

To understand the far right, look to their bookshelves

Sunday 7 April 2019, by [SHAFAK Elif](#) (Date first published: 1 April 2019).

From Jordan Peterson to Thilo Sarrazin, rightwing writers are bringing once fringe ideas into the mainstream.

I used to live in Tucson, teaching at the University of Arizona. The post-9/11 US, just half an hour away from the Mexican border, was a strange place to be. Armed vigilantes patrolled the desert hunting for illegal immigrants. Every day the local radio spewed paranoia and xenophobia. They talked about “true Americans” in small towns with “pure values”, as opposed to the corrupt liberal elite in the cities. A radical-right rhetoric was beginning to form, but it was still on the margins.

Poll after poll showed that trust in basic democratic institutions was diminishing. It was against this background that the rightwing radio host Rush Limbaugh claimed there were “[four corners of deceit](#)”: media, academia, science and government. Conspiracy theories mushroomed about how “liberal lobbies” had usurped the system. Populist demagogues began to advise building alternative rightwing institutions. A parallel universe. Information wars. Culture and knowledge, which have for centuries bound us together as human beings, were now regarded as a battleground.

Since then the radical right has seeped into the mainstream. A new breed of populist demagogue has arisen, with no care for facts, reason or data. Yet alongside this has been a silent shift: the emergence of a radical rightwing intelligentsia. With their books and talks they bridge the less-educated groups on the margins and the world of letters. A new publishing trend has emerged, and part of its task is to rewrite history.

In 2018, [Jean-Marie Le Pen’s memoir Son of the Nation](#) came out in France. The first edition sold out even before it arrived in bookshops. The book was, among other things, an attempt to rewrite the past, particularly the Vichy era. Nazi sympathisers in the Vichy government were romanticised as true French patriots. Le Pen himself has repeatedly denied the Holocaust, and calls the Nazi gas chambers “[just a detail](#)” in the history of the second world war. A similar attempt to reconstruct the past is taking place in Poland. In her books and talks, the historian Ewa Kurek claims the ghettos were “[voluntary](#)” and life was more difficult for Poles living outside the ghettos than it was for the Jews inside.

As a novelist I am particularly interested in how fiction fits into the new rightwing publishing. Hard though it is to admit for those of us who believe in the positive impact of books, today the art of storytelling is being used to spread hatred, bigotry and misinformation. That in itself is nothing new. [The Turner Diaries](#), a dystopian novel regarded as the bible of the far right, is a 1978 novel by WL Pierce (writing as Andrew Macdonald). It depicts a future society where white Americans have been subdued by non-white minorities. The dominance of these minorities is opposed by an armed movement named “the Order”, which eventually carries out a genocide of all non-white people. The book has inspired a series of terrorist attacks, including the Oklahoma City bombing of 1995, in which 168 people died. A white nationalist group that called themselves the Order murdered Alan

Berg, a liberal lawyer and anchorman, in 1984.

The Camp of the Saints, a 1973 novel by the French writer and explorer Jean Raspail, was recently rediscovered and repackaged by the far right. It has since sold in huge numbers, thanks to an endorsement from Steve Bannon. It, too, describes the collapse of western civilisation at the hands of “brown people”. Raspail, now 93, claims that the solution to today’s problems lies in suppressing compassion. “I have written that Christian charity will suffer a bit when faced with the answers to the influx of migrants. It will have to steel itself and suppress compassion of all sorts. Otherwise, our countries will be submerged.”

Few books in this new trend have been more influential than those written by the French novelist and essayist Renaud Camus. Camus, an ardent supporter of Marine Le Pen, claims a global elite is conspiring against the European white populations and culture. His views on “[the greatreplacement](#)” have been translated by far-right websites and used to reinforce the thesis that there is a “white genocide” at work.

That fear is also visible in Thilo Sarrazin’s 2010 book Germany Abolishes Itself, which topped German bestseller lists for 21 weeks and sold 1.5m copies. Sarrazin believes [Muslim immigrants are less intelligent than Germans](#). Emboldened by his remarks, rightwing activists in Germany demand IQ tests for immigrants. In 2018 Sarrazin published [Hostile Takeover](#), on more or less the same themes. This time, the political atmosphere has been even more welcoming with the far-right [Alternative for Germany](#) having entered parliament. In an interview, when asked whether he had anything positive to say about Islam, [Sarrazin responded](#): “No, I believe the world would have been a better place if Islam had never existed.”

The new radical right rhetoric deftly blends antisemitism and Islamophobia – but other forms of prejudice also share centre stage. Anti-feminism and gender bias echo throughout the works of the [Canadian clinical psychologist Jordan Peterson](#). Packaging age-old reactionary machismo with sophisticated, academic language, he is the perfect intellectual icon for young, discontented men involved in the radical right. Peterson enjoys making grandiose claims and then watching people get upset. He is difficult to categorise, and that elusiveness is clearly cultivated. He walks an increasingly thin line between a scholar who rightly defends freedom of speech, and a demagogue who fuels discrimination. One wonders if this does not bother his conscience.

When we think of white supremacists, we often think of uneducated, unemployed young men who spend entire days behind computer screens, individuals so disconnected and atomised they search desperately for a sense of safety and security in the dark labyrinths of the internet. We think of [Charlottesville](#), of angry men marching with flaming torches in their hands. But these images are limited, and they fail to capture the extent of the cultural shift we are undergoing today. To understand that, we need to focus on the seismic changes in the publishing industry. There is a new radical-right intelligentsia and they provide the missing link between the world of art and the margins, they give legitimacy to reactionary politics and to the backlash against progressive reforms; they systematically distort facts, unashamedly rewrite history, and use their words and social status to incite hostility and separation. And they manage to do all of this with a shiny veneer of intellectual sophistication.

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The Guardian, April 2, 2019

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