

Intervention Symposium

**“Worldbuilding and Worldbreaking:
New Spatialities of the Far-Right”**

Conspiracists at Rush Hour:

**The Extraordinary Nature of the Far-Right’s Algorithmic Creep into
Ordinary Democratic Spaces**

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In this short intervention, we propose that the far-right today, driven by algorithmically mediated “cloud” architectures, creeps into the ordinary democratic spaces of everyday life in ways not witnessed before. This is evidenced by the assemblages of sporadic far-right protests which are loosely organised around a general scepticism, attaching to issues like urban traffic-calming measures, “net zero” agendas, and other imaginary “globalist” conspiracies. We suggest that algorithmic processes, insofar as they are coded to connect the dots of bits of digital text, images, and behaviours, help to catalyse far-right mistrust of government and institutions, and conspiracist belief systems. Furthermore, we argue that these algorithmic processes, and the “cloud protests” (Milan 2015) that they generate, serve to fill gaps in the perceived clarity, legibility, accessibility, and infrastructural failures of nominally democratic spaces.

The far-right-conspiracist protests that are now regularly occurring in many cities, in other words, are products of three facets in particular: [i] the epistemic mis/distrust of

perceived elite knowledge and policies; [ii] the far-right's continuing infiltration into mainstream discourse and rising visibility in mainstream public spaces; and [iii] the blending of predictive algorithmic generation and the "coding" of far-right discourse. Whilst the first two of these facets follow a longer historical trajectory, the virality, rapidity, and global hybridity allowed by predictive algorithms and generative AI represent a new and dangerous phase of far-right spatiality, and present a growing threat to democratic life.

Conspiracists at Rush Hour

One afternoon, driving across the heavily-trafficked Tyne Bridge, separating Newcastle from Gateshead, England, one of us came across an assembled group of around 30 protestors, holding a wide variety of conspiracist signs toward the oncoming motorists. These signs spanned a range of topics, from scepticism around Covid-19 vaccines, to the "Great Reset" ("globalist") agenda, to traffic-calming urban planning initiatives known as "Ultra-Low Emission Zones" (or ULEZ), which have been rolled out in several UK cities. Visible and audible via shouts and honks during rush hour, these protestors were gone a few hours later, their signs and slogans packed up into bags and boxes. Whether this was a far-right protest is, for us, a complex question. Indeed, what forces compel these protestors to materialise and disappear as they do, and to what degree are these forces predicated on definable far-right ideologies and intentions? We suggest that algorithmic processes, and the "cloud" of social relations they catalyse, play a large role in these new, pop-up, combinatorial, and disaggregated materialisations of protest and the worlds that they seek to build.

From some points of view, the far-right is everywhere: scholars, journalists, and activists examine the recent electoral successes of right-populist movements and spectacular acts of violence committed in the name of far-right political causes to interrogate the degree to which the far-right or (neo-)fascism has become "mainstream" (e.g. Benjaminsen et al. 2018; Bures et al. 2023; Mondon and Winter 2020; Wending 2018). Other analyses examine the long march of far-right ideas through liberal institutions (Margulies 2015; Schlozman and Rosenfeld 2019) or how fringe cultures have gradually edged their way from universal disgust and condemnation to universal indifference, if not acceptance (Miller-Idriss 2018). A constant in these investigations is the recognition that far-right movements conceive of their

work as counter-cultural—that is, that they are struggling within an ostensibly oppressive culture to bring about a vision of society that, from their point of view, is more just.

In this short intervention, we argue that the far-right is, indeed, globally present in a way that is qualitatively and quantitatively different from recent times in the post-Second World War era, but, that understanding the shape and reach of this presence requires analytical precision that does not simply relegate all conservative political movements and developments into the “far-right” bin. In building our argument, we operationalise a set of spaces through which the far-right is seeking to break the world that liberal order has wrought and rebuild a new world based on order, hierarchy, and the subordination of the individual to the community—“gaps”. Gaps, in our formulation, are real or perceived lacunae in material provision, institutional competence, epistemological trust, or a combination of these that far-right groups seize upon as evidence of liberal rot that must be uprooted and replaced with new institutions and norms. Elsewhere (Lizotte and Luger forthcoming), we describe the “gap” as a concept in more detail. Here, we focus on how potent combinations of familiar tropes regarding the spatialities of belonging (see also Lizotte 2020) and the accelerated combination of these tropes with novel elements touch down and fill gaps in local contexts to produce novel contextual manifestations of far-right politics that variously endure or fade away, to be replaced by new combinations and assemblages. In particular, we argue that we can conceptually frame the far-right by identifying its entry into three spatially-constituted gaps that have developed over the past decades.

The first gap are the conditions of epistemic mistrust that have been created by a legacy of real and perceived elite failures in matters of public governance. Austerity and structural adjustment policies following fiscal crises (e.g. post-2008/9) in contexts across the globe, but particularly in Europe and North America, have led to deepening and geographically disparate gaps in service provision, public space, and general wellbeing, hollowing out the space of trust and engagement with elite institutions and knowledge/policy production (see Theodore 2020). The close identification of these failures with a vaguely identified “authoritarian leftism” further leaves a perceived ideological gap between elite incompetence or machinations and the interests of ordinary folk (e.g. Shellenberger 2021) into which mistrust fuelled by far-right conspiracism easily manoeuvres. Crucially, contrary to many critical expectations, the disdain for official knowledge that has become

characteristic of the early 21st century is not politically predetermined and provides equally fertile soil for multiple interpretations of radicality (Harambam and Aupers 2015).

The second set of gaps are those produced by suggestive algorithmic circulations. As Amoores (2009) argues, algorithms function by disassembling discrete data points and reassembling them into speculative and predictive profiles. We suggest this happens vis-à-vis the entanglement of the far-right into predictive and suggestive algorithmic circulations, which impacts the way users are exposed to, but also generate, far-right ideology, images, rhetoric, and worldviews. Users' information is also constantly extracted, which helps to reinforce and further perpetuate the content produced. Users' data are coded and strung together via these algorithmic processes in the "cloud", facilitated by various digital media platforms. The cloud then helps to generate and spatialise new forms of knowledge and perpetuates the "epistemic distrust" we identify in our first point. Milan (2011) defines "cloud protest" as a diffuse formation where:

Anyone can join anytime; one can bring along his or her identity, cultural and political background, grievances and claims, and even groups of friends. Anyone fits in the broad narrative of the cloud, anyone can contribute. Identities, resources, narratives are negotiated on and offline, but they mostly "live" online. They are mediated by the web interface offered by commercial social media.

Thus, as "cloud protests", the conspiracist assemblages we point to are both atomised and centralised, materialising in the gaps (such as the epistemic mistrust we mention previously). These protests resemble and mimic the algorithms, in the way they are linguistically, symbolically, and logically coded and structured, replicated, and disseminated. Algorithms have long played this role within social media (Amoores 2009, 2019), often assuming a life of their own which becomes incredibly difficult to contain; see, for example, the failed attempts of social-media moderators to rein in algorithmic content deemed antidemocratic or offensive. In other words, algorithms are a Pandora's Box of cloud-based content, and the geographical protests they help catalyse can be seen in the same way, with bespoke configurations affixed to specific contexts and individuals' profiles.

The final gap is represented by the local political spaces into which far-right worldviews and facilitated online content infiltrate through mechanisms and issues not traditionally seen as politically extreme. Examples include reactions to banal urban planning efforts to reduce car traffic (in the UK) and the operation of local public schools (in the United States). In both of these cases, far-right algorithms perpetuate conspiracist and sceptical thinking, including scepticism previously coded as left-leaning—for example, resistance to state surveillance/policing mechanisms—and catalyse frequently contradictory efforts towards perceived territorial autonomy and control. These efforts then further entrench far-right creep into mainstream political and socio-cultural spaces, and catalyse the production of local sites of protest and far-right material visibility in normally and nominally democratic spaces like local urban planning forums or primary school public meetings.

The Ambiguous Politics of Epistemic Mistrust

A crucial, but often overlooked, element in the contemporary political landscape across many societies is the degree to which the political meanings and identities attached to expertise, learning, and cultural production have shifted. Influenced by social theorists such as Michel Foucault and Jacques Rancière, critical scholars in geography and beyond have tended to assume that “elite” or “official” knowledge deployed in governance stems from, or is adjacent to, ideologies associated with the political right. By contrast, “folk”, “vernacular”, “the everyday”, and other non-elite epistemologies are assumed to bend towards progressive correctives to the state and non-state elite institutions (e.g. Janes 2015; Vaughn-Williams and Stevens 2016).

However, politically pegging the elite/non-elite divide as such obscures an essential quality of the current political moment in many late-capitalist societies, which is the degree to which educational attainment, and by extension, participation in professions requiring advanced degrees, is politically polarised both across populations and within parties (in the United States, see e.g. Ellis and Ura 2008; Furnas and LaPira 2021; Yglesias 2021; in Europe, see e.g. Gethin et al. 2022; Gidron and Hall 2017). This polarisation is especially pronounced among people working in epistemic institutions such as universities (e.g. Eagan et al. 2014), law firms (Bonica et al. 2015), and journalism (e.g. Hassell et al. 2023; Willnat et al. 2019) where those professing adherence to contemporary “progressive” values tend to

vastly outnumber their ideological rivals. This perceived capture by ideological monocultures of institutions that control access to the means of intellectual production provides some of the fertile ground in which conspiratorial beliefs about the intentions of political, economic, and cultural elites that run toward the political right can flourish.

Contrary to “deficit models” that assume a psychopathological cause of belief in conspiracy theories, it is important to recognise that the epistemic mistrust that permeates the far-right and its associated ecosystem of alleged conspiracies (Pierre 2020; see also Lizotte 2021) is not limited to the far-right. Indeed, the epistemological privileging of personal experience over official knowledge—“*I*-pistemology”, as termed by van Zoonen (2012)—is a common tenet expressed across a range of critical theory that has been co-opted by the radical right into attacks on epistemic elites (e.g. Friedman 2023). By emphasising the algorithmic assemblage of diverse elements into the production and circulation of far-right conspiratorial imaginaries, then, we do not mean to suggest that conspiracy theories are uniquely far-right instruments of communicating political ideas. Rather, we follow Dean (1998) in arguing that the banality of conspiratorial thinking across a range of topics indicates something more than the content of the particular conspiracies themselves; it points to a general mistrust of “experts” under conditions of contemporary democracy that experts themselves have been complicit in building (see also Eberl et al. 2021; Eghigian 2017; Harambam and Aupers 2015). This distrust produces *gaps* that algorithmic assemblages are especially well-positioned to exploit, as they offer to rebuild a world marked by epistemic chaos. The distrust also enables the emergence of self-made, self-anointed expert gurus on all manner of topics, able to speak from digital pulpits and, via algorithmic virality, reach wide, global, and diverse audiences at a speed and scale not witnessed before through novel figures such as the “influencer”, whose “influence” sits at the intersection of self-styled titles and algorithmic reach. As Milan (2011, 2015) identifies, the digital influencer is able to tap into the already-circulating bits and pieces of cloud data—information/mis/disinformation, images, etc. The far-right or conspiracist influencer, as an embodiment and outgrowth of the algorithm, is then one instigator of the diffuse protests that blur the boundaries between the far-right and everyday space/place.

The Algorithmic Blurring of Far-Right Shape: Space, Place, and “Cloud Protests”

Algorithms are difficult to grasp in their multiple and simultaneous ontological valences. They produce pathways for content selection and presentation that have lasting political effects, even as they themselves leave no trace of their operation (McKelvey 2014). They disassemble the traces left behind by individual behaviours and actions and strip them of their context before reassembling them in the form of speculative, coded profiles (Amoore 2009). Perhaps above all, they thrive on doubt and the in-between spaces of ambiguity as they predictively link together incomplete bits of information into wholes that are presented as coherent. Ironically, algorithms’ acknowledgements of their own shortcomings—that they are only as accurate as the data on which they are trained—serve as an implied guarantee of their ultimate infallibility, if only they are provided with more data for their refinement (see Amoore 2019).

It is this capacity to not only assemble but to assemble speculatively and predictively—often mediated by built-in human coding processes undergirded by libertarian and far-right, supremacist philosophies (see Noble 2018; Pruden et al. 2022)—that grants algorithms the capacity to weave together disparate ideas, images, and affects into narratives that mobilise and radicalise. This capacity is further harnessed by the simultaneously collectivising and atomising effects of social media to produce a distinct and paradoxical form of social movement that Milan (2015) terms “cloud protesting”. The term, as Milan uses it, captures key contradictions at the heart of social media-driven social movements: the cloud allows for the production of content that is immediate and strictly personal, but through a medium that is proprietary and centralised. While Milan deploys the cloud protesting concept to capture the novelty of politically progressive social movements in the early 2010s, she highlights the ultimate political ambivalence of the cloud as an assemblage of the technological and the social. Social media are not simply neutral vehicles for the dissemination of identities and interactions; it is the materiality of how information is presented through social-media platforms that constitutes and constrains the relationships and affects circulated throughout. The framing and assembling capacities of algorithmically enabled social media challenge us to rethink some of the assumptions that have been made about the circulation of information.

Touching Down / Filling-In the Gap

To conclude our intervention, we return to our opening anecdote as a device to bring the previous arguments and ideas together. We suggest that Milan (2015) would recognise the spatialities of the “cloud protest” in the materiality of the conspiracists gathered on the Tyne Bridge, insofar as their slogans, signs, and patterns are simultaneously individualised and part of a collective web of incoherent, diffuse bits of code, assembled by and through algorithmic circulations. The protest fills a series of gaps. In a spatial sense, there is a gap in the provision of functional public space where coherent democratic ideas are exchanged and debated—an outgrowth of ongoing urban austerity and neoliberal privatisation and enclosure (Luger and Lees 2020). Thus, the precarious pavement along the Tyne Bridge fulfils this role, as does the accessibility of social media platforms, where epistemic mis/distrust flourishes and finds resonance.

Likewise, in a political and epistemic sense, the protest fills a gap in understanding the coherence and legibility of the policies and so-called expert knowledge surrounding these issues. Indeed, the societal costs and benefits of “Ultra-Low Emission Zones” (ULEZ) and their associated urban planning interventions, wrapped up as they are into hazy language around “15-minute cities”, “smart cities”, or “quality of life”, are not well-communicated. For instance, the “Low-Traffic Neighbourhood” (LTN) has increasingly made its presence felt in British towns and cities since the Covid-19 pandemic on the back of a national government-funded scheme, and yet no official definition of what constitutes a LTN exists. A search for the term brings up descriptions of what LTNs *do* rather than what they *are* (e.g. Transport for London 2020), and boosters who claim that LTNs are inscribed in a long tradition of British urban planning—and yet are unable to offer more than anecdotal evidence of this history (see e.g. Kingston Cycling Campaign 2021). That many LTNs were put into place during the pandemic with *ex post facto* public consultation (Powell 2023) further exacerbates a genuine gap in local democratic processes that far-right influencers are prepared to fill by providing ostensibly coherent explanations such as the “climate lockdown” conspiracy theory (Institute for Strategic Dialogue 2023). This and other theories are, to be sure, repellent in their invocation of the “blood and soil” rogues’ gallery of scapegoats, updated for the early 21st century: alongside the distressingly long-standing figure of the Jewish-coded “globalist”, for example, sits newer enemies such as the “woke authoritarian” (see Cammaerts 2022). And

yet, they are devastatingly effective at appealing to the positive emotions attached to hearth, nation, and faith (Lizotte and Luger forthcoming). In the case of LTNs, for example, it is not difficult to see how the imposition of literal roadblocks without local consent could be construed as a threat by, for instance, car-dependent parents or pensioners, to the home and those who live in it. Speculation about the origin of such measures, shared amongst perceived peers and algorithmically attached to conspiracies of elite machination, fill in the gaps caused by the personal destabilisations brought about by traffic barriers with narratives of community empowerment and mutual support (see van Prooijen 2016). Leaflets distributed at a February 2023 protest against LTNs in Oxford, for instance, call on participants to “reject the future ... [that Oxfordshire County Council is] making for your family and help each other work towards a better one” (Not Our Future 2023).

We return, then, to our protestors on the Tyne Bridge, and our introductory question: do they manifest far-right politics? While it may be a dissatisfying answer, we would suggest that the focus should be somewhat less on the protestors themselves, and more on the material, informational, and emotional dimensions of the gaps they are attempting to fill. This point is essential: a task for researchers will be to grasp how these gaps are understood by those who seek to fill them. After all, how is the full story of what an Ultra-Low Emission Zone will accomplish communicated to an urban citizen, especially one that may be already sceptical of government policies? It does not take much investigation to discover that the ULEZ narrative, at least as it is presented to the public, consists largely of presumptions of self-evident benefits backed by circular explanations. However necessary we, as educated professionals, may believe that ULEZs are to combat the deleterious effects of climate change or local air quality, we should recognise that no crisis overrides the central importance of persuasion to democratic governance. As Bennett (2020) argues, believing experts’ opinions and following expert recommendations, especially when those recommendations involve disruptive lifestyle changes, require different forms of trust where the latter—“recommendation” trust—does not follow naturally from the former—“epistemic” trust. Framing opposition to public-health or environmental measures as wilful or malicious ignorance that must be overcome is to ignore the actually existing gaps in trust that will, inevitably, be filled by actors proposing an alternative “democratic” narrative promising solidarity and freedom from elite malfeasance.

Algorithms fill some of those gaps by connecting bits and pieces of—however unintentionally—coded language about the nature and necessity of ULEZs and stringing together the story into something legible. People then fill the remaining gap by showing up with protest signs, connecting with each other, creating a space of connected language, connected space, and connected democracy. The far-right, with its conspiracist, distrustful, and parasitic nature, supercharged by algorithmic dimensions, feeds on and creeps into these gaps, offering the seductive illusion of a “full story” and the false promises of answers to sceptics’ questions. We suggest that this creep will continue to present a threat to democratic processes, governance, and institutions. However, we caution that if we persist in seeing the circulation of conspiracy theories and accusations of elite machination as purely driven by “misinformation”, we risk focusing on the supposed pathologies of the adherents to these narratives at the expense of the very real informational, participatory, and emotional gaps that such narratives fill.

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