

INTRODUCTION

Selling the Right Wing

So join the struggle while you may.
The revolution is just a T-shirt away.
—Billy Bragg

On a hot day in late June 2010, I shaded my eyes with folded hands and peered through a locked steel-and-glass doorway into a well-lit Berlin clothing store named Trømso, after a Norwegian town with a rich Norse history.¹ A doorbell-style buzzer enabled access to the store by permission only. Although I would later go back to peruse the clothing in greater depth, on that first visit, I found myself uncharacteristically hesitant to press the button, even though I had spent months studying the brand and securing funding to go there in person from New York. Somewhat irritated with myself, and realizing there were no staff or customers visible at this midday hour, I settled for observing the store through the windowed entry, alternately peering through the glass, taking photos, and scribbling field notes under the hot sun.

What I saw was this: bamboo-colored flooring connected the entryway with the rear of the store, where stacks of neatly-folded T-shirts and sweat-shirts rested on deep, bright-white shelving. Near the store's entrance, a mannequin sported a lovely, butter-yellow polo shirt and lightly distressed jeans. Boxwood topiary globes rested atop tall, woven-seagrass planters flanking the front counter, while a pair of additional small boxwood globes were centered on stone platters on each side of the register. A rubber-backed carpet protected the floor at the entryway, emblazoned with the store's name and logo in large print. To a casual observer, the store was chic and inviting, and it certainly looked no different from any other mainstream, sporty clothing shop. But in fact, as I already knew, Trømso was not any ordinary store. Along with Thor Steinar's Tønsberg shop, which had opened in February 2008 in the heart of Berlin's hippest commercial district a few kilometers away—Trømso was clear evidence of the radical, and profitable, transformation in far right youth subcultural style analyzed in this book.

Since the early 2000s, far right youth have gravitated away from the singular, hard-edged skinhead style in favor of sophisticated, fashionable, and

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highly profitable commercial brands that deploy coded far right extremist symbols. German and American media have dubbed the youth who wear such brands “Nipsters” —Nazi hipsters.² By marrying right-wing ideology and symbols with popular culture and style in high-quality clothing, Thor Steinar (the parent brand of the Trømso and Tønsberg stores described above) —and similar commercial entities, such as Erik and Sons and Ansgar Aryan —have effectively created a new far right subculture. Buying a bomber jacket, shaving one’s head, and donning combat boots are no longer the “entry points” to the right-wing scene. Today’s far right youth can express their own individuality and still be right wing, and commercial entities are both capitalizing on this and acting as driving forces of the phenomenon.

Commercialization is not an entirely new phenomenon for the far right. The commercialization of right-wing ideology dates at least to the early 1930s, when for-profit companies began to produce a variety of souvenir-style products deploying likenesses of Hitler, symbols like the swastika, and the national colors: black, white, and red. Nazi consumers could buy children’s toy soldiers, yoyos, spinning tops, playing cards and horns, chocolate candies with swastikas, clothing, accessories, and decorative items like pocket watches, busts of Hitler, collector plates, paper cups, tin pails, piggy banks, German-style suspenders, and even light bulbs with swastikas imprinted on the glass.³ Referred to as national “kitsch,” such commercial products were viewed critically by Nazi party leaders and others who felt the use of revered symbols like the swastika on commercial products was irreverent and cheapened the National Socialist ideology. “Out with National Kitsch!” declared a 1933 headline in the Cologne newspaper *Der Feuerreiter Köln*, describing the production and sale of such items as “outrageous,” while a Berlin newspaper the same year referred to the phenomenon as an “industry of tastelessness.”⁴

This early commercialization remained limited to touristic, decorative items using standard symbols and iconography valorizing the Nazi party during the Third Reich.⁵ But in the 1980s, the commercialization of far right ideology reemerged as part of the growing popularity of the right-wing rock music scene in the United States, which spread quickly to Europe.⁶ The neo-Nazi skinhead style emerged at this time, characterized by shaved heads, high black combat boots (typically worn with white laces), suspenders (braces), and bomber jackets —a working-class aesthetic adopted from British racist skinheads.⁷ Right-wing youth gathered, socialized, and radicalized at global right-wing concert tours and music festivals, while music CDs were sold in mail-order catalogs, from product sheets, out of the backs of cars at concerts, on folding tables, and, eventually, on centralized clearinghouse websites. A limited range of basic product items were sold during this period,

including low-budget, screen-printed T-shirts, pins, patches, and stickers with coded symbols and references to far right ideology. The product quality was rudimentary, and the coded symbols lacked the kind of sophisticated coding, complex symbol usage, and product quality that would develop in earnest a few decades later.

This all changed when Thor Steinar launched its product line with a slick mail-order catalog in 2002, offering high-quality clothing laced with sophisticated codes relying on historical, colonial, military, and Norse mythological references.⁸ From the outset, Thor Steinar was significantly different from the commercialization that predated it. It crafted a new way of coding and embedding ideology, drawing on less overt references than previous products had done; even the brand's name, for example, combines reference to a Norse god and a (misspelled) name of a Nazi general. The clothing captivated a generation of far right youth who were eager to shed the social stigma of the skinhead look and avoid the legal ramifications of banned symbols, and it inspired an entire genre of extremist attire, with new brands targeting micro-subcultures within the far right spectrum. The style enabled youth to embrace more mainstream clothing and subcultural styles while still secretly conveying racist, white supremacist, and far right ideologies, including xenophobia and the valorization of violence, whiteness, and Nazi and colonial history.⁹

Within a few years, Thor Steinar had moved beyond a mail-order catalog, developing a sophisticated website that was virtually indistinguishable from high-end brands like Abercrombie and Fitch or Marc O'Polo, and began opening chic physical stores in major cities throughout Germany. The website and stores evoke sporty, fashionable, mainstream brands. The clothing is expensive (the equivalent of \$30 to \$40 for a T-shirt or over \$100 for a pair of denim jeans). The quality of the cotton, the workmanship, and the fit is far superior, with more variety and product styles, than previous products marketed to far right youth. Product lines include men's, women's, and children's clothing (later discontinued) as well as accessories like bags, belts, key chains, hats, and wallets.

The sweeping commercial success of the Thor Steinar brand—which by the mid-2000s was earning annual revenues of nearly €2 million¹⁰—rapidly and literally transformed the face of the European extreme right.¹¹ Other brands quickly followed in Thor Steinar's footsteps, marketing mainstream-style clothing with coded symbols that evoke, connote, or directly reference far right ideological viewpoints or mythic ideals appealing to the subculture—such as Vikings. Today, there is a diverse range of brands that are popular among youth in the far right scene, particularly within soccer

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and hooligan subcultures. About a dozen brands clearly dominate the scene in terms of their popularity with youth and the attention given to them through the media, monitoring from authorities, bans in stadiums and schools, and trainings for educators. Three brands—Erik and Sons, Ansgar Aryan, and Thor Steinar—initially produced the most sophisticated and comprehensive lines of clothing, but others have quickly jumped into the market as well.

The brands are distinguishable from one another in a variety of ways. Some websites sport hypermasculine, muscular models with heavy tattoos and piercings, while others are sportier and clean-cut. Some of the brands use clear and direct racist or xenophobic references, while others use a subtler approach relying on colonial, military, and mythical references and motifs. Ansgar Aryan is known among antifascist activists as a “clear neo Nazi fashion vehicle,” while Erik and Sons is characterized as a less expensive and more authentic counterpart to the mainstream style of Thor Steinar.¹² At least two brands (Fourth Time and Label 23/Boxing Connection) have cornered a crossover market comprising youth at the intersection of three subcultural scenes: the far right, soccer/football hooligans, and martial arts subcultures.¹³ Other brands, like Yakuza, are known primarily for their offensive and provocative iconography that includes but also extends beyond right-wing ideology, including T-shirts and hoodies with misogynistic iconography and references alongside racist, Islamophobic, anti-Semitic, and xenophobic ones. Phalanx Europa, tied to the Identitäre Movement, steers away from the dark colors and camouflage patterns popular with the early brands, marketing modern, hip clothing in bright colors with witty, intellectual iconography and commentary.¹⁴

The specific product images I analyze in this book draw heavily from the three major brands, but I include smaller and crossover brands in my analysis of images and commercialization as well. Regardless of their market share, what the brands share is a way of encoding historical and contemporary far right, nationalistic, racist, xenophobic, Islamophobic, and white supremacist references into iconography, textual phrases, colors, script, motifs, and product names within products that are essentially identical to other mainstream youth clothing styles. Absent the coded symbols, in other words, the new brands in the far right scene are virtually indistinguishable in style from other clothing popular with youth. This is a radical shift for a youth subculture that was virtually synonymous for two decades with its uniform, skinhead style of shaved or closely cut hair, black bomber jacket, camouflage fatigues, and high black combat boots.

It is not only the codes themselves that are fascinating, but their embeddedness in high-quality, well-made mainstream style clothing. The clothes are expensive economic objects that also act as status symbols while simultaneously embedding a nationalist, xenophobic, or extremist code in the embroidered stitching on the lapel of a \$75 hooded sweatshirt. The T-shirt plays a particular role in this regard, bearing the heaviest weight of the coded messages. Long-sleeve or short-sleeve, the T-shirts (and heavier hooded sweatshirts) act as billboards, literally serving up a broad-chested message to observers. As Timo, a twenty-two-year-old scaffold builder apprentice explained, there is intentionality in T-shirt iconography and messaging: “Lots of people wear [such symbols] on a T-shirt so that it can be seen. So that you can see, OK, good, they are maybe a little *gewaltbereit* [ready to be violent].”¹⁵ Consumers thus become literal embodiments of nationalist messages—a topic that is discussed in greater depth in chapter 6’s analysis of masculinity and the body.

The brands’ relationships with the far right varies. One of Thor Steinar’s original owners, Axel Kopelke, reportedly had ties to the far right scene, but the brand was subsequently sold to a conglomerate based in Dubai before returning to European leadership in 2010 under CEO Marco Wäspe.¹⁶ Its reputation today is of a brand that deliberately markets to and profits from the far right scene. Prominent neo-Nazi Patrick Schroeder told an American reporter, for example, that Thor Steinar’s use of Nordic references to attract neo-Nazi consumers was an “ice-cold, political, economic calculation and it worked out for them.”¹⁷ The brand remains an identifiable symbol of far right affinity and of the modern extreme right in Germany more generally, even as over time the brand has distinctly shifted away from direct right-wing codes, relying more heavily on Nordic mythology in what antifascist activists have referred to as a “light aesthetic change.”¹⁸ Several of the other brands have explicit connections to the far right. Erik and Sons’ CEO Udo Siegmund has reportedly been spotted with neo-Nazi bands and at concerts, according to antifascist news sources; the brand has sponsored bands and far right gatherings¹⁹ and reportedly has a strong connection to the far right scene, according to one antifascist activist I spoke with. Ansgar Aryan’s racist and neo-Nazi connections are fairly clear in the brand name alone.²⁰ Phalanx Europa, founded by Austrians Patrick Lenart and Martin Sellner, is closely tied to the far right Identitäre Movement—a hip, modern, youth-oriented subset of the far right. A pro-Identitäre website tells potential consumers that wearing the brand in your clique, at school, when you go out, or while you work out is “an aesthetic-political act: against the multi-kulti [multicultural]

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empire, against the action-less bourgeois and the vision-less pessimists. No to the flooding of Europe, no to dull consumption—yes to heroism.”²¹

The codes themselves rely on—and market to—consumers’ knowledge of far right ideology but also play on adolescent (masculine) desires related to rebellion, resistance, aggression, violence, male camaraderie, belonging, and identity.²² Many of the symbols deployed by the brands directly reference immigrant groups and ethnic and religious minorities or express exclusionary, xenophobic, or racist ideologies. The code deployment carefully toes the line of legality in Germany, sometimes marketing directly to consumers’ awareness of legal bans of particular symbols and phrases, as chapter 2 details in greater depth.

The introduction of commercial stores selling the brands in major cities, meanwhile, contributes to the broader growth of far right subculture, because the stores serve not only as sites to sell consumer products, but also as what Germans call *Verknüpfungspunkte*—“nexus points.” Physical stores are gathering places for right-wing youth to share ideology and news about right-wing rock music concerts, and to plan protests, rallies, neo-Nazi marches, or other activities. Commercialization is more than merely a reflection of subcultural style, in other words. The phenomenon is rather unique to Germany, although the strategy is expanding and the largest brand, Thor Steinar, is sold in shops throughout Europe and Eastern Europe and most recently in the U.K. and North America, as chapter 5 discusses in greater detail. Thor Steinar registered a U.S. trademark and as of 2016 is selling the brand online through its U.S.-based representative, Dortrix. Aside from this development, however, the commercialization that exists in the United States is rudimentary in comparison to the European scene, and the symbol usage is much less complex; there is no comparable degree of sophistication in the American commercial market for products laced with far right wing references or codes.

Commercialization in Context

The growth of the extremist commercial market has coincided with one of the most significant waves of far right popularity in Europe in recent memory. The past several years have witnessed a steady increase in far right wing politics and social movements across Europe. In 2014, voters elected far right, anti-immigrant, Eurosceptic, and nationalist parties into parliaments in fourteen European countries, winning a quarter or more of the national vote in Denmark and France, a fifth in Austria, and more than 10 percent in Greece, Hungary, and the Netherlands (with 9.7 percent in Sweden).

Meanwhile, far right parties gained fifteen additional seats in the May 2014 European Parliament elections (for a total of fifty-two seats), while Greece's openly neo-Nazi party Golden Dawn and Germany's National Democratic Party (NPD)—a controversial but legal party—won seats there for the first time.²³ The new German far right party Alternative for Germany (AfD) has achieved surprising results across the country, winning especially high percentages of the 2016 regional elections in the state of Sachsen-Anhalt (24.3 percent), where they became the second-strongest party after the Christian Democratic Union (CDU).²⁴

These electoral trends toward the far right have been punctuated by spectacular and ongoing acts of right-wing terrorist violence, as I discussed in this book's preface. Dozens of defendants from the Golden Dawn party remain on trial in Greece for a variety of criminal activities, including supporting black-clad vigilantes who have repeatedly attacked immigrants on the street. In Germany, the migrant crisis sparked a violent backlash from the extreme right, as over one thousand attacks on refugee homes took place in 2015.²⁵ Less violent far right actions have also increased significantly; tens of thousands of ordinary citizens have joined regular PEGIDA (Patriotic Europeans against the Islamization of the Occident) marches across Europe.

Such protests and violent episodes exist in a context in which far right, nationalist, xenophobic, anti-Semitic, Islamophobic, and racist rhetoric and discourse has risen across Europe.²⁶ Prominent incidences of anti-Semitic violence in the summer of 2014 in Europe led the Swiss chairman of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) to warn that “anti-Semitism remains a challenge to stability and security in the OSCE region.”²⁷ A recent Pew Global Attitudes survey reported high levels of anti-Muslim, anti-Roma, and anti-Jewish sentiment in several European countries; over half of those surveyed reported unfavorable views toward Muslims in Italy, Greece, and Poland, for example.²⁸ In Germany, the most recent “Mitte” study—a nationally representative survey conducted every two years—reported increases in resentments against asylum seekers and Muslims; fully 50 percent of respondents in 2016 reported that they “occasionally feel like a stranger in my own country because of how many Muslims there are here.”²⁹ In their 2015 annual report, the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz, or BfV) noted increases in the number of right-wing extremist individuals in general as well as in the more specifically defined groups of “subcultural right-wing extremists” and neo-Nazis.³⁰

These developments pose significant challenges for countries that have spent decades rebuilding democratic societies in the post-World War II era and have firmly committed to policies and practices that protect pluralistic

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communities. Academics and policy makers have struggled to understand the diverse causes and dynamics that have made the far right so appealing for so many people—that appear, in other words, to have made the extreme more mainstream. Although largely stylistic, the Nipster is a consequential development for policy makers and educators who find it more difficult to recognize far right young people in time to intervene, whether in or outside of classrooms. As a recent *New York Times* article declared, the Nipster “is discomfiting for how it undermines our ability to identify a potential threat.”³¹ And while the brands have carefully toed the line of legality, occasionally they produce iconography or messaging that crosses the line into illegal territory. As a result, these developments in commercialization have been carefully monitored by German authorities, policy makers, educators, and anti-fascist activists. Thor Steinar, for example, which officially and vehemently denies far right connections, has nonetheless been widely recognized as a brand associated with the far right. The Office for the Protection of the Constitution (*Verfassungsschutz*) in Brandenburg contends that the Thor Steinar brand serves as a “scene-typical badge of recognition and demarcation.”³²

Banning is one of the primary strategies pursued by authorities in their efforts to combat the far right. Dozens of symbols, phrases, and even specific gestures are legally banned in Germany if they can be directly tied to the Nazi party. Saying “Heil Hitler” or raising one’s arm in the so-called Hitler greeting are arrestable offenses under article 86a in the German criminal code (*Strafgesetzbuch*), which prevents the public use of symbols, signs, and speech acts associated with national socialist organizations (or other organizations deemed to be against the constitution).³³ Symbols like the swastika, the official Nazi flag, the “SS” runic symbol, and the civil badge of the SA (*Sturmabteilung*) are therefore all legally banned. Specific symbols associated with global pan-Aryan or racist groups such as the Celtic cross are also banned, as are symbols that are so similar to banned symbols (such as modified swastikas) they are deemed to be “equivalent” to the banned symbols.³⁴ Thus, the Triskele, for example, a modified swastika that was used by a division of the SS as well as the once-banned right-wing group Blood and Honour, is illegal because it is tied to a banned organization. The legal bans are limited in power, however, particularly because in recent years, the German courts have tended to rule in favor of defendants who argue for the right to use modified Nazi and far right wing symbols. Legal bans are also limited in scope because they are largely restricted to symbols proven to have a direct association with banned organizations.³⁵

The key interpretive issue for courts in recent years has hinged on the concept of “association” with banned organizations—namely, whether or not

any given symbol can be shown to directly reference an organization like the Nazi party. Thor Steinar's original logo is a classic case of how the courts' views on symbols are evolving. The original logo was created by combining two banned runic symbols (both of which had been used by the Nazi party) into a symbol that evoked a swastika. The logo was banned in several German states and became the subject of protracted legal disputes, until several state courts overturned the legal bans on the logo (see chapter 5 for further discussion). The courts' reversals were based on a semiotic argument: namely, that the combination of two banned symbols creates a new symbol that can no longer be understood to reference the banned organization.³⁶

As I came to learn during discussions with scholars and antifascist activists, the state makes an effort to monitor new brands through the patent registration process. The German Patent and Brand Office (Deutsches Patent- und Markenamt) approves applications for new brand names once they confirm applicants are not copying existing patented brands and once they ensure that the brand's content is legal and not objectionable. This latter condition, known as *Verstoss gegen die guten Sitten* — loosely translated as “objectionable against good morals” — allows the patent office to reject applicants on moral grounds. The classic case is pornography, but right-wing extremist content is monitored as well, and brand applications are rejected when they contain clear right-wing extremist content.³⁷ The process is not foolproof, however: as a colleague explained to me, the new German brand Consduple passed initial review because the reviewers did not catch the embedded code in the name — the initials of the Nazi party, NSDAP — but a few weeks later, it lost its protected brand category when the true meaning behind the brand name came to light. This means that the T-shirt can continue to be produced, but not with protected brand (*Markenschutz*) status.

While legal bans of entire brands may not be possible, it is possible to ban particular symbols if they are deployed in public — notably the swastika, but other symbols as well (see chapter 5). Moreover, dress codes and rules within private and public institutions can be implemented and are widely in use. Visitors as well as employees of the Bundestag, the federal parliament in Berlin, are prohibited from wearing Thor Steinar clothing. The brand (along with other brands, symbols, and logos) is banned in many schools, public sector buildings like the Bundestag, stadiums, and at least one university.³⁸

There is also considerable attention among antifascist activists to the brands and stores. Although I found general public awareness of the commercialization phenomenon to be fairly uneven, left-wing activists are highly engaged in efforts to publicize and protest the brands, particularly when they open physical storefronts. On the June day when I first observed the Trømsø

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store in Berlin, I noted that the store's exterior shutters and paint bore the effects of paint-bomb attacks. Remnants of splattered paint—large black blobs across the top, smaller red spatters down the creamy columns between the windows—were evidence of left-wing activists' repeated assaults. Later the same day, I observed the entrance of the Thor Steinar Tønsberg, nestled amongst chic local boutiques in Mitte's Rosa Luxemburg Strasse, an area populated heavily by tourists drawn to the neighborhood's stores, cafes, galleries, and high-end shops. The Tønsberg façade was heavily damaged, covered in red paint, with broken, cracked, and scratched windows. Two weeks later, I passed a poster with an image of a fist punching the Thor Steinar logo, under the words "Close down the Nazi-Shop Trømso" (*Naziladen Trømso dichtmachen*) (see plate 25). Across the center of the poster, two photos appear: one a photo of the broken glass of a clothing retailer's storefront, and the other of the Trømso shop. At the bottom of the poster, the phrase "Broken glass shards bring good luck!" appears in bold, red capital letters, over the address and telephone of the Trømso store.³⁹ Other store openings produced similar reactions and protests, as did the opening of a Thor Steinar store in London in 2014.⁴⁰ When Thor Steinar opened a store in Chemnitz named Brevik just a short time after the right-wing extremist Anders Behring Breivik murdered seventy-seven mostly young people in Norway, there was tremendous public outcry.⁴¹

In this book, I examine the emergence of high-quality, commercialized products laced with far right extremist codes. The case is fascinating as a study of youth subcultures and symbol usage, but it is also about much more than subcultural style. I will suggest that consumption of coded ideological symbols is a potential gateway to extremist recruitment and radicalization. The mainstreaming of extremist subcultural style has made it easier for youth to wear and consume commercialized products and clothing laced with extremist, anti-Semitic, racist, and nationalist coded symbols and references. For some youth, they are an entry point to the scene. They are products that desensitize youth, dehumanize immigrants and religious or ethnic minorities, and make light of past pogroms and tragedies. They are worthy of our serious attention.

The Empirical Base

The methodological appendix offers a full overview of the methods and data I used in my efforts to understand the transformation in far right youth subculture documented in this book. My research for this project very much followed the tenets of grounded theory, although I didn't plan it that way. In the early years of this project, my intent was to study the symbols, iconogra-

phy, and codes prevalent across the new brands in the far right scene. I was focused on trying to understand how the coding worked, what symbols were being deployed, and what they meant. With the help of a native German research assistant, I digitized commercial product catalogs, took photos of clothing and products, captured screenshots from commercial websites, and sorted through thousands of photographs from three professional German photographers who follow the far right at public events such as protests, marches, festivals, and concerts. I gathered historical images where right-wing symbols were evident, so that I could trace the historical usage of codes and symbols. Ultimately, I assembled a digital archive with several thousand images and coded those images in Atlas.ti, tagging each image with multiple inductive and deductive codes that helped filter and sort the images into categories that could be analyzed in greater depth.

The images in the digital archive are drawn from four main sources, which I discuss in greater depth in the methodological appendix. Three professional photographers who follow the far right and extremist right wing in everyday settings generously granted me searchable access to their full photo archives, enabling me to search by keyword and then sort through thousands of images of youth wearing and deploying commercialized clothing and coded symbols from 2001 through 2011. In order to understand whether and how the contemporary deployment of symbols and brand consumption drew on or modified historical symbols, I gathered historical images from the 1930s–40s from the special collections of confiscated prints, photographs, and Nazi propaganda at the John W. Kluge Center at the U.S. Library of Congress, the digitized collections housed at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, and a limited number of images from the private Granger Collection. In order to capture the shift from the skinhead era to the early commercialization, I gathered more recent historical images from the 1980s and 1990s, as well as contemporary images from the past decade, from the collections at the Anti-fascist Press Archive and Educational Center in Berlin. The archive I built also includes hundreds of screen shots of the websites of several commercial brands that sell clothing and products popular with far right youth, and digital images I captured on the street in Berlin and other German cities, including images, stickers, posters, graffiti, buttons, patches, banners, flags, clothing, and other products.

The task was immense. I spent a sabbatical year building and coding the initial database and then spent another full fellowship year at the University of Cologne analyzing two categories of the images in greater depth, which resulted in chapters 3 and 4 of this book. Analyzing the images was a complicated task that led me into new methodological territory, as I drew

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on scholarship on iconography and iconology, art history, religion, visual culture, and national myths and as I worked to decode complex layers of symbols requiring intimate knowledge of German nationalist history, global pan-Aryanism, and violent youth cultures.

Part of what is so difficult about the decoding process is that symbols are not only multivocal, but are also sometimes ephemeral rather than concrete. In other words, they often do not convey a decisive or direct meaning, but rather an evocative one. This does not weaken their impact; indeed, symbols and myths can be very powerful even in forms that are less than full-fledged narratives. The mythical motifs that Mircea Eliade references, for example, may be present in hints, partial images, or suggestions that are evoked or alluded to indirectly in phrases, symbols, or text.⁴² Thus, images that evoke Nordic imagery are just as important as ones that depict Nordic symbols or scenes directly.

But the presence of symbols that evoke rather than convey meaning directly does pose methodological challenges. When symbols *evoke* a sense of something, they elicit meaning in ways that often are abstract and dependent on an observer's own autobiography.⁴³ They are, as Davies explains, a "physical manifestation of ideas" that help manipulate "otherwise abstract concepts like those of kinship, manhood, womanhood, self-sacrifice, and so on."⁴⁴ The ways in which a symbol acts on an observer is highly dependent on the broader sociocultural configurations⁴⁵ in which individuals' lives are embedded; symbols are thus interpreted in light of broader social and cultural contexts and in light of individual's own life histories and experiences. An image of a father and daughter, for example, might evoke nostalgia, wistfulness, anger, tenderness, resentment, joy, yearning, grief, hopefulness, or more, depending on the observer's own filial relationships and history and the broader sociocultural norms, values, expectations, pressures, and practices related to parenthood, fatherhood, or childhood more generally. National symbols work the same way: images of national flags might evoke pride or shame or other affective reactions.⁴⁶ And these reactions vary tremendously within regional or national contexts; symbols like the Confederate flag, which many regard as a racist symbol glorifying slavery, is interpreted by others as a respectful tribute to southern heritage.⁴⁷ The interviews I conducted with fifty-one youth, in which they reviewed a subset of thirty-four of the images from the database and offered their own interpretations, were critical as checks against my own interpretations and to provide a sense of how observers react to and understand the coded symbols.

Finally, it is worth noting that the work of identifying and decoding allegorical images has many layers of complexity, particularly for someone who is working cross-culturally and crosslinguistically. In order to identify and

classify allegorical images—much less interpret and analyze them—several different strategies are needed.⁴⁸ This includes a familiarity with or consultation of expert source material related to particular allegories—otherwise, as Erwin Panofsky pointed out, an observer would simply identify a painting of the Last Supper as an “excited dinner party.”⁴⁹ This is very true in my own work as well, and the interpretation of these images draws not only on my own practical and subject knowledge but also on expert source consultation. I regularly consulted with scholars of the far right, antiracist activists, native German research assistants who have familiarity with far right scenes, literary and mythological sources and texts, and political and military history, particularly the period of the Third Reich, in my efforts to decode symbols and iconography.

Despite these efforts, there are no guarantees as to the “correctness”⁵⁰ of my interpretations, particularly because symbols are often multivocal and multivalent and can have ambiguous interpretations.⁵¹ Indeed, the producers of coded T-shirts and products rely heavily on this very ambiguity to avoid legal consequences and social stigma, as I discuss more in chapter 2. Labeling any particular symbol a “right-wing” symbol is possible only in the context of other symbols and cues. I discuss this dilemma further in the appendix.

School-Based Responses to the Far Right

My original plan was to write this book based on the images, but as analysis continued, I found myself unsatisfied with my ability to answer a number of questions about the production and reception of the images. Did consumers of the commercial products understand the coded iconography and intended messages? How do they interpret the symbols? Why do they purchase the clothing, and how do they understand its meaning within and outside of the far right scene? How have schools and teachers dealt with the transformations in far right subculture? Do teachers understand the coded messages, and if so, what do they do when they encounter them? On the production side, I had questions as well: how do the designers research and deploy the coded symbols and messages? How ideologically motivated are they, and how much are they driven primarily by profit motives?

Taking on all these questions would have made an already ambitious project completely unwieldy, and so I knew I had to narrow my focus. Ultimately, I decided to study the reception side and designed a second phase to the research that involved fieldwork and interviews in two schools—known here by the pseudonyms the Flusser school and the Erker school. I chose to focus on schools for several reasons. First, I have long been interested in schools as sites where young people are socialized into broader social values,

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including national identities. German schools have a mandate to counteract the radical right wing and have received increasing attention as a site where right-wing extremism needs to be dealt with more seriously,⁵² so they were a natural place to study how authorities were reacting to the transformations in far right subculture. Second, schools are the most frequent site where youth encounter bans on brands and symbols and are an ideal site to study the relationship between local policy decisions (like school bans) and youth resistance, shedding potential new light on the relationship between schools and youth culture. Moreover, because the vast majority of research on youth “resistance” has focused on the left,⁵³ we know almost nothing about how schools affect youth culture on the right. Little is known about the impact of school bans on youth consumption of extremist symbols or their commercialization. There has been some attention to right-wing extremism in the German school system⁵⁴ and specifically in vocational schools,⁵⁵ but these studies—or the research on which they are based—predate the emergence of the new commercial forms of right-wing extremist subculture, which began in earnest after 2000. Other work on far right and right-wing extremist style is not connected to schools.⁵⁶ There is anecdotal evidence that the game-playing aspect of the coded symbols are directly related to bans, as I discuss more in chapter 5. But there has been no empirical research studying how the bans are understood by far right youth; whether the bans have an influence on their consumption of coded symbols and commercial products; or whether such consumption is related to far right wing and extremist behaviors and attitudes. Most of the research on the far right wing, particularly in Germany, has focused on tracing predictors of right-wing extremism, analyzing the role of social class, gender, education, family socialization, region, employment status, exposure to foreigners, and other factors as they relate to youth’s propensity to join right-wing extremist groups.⁵⁷ In sum, I hoped that by heading to schools, I would be able to shed light on the relationship between bans on symbols and the use of coded symbols in the new game-playing culture of far right wing youth.

Finally, I chose to work with schools because they are an excellent place to gain access to youth. I needed to gain access to youth who were consumers of far right clothing brands, or who at least came into frequent enough contact with the brands to be able to discuss them. Vocational schools in Germany educate the majority of German youth aged sixteen to twenty and are clustered by career field. From my previous fieldwork in German schools, I knew that vocational schools for construction trades have struggled with significant populations of far right youth, and that they would be a place where I would be able to talk to youth in and around the far right scene.⁵⁸

I would thus be able to gain access to a population of youth who were high risk for far right and extremist participation or who had spent much of their lives around other youth who were part of those scenes.

Berlin was an appealing site because the two schools I studied are the only construction trade schools in the state, and so all youth from Berlin and much of the surrounding state of Brandenburg who want to train in a construction field end up as students at one of these two schools. In a stroke of fieldwork-design luck, one of the two schools in Berlin bans all symbols, brands, and representations that convey ideological positions, while the other does not. The schools' student populations are quite similar, drawing largely from the same region and youth backgrounds, and students do not directly choose the schools; they are assigned to one school or the other based on their selection of occupation. The similarities in the student bodies and the variation in policy decisions thus set up a naturally occurring, quasi-experimental design, providing the opportunity to examine whether and how the bans affect the use of coded symbols among youth and the participation of youth in the right wing more generally.

The Berlin schools also appealed to me because Berlin is one of only a few locations where young people can train to become scaffold builders, who I anticipated would be particularly well-informed participants. I knew from my previous research that scaffold builder classrooms were likely to have higher numbers of far right youth compared to other occupations. As Oliver, a twenty-three-year-old nearing the end of his scaffold builder apprenticeship, noted, "I've only known about brands like Thor Steinar for the past two years or so, since I started training to be a scaffold builder, where it's said that a certain ideology is represented." Moreover, the scaffold builders brought important regional diversity to the study because scaffold builder apprentices travel to Berlin for multiweek residential sessions, staying in a dormitory and attending theoretical training in school intensively before they return to their home cities for further practical training. This meant that from a base in Berlin, I was able to interview young people from cities throughout eastern Germany, such as Leipzig and Braunschweig.

I therefore aimed to oversample scaffold builders (N=9), who ultimately made up nearly 20 percent of the fifty-one youth interviewees. Concrete layer (N=7) and masonry (N=7) apprentices constituted an additional 27 percent of the final sample, with the remaining interviewees spread across a variety of construction fields, from roofing and carpentry to more specific fields related to historic preservation, building energy design, and street construction (see tables 7 and 8). All but two of the youth interviewed were born in Germany, though the two born elsewhere (in Poland and in Kazakhstan)

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grew up in Berlin. Four youth (who were born in Germany) had names that are traditionally Turkish in origin, indicating at least partial Turkish heritage. Two of the fifty-one youth were female, which is consistent with male-dominated fields in construction. Although some of the brands have limited women's product lines, there are far fewer options, and the iconography tends to contain fewer coded symbols, compared with the men's clothing (see chapter 6 for further discussion).

Ultimately, with the help of my field coordinator and research assistant based in Berlin, I conducted sixty-two interviews in 2013–14⁵⁹ with youth (N=51) and their teachers and principals (N=11), which focused on how young people interpret the brands and symbols and the effect of school bans on the game-playing nature of coded extremist symbols. The interviews with youth aimed to understand whether young people—who were aged sixteen to thirty-nine⁶⁰ at the time of their interview, with an average age of twenty-one—own or wear any of the banned clothing, how they define their own sense of style and its meaning to them, how they feel about school bans of symbols or clothing brands, and how they interpret a series of images depicting far right symbols in clothing. Interviews with teachers and principals are supplemental, primarily providing background information on the history of the schools and local discussions about bans and their enforcement, and illustrating teachers' and principals' engagement with the issue of school bans and far right youth culture.

Thus, the empirical base for this book is a combination of the unique digital archive of thousands of historical and contemporary images, combined with sixty-two interviews conducted in 2013–14 in two German construction trade vocational schools with histories of far right extremist youth presence. The digital archive enabled me to track the emergence of the far right commercial scene and its use of symbols, while the interviews and observations traced whether and how young people in and on the periphery of the far right consume, understand, and interpret the brands and coded symbols, and how schools and educational policy makers are responding. Before I turn to an overview of the rest of this book, there are two key terms that need to be defined, because of their centrality to the book and its arguments. In the following section, I explain how I define and use the terms “youth” and the “far right.”

Youth in and around the Far Right Scene

I define “youth” as encompassing the period of life from early adolescence through the midtwenties. At the early end of this phase, youth are just beginning to experience greater freedom of movement from parents and other

authorities. At the latter end, most youth are transitioning into financial independence, working, studying, or training full time for future careers. It is a phase characterized by experimentation and norm breaking.⁶¹ During this decade of life, young people develop more independent political ideas, experience romantic and dating relationships, and increasingly find peer and friendship groups to be more important to their daily lives than their familial relationships.

Youth is also a phase when their individual and collective identities are developing and changing, as young people come into contact with new people and friends, learn more about their communities and worlds, and navigate complex sets of expectations from the cultural worlds of their peers, families, and broader communities. While the term “youth” sometimes applies to younger children as well as to adolescents and young adults, I follow the general trend in the literature in a focus on “older” youth (from late adolescence to young adulthood). This period marks the primary period in which political attitudes develop and solidify⁶² as well as a time when youth are experimenting with various styles, subcultures, and youth scenes. Such scenes and subcultures, notably, are not static or sealed units but adapt and change as youth enter and exit various groups.⁶³ Subcultures are—as Anoop Nayak skillfully describes—groups that “momentarily coalesce around a configuration of values only to transform and mutate again, in a perpetual state of flux and cultural repositioning.”⁶⁴ My focus on older youth aims to capture this phase of experimentation and varied engagements with subcultures and scenes, as they explore new styles, music, hobbies, and peer groups during the transition to early adulthood.

Any discussion of youth subcultures is predicated on an understanding of the “mainstream,” particularly because youth position themselves in resistance to it and as aiming to “provoke” it. It is important to note, however, that there is no single, monolithic mainstream society against which subcultures are positioned. Just like subcultures, the mainstream is not a sealed or static entity—it is, rather, a shifting spectrum against which youth in subcultural scenes position themselves. The term’s analytical usefulness thus derives from its usage by youth across a wide variety of subcultural scenes as they articulate anger toward what they perceive as the “mainstream.” As J. Patrick Williams explains, “young people’s claims about the ‘mainstream,’ while deemed vague and inarticulate by many adults (including social scientists), are real for the participants themselves. And . . . that reality is powerfully linked to notions of selfhood and identity, as well as to social behavior.”⁶⁵

Defining the far right is a somewhat more complex endeavor—in part because it, like all youth subcultures—is not a single or unitary entity. I rely

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on the term “far right” as a way of referencing attitudes, scenes, groups, and political parties that espouse some combination of xenophobic, antidemocratic, authoritarian, anti-immigrant, anti-Semitic, antigovernment, fascist, homophobic, ethnonationalist, or racist values, beliefs, actions, and goals. The term also extends to populist and Euroskeptical political parties, parts of the U.S. Christian right, the Tea Party movement, patriot groups, the Ku Klux Klan (KKK), neo-Nazi groups, right-wing terrorist cells like Germany’s National Socialist Underground (NSU), and “lone wolf” terrorists like Norway’s Anders Behring Breivik or the United States’ Wade Michael Page. There is significant variation in what counts as “far right” across countries, in part because of different historical and legal contexts.⁶⁶ Most research publications on the far right establish a definition for the term right at the outset—but these definitions vary to some extent.⁶⁷ Moreover, the labels are often ideologically laden (e.g., some use the term “hate groups,” but far right wing groups often position others as the “haters”) and are often heavily contested.⁶⁸ My use of the term “far right” aims to contextualize far right youth engagement within a broad spectrum, while acknowledging that scholars lack full agreement on what the “far right” actually is.

I regard far right youth as youth who are either actively engaged or quietly supportive of nationalist or exclusionary platforms that seek to maintain or restore national ethnoscares⁶⁹ to reflect an idealized community based on racial, ethnic, linguistic, or national criteria. Globally, this would include youth who are white or Aryan nationalists, Ku Klux Klan members, neo-Nazi members, soccer hooligans, neofascists, racist skinheads, and members of antigovernment patriot militia or hate groups, as well as youth who express views consistent with these groups—on social media, for example—even if they are not formal members.

Finally, it is important to note that far right youth identity is not clearly bounded or monolithic. Adolescence and early adulthood are key phases of identity formation, during which youth may move in and among various subcultural communities, engaging in contradictory actions or espousing conflicting identities. They may make racist comments on social media even as they exude loyalty and friendship to classmates or teammates who are members of minority groups. The public performance of identities and attitudes may contrast sharply with privately held beliefs or what youth say or do at home. Youth who express far right political views may be “far right” during early adolescence but move away from these views in later adolescence. Or they may offer contradictory views on topics like immigration, opposing the presence of certain groups while accepting others. In many cases, there is a strong emotional core to far right identity, but an unclear

or unarticulated connection to political ideology of any kind. Scholars have long understood youth identities to be fluid and complex, with boundaries that are porous rather than fixed.⁷⁰ Identification with far right scenes is no different. But while previous scholarship has shown that individuals hold multiple and sometimes conflicting identities,⁷¹ empirical work on extremist and far right wing identity has largely positioned youth engagement in extremism as unidimensional, fixed, and unconflicted. I suggest that youth who engage in extremist movements also need to be understood as holding identities that are complex, contradictory, multiple, and varied. Identities are messy rather than clear-cut; they can surge and retreat in relevance for individuals and communities at any given time, such that their value for an individual at any one point may not be easy to consciously articulate.⁷²

I have found it most accurate to speak of youth who are in and around the far right scene, which acknowledges that youth move in and out of various subcultural scenes in experimental and playful ways, shifting from core to periphery and back again. Sometimes these shifts take place over years, and sometimes the contradictions are apparent even in the course of a single interview. Across the interviews, it was rare for youth to directly volunteer that they were currently or formerly engaged with the far right. But many more expressed views consistent with right-wing ideology, making statements or agreeing with messaging in commercial products that expressed xenophobic, anti-Semitic, Islamophobic, racist, anti-immigrant, nationalist, or antigovernment ideologies. The majority had family, friends, classmates, acquaintances, or neighbors who are part of the far right or who owned clothing associated with the far right. These youth regularly engage with peers and communities that are quietly supportive or actively advocating for far right ideas.

Finally, it is critical to emphasize that even if they are experimental or contradictory, identities and actions can be dangerous and harmful, particularly when they originate in scenes where violence against others is valorized, celebrated, or encouraged; where minority religious or ethnic communities are dehumanized; and where racism and xenophobia are normalized, as is the case with many far right youth subcultural scenes and groups. Acknowledging that youth in the far right have flexible engagements in far right scenes does not therefore imply that those engagements are any less consequential or worthy of intervention.

Chapter Overview

In chapter 1, I situate the empirical base of *The Extreme Gone Mainstream* within theories of culture, nationalism, iconography, and youth extremist

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subcultures. I begin by describing two prevailing notions of how culture “works”—one that presents culture as a coherent meaning system and the other that characterizes it as a “tool kit” of actions and strategies. *The Extreme Gone Mainstream* highlights a mechanism that links these two theoretical approaches to culture, I suggest, by showing that symbolic codes are best understood as embedded in and constituted by meaning systems. Coded, commercialized symbols expressing far right ideology are strategies that can be understood only within the broader schematic structures that help people interpret and understand the messages those symbols convey. In this chapter, I also address theories of extremism and youth subcultures, arguing that previous research on nationalism and extremism has paid more attention to political dimensions than cultural ones. Finally, I link far right commercial symbols to recent scholarship on visual symbols, arguing that attention to the aesthetic dimensions of far right subculture is particularly overdue in light of the recent “iconic” turn in the social sciences.⁷³ As Dominik Bartmański and Jeffrey Alexander point out, sociologists’ ongoing attention to Marxist understanding of economic objects and their relationship to class-based exploitation has led many scholars to overlook the potential for economic objects to have constitutive power for individuals’ lives, identities, sense of belonging, or—in this case—the extremist participation of consumers.⁷⁴

I turn in chapter 2 to the first of the five areas that make up the empirical core of the book. In this chapter, I focus on the ways in which symbolic codes are manipulated and deployed in the iconography and text of clothing products. The chapter focuses in particular on the use of codes that draw on alphanumeric combinations or on historical references. Such codes are seen not only on T-shirts and other clothing products but also on tattoos, license plates, accessories, and even giant Styrofoam letters in football stadium stands. Some alphanumeric and historical codes are co-opted from other popular youth cultural scenes and then stripped of their original cultural referents. I trace the game-playing aspect of the codes, by showing how young people (and commercial companies) adapt the codes and their display in order to navigate bans of particular symbols and brands. Drawing on interview data with young Germans in and around the far right scene, this chapter also looks both at whether and how youth understand and interpret embedded far right codes, and at how they consume the clothing and products more generally.

Chapter 3 undertakes a careful analysis of commercial iconography and accompanying slogans and textual references to Norse and Germanic mythology in T-shirts and other products, combined with interview data ex-

plaining how youth interpret the meaning of these symbols and myths. The chapter argues that the fantasy of Nordic heritage—and all the positive traits associated to be a part of that heritage—including loyalty, purity, beauty, integrity, and honesty—appeal to youth as a strategy for handling the uncertainty of the postmodern era. I show how fantastical myths and symbols are used to directly depict or evoke a sense of loss, a sense of a particular way of life “slipping away,” or a sense of urgency around a need for preservation, survival, resurrection, or rebirth of a particular kind of nation. I argue that they help to crystallize a kind of “magical thinking” about the death (or potential death) of a blood-based ancestral group. Allegorical references—symbols that imply or convey something else—are of particular importance for how they facilitate what I call “aspirational nationhood”—fantasy expressions of a nation that never existed but that is nonetheless aspired to. Such symbols help strengthen group bonds and act as a powerful mechanism of belonging and identification for far right youth. In closing, I link these arguments to new theoretical work about the appeal of Nazism and fascism as rooted in the loss of stability in the global, postmodern era.⁷⁵

Chapter 4 examines historical and contemporary far right wing symbols that directly depict, reference, or evoke death or dying through reference to historical myths and legends as well as contemporary acts of violence. The chapter traces three ways in which the far right deploys symbols of death: abstract death, specific deaths and death threats, and reference to the death of a civilization or entire way of life. The chapter argues that the iconography of death helps evoke fear and produce anxiety among viewers, in part by breaching societal taboos that deem death unspeakable and by evoking death and violence in the name of the nation. By linking depictions of weapons that can cause death; illustrations or references to blood, war, physical fighting or confrontation; or violence to a particular vision of the nation, I argue that such iconography makes coded or oblique references to contemporary immigration and diversity in ways that indirectly or directly threaten members of minority and nonwhite groups. Symbols of death are thus a performative strategy to demonstrate fearlessness and suggest violence as a means to achieve nationalist or extremist goals.

In chapter 5, I analyze symbols borrowed from non-German movements and global or pan-Aryan extremists. Here, I also include the appropriation of nonextremist products that have been assigned new meaning as well as symbols and codes that are in languages other than German. Drawing on interview data as well as the image analysis, this chapter highlights the multivocality of far right symbols that are simultaneously nationalist and global. This multivocality is further amplified, I suggest, by the ironies of far right

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youth deployment of non-German symbols such as Palestinian scarves and Che Guevara T-shirts to signify a view of themselves as “freedom fighters,” while simultaneously adhering to anti-immigrant sentiments or enacting violence against ethnic and racial minorities in the name of the German nation. The chapter draws both on an analysis of images and of young people’s interpretation of “global” symbols deployed in the commercialized products to argue that far right ideologies have broadened, in the global era, beyond (mere) national borders. I suggest there are parallels for how other geographically dispersed extremist ideologies—from Islamist extremism to ecoterrorism—might mobilize followers across national and linguistic boundaries. Here, I also analyze legal disputes about the bans and examine youth reactions to school bans of particular symbols and codes as well as teachers’ discussions of the enforcement of those bans. Ultimately, I argue that banning policies tend to backfire, further contributing to the game-playing aspect of code modification that make the symbols appealing in the first place.

In chapter 6, I focus on how youth fashion and style serve as markers and expressions of belonging and resistance in ways that mutually reinforce masculinity and nationalism. Drawing on interview data, I show that style is deeply personal and intentional for young people. While research on young women has long discussed issues of body image, the interview data discussed here shows that clothing choices are also embedded in body image and in conceptions of masculinity for young men. The chapter focuses in particular on two emotional articulations of masculinity that are heavily marketed through the products: the desire for male comradeship and belonging, and the urge to express resistance, frustration, and anger at mainstream society. I also show how the products idealize male strength and physicality, drawing on muscular, tattooed Viking warriors with inflated biceps and hyper-masculine models that may appeal to adolescent males who feel pressured to conform to scripted ideals about appropriate masculine behavior and physique.⁷⁶ Hypermasculine symbols like Viking gods, I suggest, become intertwined with youth fantasies of a romantic, pure, and untroubled past⁷⁷ in ways that may help them navigate the transition to adult life and uncertain labor markets.

In the conclusion, I tease out two sets of implications illuminated in the book: one for our understanding of culture and one for our understanding of nationalism and extremism. Both implications rest on the evidence presented in chapters 2–6 of how the use of coded symbols can serve as a mechanism both of belonging and of resistance, helping youth feel connected to other insiders in the far right scene while simultaneously ex-

pressing resistance against mainstream society. I argue that this “push and pull” of belonging and resistance ought to expand our understanding of gateways to radicalization and violence by showing how commercialized extremist products—and other “lifestyle elements” like tattoos or far right wing music—help strengthen racist, nationalist, and ideological identification and act as conduits of resistance to mainstream society. In the German case, the commercialized, coded references and symbols—many of which use humor or aggressive coded references to historical atrocities against Jews, Muslims, and others deemed not to belong—desensitize and socialize consumers and their peers and dehumanize victims. Disaffected and disenfranchised youth who enter extremist and radical scenes through their consumption of subcultural elements like tattoos, clothing, styles, or music may become gradually more involved with extremist ideologies. Far from being mere “subcultural style,” commercialized extremist products can be a gateway to extremist scenes, radicalization, and violence. Style and aesthetic representation thus need to be considered more seriously for their potential role in radicalization.

I also suggest that the empirical analysis of symbolic deployment can help refine prevailing theories of culture and challenge mainstream sociologists to take economic objects more seriously not only for their exploitative power, but also for their constitutive possibilities. Developing a richer understanding “from the ground up” of the underpinnings of this particular subculture, I argue, has important implications for a range of youth extremist and radical practices globally as well as for sociologists’ understandings of how culture works.