding of what it is like to have artificial, racist barriers to one's personal and family success.

White privilege–much maligned in popular discourse–is, for social scientists, merely the notion that society gives white people a certain benefit of the doubt; they do not face the same stereotypes, systematic economic barriers, or other structural hurdles that non-white people do.[24] As a result, they do not have to think about what it would be like to live in the shoes of someone who does encounter these hurdles to success. Having white privilege does not mean that white people cannot be disadvantaged on other dimensions of identity. White women may still face sexism, poor white people may still face classism, and so on. But recognizing racial privilege even when these other identities are disadvantaged comes down to understanding that white people do not face systematic disadvantages because they are white.[25] Another way to think of this is that an economically disadvantaged white woman will face certain challenges based on her identity; an economically disadvantaged, black woman will, too, but hers will be amplified in certain circumstances where her race also matters to people in power while the white woman's race does not (or, more precisely, where her whiteness likely matters in a positive sense).[26]

To be clear, a "genuine" lack of understanding of the racist discrimination people of color face is not synonymous with "excusable," but nor is it always synonymous with "willful," as narratives about how white supremacy fits with extremist action sometimes imply. Individuals should know, ideally, the historical and structural trajectories that have influenced their own lives and those of others around them. The reality, however, is that it is all too easy for

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[23] Cultural scripts are themes, values, and narratives that are so pervasive in a given society that they effectively become implicit "truths" and provide shared cognitive and cultural touchpoints for members of a common group; Goddard & Wierzbicka, 2004

[24] Amico, 2016; McIntosh, 1989

[25] Some white people argue against this point, insisting they have faced personal discrimination as students in majority-black schools, for example; theories of race and racism are compatible with these experiences while still recognizing that these individual-level experiences are not the same as *structural and systematic* racism that prevents nonwhite people from having equal access to tools of social, economic and political power. That is, even if one faces what they describe as racism because of their whiteness in some specific contexts, this person still has racial privilege in the whole of society where the centers of power are still dominated by whiteness and white supremacy.

[26] Crosley-Corcoran, 2014

many white people in the US to grow up without this kind of understanding. Many schools fail to provide fundamental lessons even on the history of slavery and Native American genocide, let alone lessons about the continuing impact of this legacy about ongoing discrimination.[27] In fact, there is good reason to believe this educational bias is worsening after recent pushes to prohibit discussions of topics related to race and racism on the pretense of banning "critical race theory" and similar legal bans on discussing issues related to sexual identity and attendant discrimination under the guise of protecting children.[28]

A privilege-based ignorance, whether genuine or willful, means that some people who are racialized as white can move through life without having to meaningfully confront the fact that race-based barriers to success still exist for people who are not racialized as white, that, in fact, racism is thoroughly entrenched in structural and institutional aspects of our society. Confronting this reality is highly disincentivized because it can create an enormous amount of cognitive dissonance and other discomfort for the very people who most want to believe in the Dream's false promise of boundless success and equality.

4.   What is White Supremacy?

It is from an understanding of socially entrenched racism that notions of systematic white supremacy emerge. White supremacy, like racism, fundamentally relies on ingroup/outgroup processes that assume the inherent superiority of people who are racialized as white.[29] Yet it is broader and can be thought of as a system that encompasses, benefits from, and perpetuates different kinds of racism.

Using the language of "white supremacy" builds on but goes beyond the notion of race as a social construct to add and understand racism's historicized and politicized nature. As sociologist Deadric Williams observes, a lack of explicit attention to the social and cultural context of how historical racial constructions continue to influence present day dynamics not only misses important variables for understanding racism's impact but also risks reinforcing essentialist understandings of race. This is because "biological explanation still permeates the American imagination about racial inequality."[30] Talking about race as a social construction, alone, is not enough to disrupt the biological assumptions and broader stereotypes that remain

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27 Kahn, 2021; Pendharkar, 2023; States That Have Banned, 2023
28 Diamond, 2019; Stewart, 2019
29 J. Berger, 2018; Blumer, 1958; Bobo, 1999; Bobo & Hutchings, 1996
30 Williams, 2023, p. 2; Williams, 2019

embedded in the collective white imagination. Employing "white supremacy" better captures how race has always been a historical, politicized construct that results in a *system*, a

> "particular mode of domination, with its special norms for allocating benefits and burdens, rights and duties; its own ideology; and an internal, at least semiautonomous logic that influences law, culture, and consciousness."[31]

White supremacy as a system thus certainly includes overt neo-Nazis and other racist extremists who, visibly tattooed with obvious symbols of their hate or not, are individuals who actively and knowingly seek to harm non-white individuals, whether that be economically, politically, socially, or physically. Social scientists usually label these individuals white suprema*cists* because of their open, conscious embrace of white supremacy's aims.

But white supremacy as a system is bigger than just these hateful individuals and the groups they form to coordinate their insecurities into action. White supremacy is, as author Nels Abbey observes:

> "...not just a klansman burning a cross [....] White supremacy is not just 14 words,[32] it shapes what is seen as worthy history and what is dismissed as "wokery": who is viewed as worthy of respect and empathy, and who are dismissed as grifters with a 'victimhood mentality.'"[33]

White supremacy is why people who are racialized as Black receive harsher prison sentences, have worse health and educational outcomes, have higher mortgage rates, even (and especially) when statistically controlling for other variables that logically could account for these differential outcomes.[34]

What makes many white people uncomfortable about confronting white supremacy is the reality that, due to white privilege, it statistically benefits *all* people who are racialized as white, even if they face discrimination and are disadvantaged by other aspects of their identity[35] This reality can feel like an accusation of wrongdoing to some, perhaps especially those white people who have had genuine socioeconomic and other hardships and have difficulties

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[31] Mills, 1998, p. 8.
[32] This is a reference to an infamous white supremacist mantra.
[33] Abbey, 2023
[34] Conley, 1999; Morello-Frosch & Lopez, 2006; Pager, 2009
[35] Crosley-Corcoran, 2014

imagining that someone else's life could be made worse by virtue of racism that they have never experienced.

4.1. White Supremacy's Hegemony

Many scholars of race and racism also believe it is impossible to avoid internalizing at least some pervasive racial stereotypes and prejudice if one is born into and grows up in a society where history and power structures have relied on white supremacy as a hegemonic cultural and political order.[36] Hegemony, in sociology, is a system of *power*, one that is used with varying degrees of intentionality to the benefit of an already dominant group. It encompasses not only practical power, like the economic and political system, but also less tangible power, like the power of ideas, including ideas about ethics, virtue, and law.[37] If someone is not selected for a job for which they were qualified, white supremacy readily provides social scripts to blame supposedly lesser qualified candidates of color. If the national economy experiences a downturn or increases in crime occur, white supremacy insists it is immigrants or other supposed cultural deviants who are to blame, deflecting fault away from the broader system that is premised on white supremacy and is itself fostering negative outcomes.

Hegemonic orders maintain a good deal of inertia and work to preserve themselves.[38] Their internal logics and cultural scripts disincentivize new narratives that would challenge the structure's own failings while instead providing easy targets to blame in ways that do not alter the system's overall functioning. White supremacy's status as a hegemonic cultural and political order is why some activists and scholars insist it is not enough in contemporary society to be merely not-a-racist but rather, individuals with racial privilege must actively, if imperfectly, be anti-racist. This means learning to both intentionally see and work to dismantle the unearned advantages that historical practices continue to allocate to attain an equitable society. This is not a one-time intervention, but instead, is a life-long and iterative endeavor that requires individuals to, first, know about the harms of racial stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination, second, to willingly evaluate and self-correct when such assumptions are brought to mind, and, third, to speak out when possible to help other individuals and systems alike to correct their own

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[36] Waddell & Pipitone, 2020

[37] One reason hegemony shapes the legal system, for example, is because, historically, White men's standpoint has disproportionately shaped the law due to their historical privilege such that other groups' interests are less represented and such that white supremacy can be both established and upheld via "lawful extremism" J. Berger, 2023.

[38] Bates, 1975; Gramsci, 1992

assumptions and false assertions.[39] Simply put, white supremacy maintains racism as a cultural default such that racism must be actively and consciously challenged for white supremacy's hegemony to ever be effectively reduced.

Contrary to some of the reactionary discourse about white privilege and white supremacy, the realities of white supremacy as a system do not mean that all white people are white supremacists or that all are consciously motivated by racism. The failure to delineate between knowing racists and those who passively benefit from systems of white supremacy has contributed to some white audiences maintaining a hostility toward having productive discussions about racism and how to curtail it.[40] While it is profoundly uncomfortable and frustrating from a social justice perspective to consider the needs or comfort of already privileged white people when discussing racial power and oppression, it is nonetheless a reality–one observable in the field, in the classroom, and in personal circles–that must be navigated for meaningful change to occur.[41]

5.   White Supremacy's Implications for Extremist Scholars and Practitioners

It is also important that researchers and practitioners navigate the distinction between intentional, conscious white supremacists and hegemonic white supremacy as a system. White supremacy produces and facilitates white supremacists, but also facilitates other kinds of "everyday" harms. Confusing this distinction and equating white supremacist individuals with white supremacy as a system leads to an underestimation of the harms from both: we risk forgetting the special risks conscious supremacists pose and the way average White people who are not part of supremacist groups—or any other nostalgic groups— also contribute to white supremacy. In other words, we risk misjudging extremist threats and risk underestimating our collective ability to address them. What's more, we risk perpetuating white supremacist power structures by undermining some actors' agency and, in the worst cases, by contributing to some actors' radicalization. All these concerns are explored in greater detail below.

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[39] Fuchs, 2022
[40] Quarles & Bozarth, 2022
[41] Fein & Spencer, 1997; Greenwald & Banaji, 1995

6. Analyzing White Supremacist Individuals

Scholars and practitioners who confront extremist actors cannot ignore overtly racist, white supremacist actors. These actors pose outsized harms to some of the most vulnerable people in our society. This is because the impact of their actions (just like hate crimes motivated by other identity-based biases) go well beyond the immediate violence they create. White supremacists conduct very real, physical violence on the bodies and communities of their immediate targets, and we must also understand the psychological and emotional impact of their actions that reverberates beyond their immediate victims.

Racism itself has long been known to negatively impact the physical and mental health of non-white individuals and communities,[42] so it is unsurprising that racist attacks and other hate crimes are similarly damaging and result in fear, anxiety, depression, negative self-images, and post-traumatic stress disorders.[43] These negative impacts also reverberate through the geographical and demographic communities of hate crime victims, communities filled with people who understandably may envision themselves as possible targets of future, similar attacks or are reminded of their own previous traumatic encounters with racism.[44] Part of the outcome of hate crimes is thus to induce terror, to silence the voices and limit the civic engagement of people in perceived outgroups well beyond the immediate victim of the crime.[45] Impacts beyond immediate victims may not always be the perpetrator's intent, but such terroristic goals have nonetheless been explicit in hate-based attacks from numerous mass shooters and other actors, globally, in recent years.[46]

Law enforcement and others often discuss actions people can take to "harden" themselves against certain types of crime: lock your doors, do not leave valuables in sight inside your car, do not walk alone at night, etc. However, there are very few actions someone can take to change perceptions of their identity, short of remaining out of public view and participation and thereby feeding into one of the goals of racist violence by removing oneself from society. This lack of agency to change one's risk of victimization can, alone, be demoralizing and psychologically damaging, especially given how principles of equality and justice are ostensibly at the foundation of American civic life; the immutability of such hate undeniably undermines this mythos and the promises of the American Dream.

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[42] M. Berger & Sarnyai, 2015; Bird et al., 2021; Hudson et al., 2016; Pascoe & Smart Richman, 2009; D. Williams, 2023
[43] Barnes & Ephross, 1994; Herek et al., 1999; Novotney, 2023; Paterson et al., 2019; Perry & Alvi, 2012
[44] R. Brown et al., 2018
[45] Lieberman, 2021
[46] Hellyer & Gereke, 2024; Hunter et al., 2021; Moreland, 2024

Hate crimes are considered "distinct and more severe than other offenses" in our justice system for good reason.[47] As legal scholar Brian Levin succinctly notes, there is

> "substantial evidence that hate crimes were also more severe and risk to victims and society than nonhate crimes. [...] Studies have demonstrated that hate crimes in contrast to crimes in general are more likely to involve excessive violence, multiple offenders, serial attacks, greater psychological trauma to victims, a heightened risk of social disorder, and a greater expenditure of resources to resolve."

In other words, beyond the risk to direct victims and their communities, the societal costs of hate crimes are quite high. Racial and other identity-based tensions may remain heightened, as can risks of broader civil disorder; general social trust and specifically trust in government, law enforcement, and other structures that are intended to keep citizens safe may decline.[48] We also have special concerns of copycat behavior with hate-based extremist crime that is not a common consideration with most other criminal activity.[49] Especially with a notable increase in hate crimes in recent years and little expectation of a slowing in this trend, scholars and practitioners concerned with extremist violence must acknowledge the reality of these enhanced harms and the characteristics of the people who conduct them.[50]

7. Analyzing White Supremacy as a System

Even while analyzing the impact of explicitly white supremacist individuals, extremism researchers and prevention workers also cannot ignore white supremacy as a larger system that influences some actors even without their awareness. As scholar Anna Meier observes, white supremacy can unite actors with different motivations and ideologies because these actors "stem from the same *structural* sources, even if individual actors do not understand them this way."[51] This matters because white supremacy's hegemonic status means that the same grievances that it supports and promotes (i.e., fears of migrants, job shortages, government "tyranny" with regard to equity enforcement or incentives, etc.) can be used to incentivize action from different nostalgic groups with disparate underlying motives.

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[47] Levin, 1999, p. 8
[48] *ibid.*
[49] Kupper et al., 2022; Youngblood, 2020
[50] Li & Lartey, 2023; Novotney, 2023; Ruisch & Ferguson, 2023; Villarreal, 2020
[51] Meier, 2023, emphasis added

From a social science understanding of white supremacy as a hegemonic *system*, it is correct to say that white supremacy facilitates and produces some subset of *all* white people's actions that serve to benefit them within that system, even if white people do not understand their actions this way. However, the quote widely attributed to philosopher Karl Popper is also true here when thinking about aims related to extremism prevention: "a theory that explains everything explains nothing" because of its failure to provide nuance and predictive power across more discrete and real-world contexts. If all nostalgic group action is, fundamentally, white supremacy, so is all non-extremist white action, including actions like buying homes in gentrifying neighborhoods or opting to send one's children to private school or voting for candidates based solely on their promised incentives to one's business prospects.[52] While all these choices indeed link back to white supremacy as a system, such a statement does not help us understand what to do about any of the problems that result from these choices. We also risk equating these choices with each other and neglecting the specific harms done by those choosing to participate in overt white supremacist violence.

7.1.   Analytic Accuracy and Predictive Capacity

When we are thinking about white supremacy as a hegemonic force, there is an important range of behavior that this force captures–spanning from people who are explicitly and intentionally perpetuating racist violence on one end of the spectrum and, on the other, people who passively benefit from white supremacy as a system even if they attempt to be antiracist. Between these two extremes are many other people including those who are racist and engage in harmful, but not physically violent, actions (such as hate speech, intentional discrimination in hiring, etc.) and people who hold racist stereotypes and are engaged in varying degrees of action and self-challenge about these beliefs (ranging from no effort to an antiracist identity). While there are problems with all these forms of engagement with white supremacy in terms of promoting its continuance, there are practical differences that someone's placement along this spectrum indicates for, first, understanding and possibly predicting their likelihood and modality of harm to others and, second, for analyzing what routes of intervention we should consider for them. We need very different approaches if engaging with a white supremacist who believes people of color are inherently inferior and should be murdered or forcibly

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[52] To be clear, such actions need not be *conscious* efforts to enact white supremacy. In fact, when White individuals and families make these decisions, they often do so without consideration of race and instead only focusing on choices to improve their own circumstances as defined by the American Dream. However, these actions nonetheless contribute to aggregate patterns that promote white supremacy as a system by promoting gentrification, continued school stratification, and more (Badger, Bui, and Gebeloff 2019; Hightower and Fraser 2020; Lewis-McCoy 2014).

removed from the country compared to approaches needed for engaging with a white person who thinks racism is bad but is not fully aware of the racial stereotypes and prejudice that they, themselves, possess.

A framework that eliminates nuanced motivations and exclusively focuses on white supremacy as an abstract and unnuanced concept also has difficulty neatly explaining why white politicians or other officials can be targets of nostalgic groups. In some cases, it may indeed be possible that perpetrators label these targets as "traitors" to whiteness or white supremacy and want to eliminate them because of their visibility or degree of influence. But when white targets' policies or other public engagements are not focused on issues directly connected to racial policies or outcomes, this argument becomes, at best, rather fraught.

To take an example, during the height of COVID-19, we saw several white politicians who were targeted by various nostalgic actors due to their proposed mitigation regulations and other strategies. The most notable of these politicians was Michigan's Governor Gretchen Whitmer, who was the target of an elaborate militia plot to kidnap and extrajudicially try her for supposedly tyrannically violating her perceived responsibilities to uphold individual liberties. It is absolutely true that communities of color have been disproportionately impacted by COVID,[53] and there is a legitimate argument that white supremacy as a system both creates and benefits from the disruption of policies that promote and enforce mitigation as a result of this public health reality.

However, amplified concerns for communities of color were rarely spoken by politicians when pushing mitigation efforts, and it requires a stretch of imagination to suggest that white anti-mitigation plotters and non-criminal activists were acting with conscious malice toward their nonwhite neighbors. We know most white Americans are unaware of the multi-faceted racism that people of color continue to face and of how structural conditions are connected to disparate racial outcomes.[54] To assume that attacks on white politicians who are not promoting overtly race-based policies are motivated by a desire to see relatively hidden, disproportionate harm to communities of color would require a good deal more evidence that is contrary to what we know about white people's understanding of race and racism.

A need for additional evidence is perhaps especially clear in the case of Governor Whitmer's attempted kidnappers, the Watchmen, where many

[53] Bonilla-Silva, 2022; Hill & Artiga, 2022
[54] Norton & Sommers, 2011

conversations, which they believed to be private, about the plot were recorded and later became part of the public record were devoid of references to race and racism. These conversations and other facts surrounding the case show how the plotters were focused on Whitmer's actions, alleged intentions to remove personal liberties, and fantastical, action-movie style plans to successfully abscond with Whitmer.[55]

Additional evidence to assert a racist, overtly white supremacist aim is also needed in cases where nostalgic group actors possess and espouse a range of political beliefs. Examples include several Boogaloo members who attended Black Lives Matter or pro-LGBTQ+ rights protests in support of those movements and in opposition to police and other uses of force against these movements' members.[56] While it is easy and perhaps tempting to dismiss such claims as false or merely performative, methodological interventions that involve researchers directly interacting with these people rather than relying purely on media reports reveal a much more complex story about these actors and their understanding of social justice. It is worth noting that connections between seemingly radical conservative and radical liberal groups are not novel: both the US domestic militia and the KKK attempted to work with the Black activists in the 1990s, though for different reasons. In Michigan, militia founder Norm Olson worked, with limited success, with members of Detroit's Black Panthers to discuss self-defense and anti-crime strategies,[57] and a KKK chapter in Florida partnered with the Pan-African Inter-National Movement to open a "Freedom Center" that promoted the groups' shared goals of repatriating Black nationalists to Africa.[58]

7.2. Preventing Near-Term Harm

If we attribute all extremist, nostalgic group behavior only to conscious, concerted white supremacist actors who have been unchanged from at least the 1960s despite the widespread social progress that has occurred in the intervening decades, we cannot expect these actors to ever change without even greater social and cultural upheaval. Upending white supremacy as a system is a noble and worthwhile goal, but arguments advocating for a new hegemonic framework offer few options for accomplishing such an outcome over any timespan. They also do not offer many suggestions for preventing the reality of extremist harms to already vulnerable populations in the near-term.

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[55] Kolker, 2022
[56] Cooter, 2022; Newton, 2021
[57] Cooter, 2024; Olson Scrapbook, Norm Olson Archive
[58] Shelton Rogers, 1993. Publicly available online materials give no additional information about the center's success or longevity.

Concluding that only full-scale social change will mitigate extremist actors leads to another problematic logical outcome (which may or not be directly stated in arguments about white supremacy's primacy): inaction rooted in a kind of nihilism. The argument, in other words, sometimes unfortunately becomes that the problem is so big that we can never solve it, intermediary progress is too small and therefore meaningless, thus there are no consequential actions we can take because our goal is unachievable. Extremist violence becomes thought of as an inevitable and unchangeable outgrowth of modern society that will continue to exist until society itself somehow changes to be dramatically different than it is now. What is doubly concerning is that some of these arguments suggest a wholesale–and possibly violent–reworking of the system, a view that drifts uncomfortably close to the militant accelerationists we study. We have yet to see meaningful violence from left-oriented organizations that seek to effect a more equitable society, but an increase in such narratives and in left-oriented groups arming themselves for these potential ends is a reminder of where this logical thread can lead.[59]

It is also important to remember that violent extremism prevention work is incredibly difficult, with many social, community, and individual variables implicated in cases whose positive outcomes are also fraught with methodological difficulties. However, we do know that people *can* desist from pathways of extremism and hate-based radicalization.[60] Continued work to understand how their trajectories of desistance fit within broader social and cultural variables including white supremacy's influence on these variables is both possible and imperative to mitigate violence and the acceptance of violence as inevitable. Another way to think of this is that harm reduction that addresses the most acute and likely sources of extremist violence can and should occur simultaneously with continued efforts to address white supremacy as a hegemonic system.

7.3. Perpetuating White Supremacy's Power Structure and Radicalization

It is also important to understand that white supremacy as a system can be facilitated by people who do not already hold positions of comparative power in any given society. However, equating all nostalgic group actions to conscious white supremacy does not always satisfactorily describe all nostalgic actors whose participation violates assumptions of a concerted white power

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[59] Katarzyna et al., 2022; van Dongen, 2021
[60] Bubolz & Simi, 2015; Donato, n.d.; Erdemandi et al., 2024; Harvard, 2019

movement that is acting on the basis of a shared, conscious white supremacist outlook. There are armed militia units with members of color and units that are exclusively Black or exclusively Hispanic. The framework of a conscious, concerted white power movement also has difficulty including and accounting for extremism originating from incels, school shooter fandoms, and other emergent and atypical entities like Boogaloo, all of which to varying degrees include non-white adherents, as consciously working alongside entities like the overtly white supremacist, neo-Nazi Atomwaffen Division. Dismissals of people of color who participate in mixed-race nostalgic groups as merely being consumed with internalized racism or self-hate not only ignore these actors' stated motives and goals but also deny their agency and understanding in a way that reinforces a paternalistic racism.[61] That is, such dismissals come down to researchers, often white, telling these actors of color what their participation is "really" about, as though the researcher knows better than the actors themselves about their lives and decision making.

It is also true that failure to understand the nuance across different nostalgic group actors can be one variable in further radicalizing some of them. When people are repeatedly dismissed, belittled, told their actions are "really" about something other than they believe them to be, some will exhibit further social withdraw, will become more angry and aggrieved, become more insulated in groups they believe contain the only people who relate to them, and perceive more reasons to lash out. Specifically, if someone is regularly miscategorized, in their view, by either law enforcement or researchers, that person will have little reason to trust or engage with them. They may even be tempted to delve deeply into conspiracism about both groups, especially the government, which holds escalating explanations for why their mistrust is justified.

Radicalization as the result of blanket categorization from experts fits with long-standing expectations of criminological labeling theory, but these risks are not merely hypothetical;[62] I have personally witnessed this process take place within militia groups during ethnographic field work with them. After government publications were released that were interpreted as saying that all militia members are domestic terrorists, I listened to some members discuss among themselves how they may as well be terrorists if the government was going to treat them that way despite their best efforts to be law abiding citizens. Some in this conversation expressed empathy toward members of a different unit who had been charged with an alleged plot to harm police officers, saying that, for the first time, they believed the charges might not be legitimate if they, too, could be treated as a possible threat. Other members discontinued long-

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[61] Manning & Ohri, 1982; Meyers, 2004

[62] Besemer et al., 2017; Restivo & Lanier, 2015

term relationships they held with law enforcement agents who had previously been able to approach these members as possible sources for concerning behavior within the movement; some units also discontinued public engagements, making them more difficult to monitor and creating more insular echo chambers for these units. Overbroad labeling thus helps create a threat that was not necessarily already present while making it more difficult to effectively mitigate that threat.

Scholars and practitioners concerned with extremism will never have all the answers but should at the very least not make the problems they study worse. To be clear, this does not mean that excuses should be made for white supremacy or other harmful actions, but rather, that verbiage matters, and overbroad labels should be avoided, especially when, at best, they detract from our analytic capacity and, at worst, have the potential to detract from or even amplify to the problems we seek to prevent. Another way this kind of inadvertent harm is done in these discussions is when arguments asserting a concerted "white power movement" do so without engaging with the existing work from scholars of race, racism, or even social movements. This ironically recreates the power imbalance of white supremacy the argument is supposedly critiquing by negating the voices of the predominantly Black and Brown scholars who began serious discussions of these concepts, sometimes while facing backlash from fellow White scholars for doing so. Conceptual colonization is incompatible with effective negation of systemic white supremacy.

8. Discussion

White supremacy as a system can be an impetus for many actions–extremist or not–and can even help shape actions without rising to conscious awareness for a given actor because of how its hegemonic quality shapes both institutions and ideas of what is either possible or appropriate. Nonetheless, much more than this hegemonic backdrop is needed to assert, as some scholars have, that a conscious, concerted "white power movement" has declared an "organized war on the state"[63] and has continued executing unified and coordinated action for several decades.

Analyses that rely on white supremacy as an analytic keystone have, inadvertently or otherwise, encouraged the field to discard robust analyses of ideology, motive, and narrative when assessing nostalgic groups in favor of an exclusive focus on white supremacy. It is more beneficial, however, to

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[63] Belew, 2018, p. 3

understand *how* white supremacy discursively influences other variables and produces extremist harms to appropriately address white supremacy and its full range of harmful outcomes.

Rather than a concerted and internally organized social movement, it is instead more accurate to think of the nostalgic group landscape as comprised of multiple social movements that may sometimes intersect with each other and with additional, stand-alone groups that exist independently of other entities in the extremist right. Ideological trends that span a variety of cultural groups do not necessarily constitute a concerted movement. To help understand the dynamics involved, I have previously talked about how different nostalgic entities can be understood through a metaphor of different trees growing in the same soil whose branches move together, sometimes indistinguishably, under the correct conditions. Individual trees represent distinct groups that may have different motives and tactics, but they emerge, in my comparison, from a shared nostalgia about an idealized and imagined past and work together when socio-political "winds" create appropriate conditions. In this metaphor, white supremacy is best thought of as fertilizer. It is an essential nutrient that feeds and becomes intimately and irretrievably mixed in with that nostalgia and its resultant actions, but its proportion may vary from tree to tree. Some groups, in other words, draw on it much more heavily and overtly than others. White supremacy is also a nutrient that can be found amplifying other more mundane contexts like homebuying or local educational quality as well.[64]

It is legitimate to question whether refuting the label "white power movement" and calling for attention to nuance within nostalgic group actions is a kind of "white distraction,"[65] serving to soften bad actors or deflecting attention away from the multiple harms of white supremacy. In fact, this approach does the opposite.

By recognizing the complex nature of white supremacy and its various harms with differing degrees of immediacy and intensity, we instead better understand the full scope of the problem and are better able to identify both short-term and long-term goals to address it. Nuance allows for better understanding and a better allocation of limited resources to address the spectrum of harms emerging from white supremacy, including institutionalized harms, harmful speech and beliefs, and targeted violence and terrorism while avoiding contributing to the radicalization pathway for people who are not already among the most violent actors. That is, we can understand how white supremacy as a system contains both immediate, acute, physical

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[64] Cooter, 2024

[65] A discussion of the concept of "white distraction" may be found in Meier, 2023, who did not originate the term but explains its applicability to extremism studies.

violence carried out by overtly white supremacist actors and simultaneously understand how hate-filled speech, ideas, and "every day"[66] stereotypes are part of bigger, systemic and institutionalized processes that require conscious, informed, and systematic efforts to address. We can understand other variables beyond white supremacy that more proximally push people into nostalgic group action and membership, including members who are not racialized as white. We can also treat conscious white supremacist actors as the acute and immediate threats they are, rather than an unavoidable and unsolvable byproduct of our social system.

> *A nuanced view helps more people understand why moving away from white supremacy's hegemony requires an actively anti-racist standpoint instead of a merely passive approach.*

If, in contrast, we insist that all action or ideology under the nostalgic group umbrella is fundamentally equivalent, we risk normalizing white supremacy and undervaluing the specific hate and demonstrated harms of white supremacist actors. We also risk making the harms of the system, of white supremacy's hegemony, more invisible; if we label violent, nostalgic group actors as motivated purely by conscious white supremacy regardless of ideology, tactic, or goal, it becomes easier to forget white supremacy's primacy in ongoing, systematic discrimination in our educational, healthcare, and other institutions. White supremacy within these systems seems normal or at least tolerable, in other words, compared to the threat of violence posed by supremacist actors and thus, in some arguments, not a pressing problem. Making white supremacy's hegemony more invisible also makes it too easy to forget how the average White person (including well-meaning White researchers[67]) also benefit from systemic white supremacy and can contribute to its maintenance. Without an understanding of how white supremacy still reflects race as a historical, politicized construct, we may even forget how exclusively relying on law enforcement agencies to intervene in violent extremism may result in harmful consequences for minoritized communities due to those agencies' legacy and ongoing engagement with white supremacy.[68] A nuanced view helps more people understand why moving away from white

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[66] Osbourne et al., 2023; Perez Huber & Solorzano, 2015
[67] Bonilla-Silva & Baiocchi, 2001; Zuberi & Bonilla-Silva, 2008
[68] Lersch et al. 2008; Nix et al. 2017

supremacy's hegemony requires an actively anti-racist standpoint[69] instead of a merely passive approach.

Parsimony is an ideal in social sciences, but so is analytic accuracy. When we use too broad a description for any group of inquiry, we risk doing not only intellectual harm to concepts under study, but also facilitating very real harms to the people most impacted by the questions we study. Just as we would not expect a singular theoretical framework to be appropriate for understanding some other social entity as a monolith, we need different and complementary approaches to questions of extremism. These approaches should acknowledge the complexities of white supremacy and white supremacists, but should not work at the exclusion of other, more proximate variables when holistically assessing nostalgic groups and the real-world harms they represent.

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[69] A variety of institutions have compiled tools and resources for learning about anti-racist practice. I suggest starting with Georgetown's: https://guides.library.georgetown.edu/antiracism. Georgetown also provides additional resources on allyship, here: https://diversity.gwu.edu/resources-allyship.

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