Book Review: European and American Extreme Right Groups and the Internet

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Conducting a comparative content analysis of more than 500 extreme right organizational web sites from France, Germany, Italy, Spain, the United Kingdom and the United States, this book aims to offer an overview of the Internet communication activities of these groups and systematically maps and analyses the links and structure of the virtual communities of the extreme right. The authors should be commended for producing a very coherent book on such a fluid subject, as well as for conducting a thorough examination of a large number of actors in a significant number of countries, writes Alexandros Nafpliotis.

European and American Extreme Right Groups and the Internet. Manuela Caiani and Linda Parenti. Ashgate. March 2013.

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Extreme right groups in Europe gained a prominent place in the news in late July; in France, the government decided to ban a number of far-right groups following a series of Islamophobic incidents, while the Greek government strongly condemned an extreme-right political party's use of a Nazi anthem during a charity event. In both of these cases, all the groups involved launched a fierce critique of government actions on their websites, mobilizing their followers to react and support them.

European and American Extreme Right Groups and the Internet is a fascinating book on the extremely salient subject of the presence of extreme right groups on the Internet and their use of it to promote their goals. The authors of the book, both based at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Austria, have chosen to focus on how right-wing extremist organizations in the US and in five European countries use the Internet as a tool for communication and recruitment. More specifically, Manuela Caiani has relinquished her extensive collaboration (see latest relevant book review) with Professor Donatella della Porta for a while, and for this particular book she has worked with another of della Porta's former supervisees at the University of Florence, Linda Parenti. It should be noted that the book draws on data from two separate research projects funded by the START Center of the University of Maryland and the Austrian National Bank.

The book (already available in an Italian translation, bearing the catchy title *Web Nero*) uses a systematic comparative analysis of more than 500 political parties and movements, revisionist organizations, cultural associations, as well as Neo-Nazi and youth sub-cultural groups, in the UK, France, Germany, Italy, Spain and the US, to successfully fill an important lacuna in the literature of a subject on which very limited empirical research has been done.

Taking into consideration the political, cultural and technological contexts within which these groups act, Chapter 2 offers an illustration of the 'great potentialities' of the online environment for radical right groups, and shows that the Internet is 'used more for some political functions and less for others' by such groups. Caiani and Parenti study Internet penetration, legislation, the level of social acceptance or stigmatization, and the history of electoral success and political collaborations of extreme right groups. Their conclusions are that Italy and France have the most favourable political context for far-right organisations; the US and the UK offer very open opportunities both in terms of technological

opportunities and legal regulations (cf. Eric Bleich and Francesca Lambert's recent study that correlates increased levels of repression against racist associations with a history of non-democratic regime control in the 20th century); and right-wing extremists in Spain and Germany face a very closed context as far as cultural opportunities go.

In the following three chapters, the authors employ first a social network analysis to explore the communication networks of the extreme right; then, a content analysis of websites to discuss differences in the strategic use of the Internet by these groups; and finally, a protest event analysis of the actions of extreme right groups in order to describe the recent evolution of this kind of mobilization out of the Web. A series of tables and figures give readers a clear picture of the configuration of the extreme right virtual communities in the six countries, marking important country specificities, like the observation that 'the German and French ones emerge as the "strongest" far right sectors' with a cohesive and quite homogeneous milieu, whereas the extreme right area in other countries (and especially in the US) appears more fragmented (p.66).

In Chapter 4, Caiani and Parenti present a significant finding of their research, namely that 'different types of right-wing organizations use the Internet for serving different purposes'. More specifically, the data presented shows that the websites of far right groups are especially used for propaganda and recruitment, with identity building being a major objective. In this case, US organizations come out as the most active in the use of the Web, with the Italian ones leading within Europe (for more detailed information on the use of the Internet by extremist groups specifically in Italy, see the authors' relevant article published in the journal *South European Society and Politics*). The findings mentioned in Chapter 5, on the other hand, focus on extreme right action as a growing 'notable and widespread phenomenon' in all six countries, with levels of right-wing violence fluctuating significantly and strong links developing between the actions staged offline and the Internet arena.

The authors' final conclusion is that the Internet can constitute an additional aspect to be considered for understanding right-wing mobilization, stressing that the distinction between the online and offline dimensions is disappearing. Throughout the book, the arguments put forth are substantiated through the use of systematically put together tables and charts that help the reader safely navigate the meandering rivers of the plethora of extreme right organizations which are active today in Europe and the US.

All in all, *European and American Extreme Right Groups and the Internet* is a welcome addition to the literature on the extreme right and the relationship between political parties and movements and the Internet. Its authors should be commended for managing to produce a very coherent book on such a fluid subject, as well as for conducting a thorough examination of a large number of actors in a significant number of countries.

The book is highly recommended for students and more advanced scholars of political science and the extreme right, in particular.

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Alexandros Nafpliotis is a Research Associate at the Hellenic Foundation for European & Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP). He completed his PhD in International History at the London School of Economics and was recently a Visiting Fellow at LSE's Hellenic Observatory. His research interests include Mediterranean and Balkan history and politics. He is the author of *Britain and the Greek Colonels: Accommodating the Junta in the Cold War* which was recently published by I.B. Tauris. Read more reviews by Alexandros.

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