Fascism’s contribution to politics, cultural theorist Walter Benjamin famously asserted, is first and foremost aesthetic. Puzzling, then, that so few scholars of contemporary Far Right nationalism concern themselves with detailed analyses of the ways this political scene stylizes and performs its ideals in arts and expressive culture. This absence is one of the reasons why Cynthia Miller-Idriss’s book offers more than documentation. It is instead a methodological and conceptual contribution poised to challenge scholars who would treat participants in this or related political scenes as mere ideologies incarnate.

*The Extreme Gone Mainstream* attempts to understand transformations in Far Right subculture, focusing in particular on the reception of fashion and visual culture among youths. Underlying that investigation is the assumption that cultural expressions of these kinds constitute both a representation and a performance of Far Right visions and imaginaries. Miller-Idriss focuses her analysis both on archival studies cataloguing Far Right symbols, and on a series of interviews she conducted between 2013 and 2014 with fifty-one subjects from two vocational schools in greater Berlin, most in their late teens or early twenties. All interviewees were training to become construction workers, and the sample was overwhelmingly male and ethnic German. The author chose this sample because its demographic features suggested they were likely to be familiar with and a common target for Far Right propaganda. Interviewees included individuals who appeared insiders to Far Right activism as well as more casual participants and informed peripheral spectators.

The choice of case study is key to the book’s broader relevance. First, the location in contemporary Germany offers the opportunity to consider the impact of official bans on Far Right expression (the country has especially stringent hate-speech laws, and one of the two schools hosting students in Miller-Idriss’s sample enforced an additional set of prohibitions). Second, the fact that the interviewees included both insiders and peripheral participants positioned Miller-Idriss to trace the Far Right’s cultural outreach and recruiting. The third factor enhancing the relevance of this case study relates not to its location, nor necessarily to the identities of the individuals it studies, but rather to its point in time. The most pronounced aesthetic tendency in post-WWII Far Right activism—the trend that has dominated the attention of those scholars who ventured into the topic of aesthetics—is skinheadism. And though that subculture fueled an explosion of revolutionary anti-immigrant and racist activism throughout the West during the 1980s and 1990s, its aesthetic and social impact has since waned.
What replaced skinheadism? It isn’t entirely clear. At times its ersatz appears to be anti-subculturalism and cultural neutrality tailored to capitalize on expanding political opportunity. Far Right activists across Europe today can join political parties with legitimate chances of gaining mass electoral support. Real (rather than merely symbolic) governmental power beckons for those who can formulate and package a message that transcends the values and aesthetics of a single demographic. Thus, as many commentators are fond of pointing out, Europe’s Far Right has exchanged shaved heads and boots for suits and ties. But what about the underground, extraparliamentary branches of the Far Right—the actors who, either because they are devoted to revolution and militancy or because of social factors, are unlikely to participate as politicians in formal democratic processes? *The Extreme Gone Mainstream*, with its ethnographic present in 2013/2014, shines a light on emerging trends and symbolism in that underground.

Miller-Idriss divides the book into six chapters with an introduction and epilogue-style conclusion relating her findings to events taking place closer to the book’s date of publication. Chapter 1 presents a theoretical apparatus for understanding the interpretation and strategy of symbolic expression in culture in general, and Far Right activism in particular. Chapter 2 begins a series of empirically based studies exploring different, though often overlapping trends in Far Right fashion and visual culture. This chapter features a close study of iconography, codes, and symbolism in the contemporary and historic Far Right, drawing both from the author’s initial, archival phase of research as well as later interviews with students to assess patterns in interpretation. Moving beyond codes, chapter 3 addresses the historical legacy and contemporary incarnations of Old Norse and Germanic iconography in the scene, paying special attention to the ways that Nordicness and Scandinavianness forge origin myths for youth who today tend to experience themselves as rootless. Chapter 4 examines the preponderance of portrayals of death in Far Right fashion, interpreting these references as declarations of revolutionary and militaristic intent as well as commentary on the perceived impending “death” of white-majority populations. Chapter 5, offering in many ways an alternative to the case study and analysis in chapter 3, examines the role of global, non-German iconography among the Far Right, including surprise appropriations like the Palestinian scarf and Che Guevara images that the author frames both as efforts to form new solidarities (aided, surely, by their concentration in aesthetics rather than explicit ideology and policy) and to strategically evade domestic German censors. Finally, chapter 6 explores the ways that clothing interacts with visions of the ideal Far Right body wearing them. This chapter moves from discussions of the body as a piece of expressive technology to adjacent discussions of masculinity, which is shown in turn to interact with previously examined themes of Nordicness (via Viking warrior iconography) as well as militancy.

The writing throughout is clear and features a steady alternation among theoretical analysis, historical background, description of visual and material artifacts, and interview data. Given the novelty of the latter, however, one might have wished for less balance and greater attention to her interview subjects. Similarly, the theoretical and historical contextualization could have been more targeted to the book’s topic (the work of scholars of Far Right visual aesthetics Les Back and Vron Ware is notably absent from the bibliography).

But while one may grumble about a detail here or there, the broader set of conclusions from the book is impressive and imposing. One is Miller-Idriss’s observation that Far Right fashion and style do not always have a political motivation. The implication is that it does not always make sense to study the Far Right as an exclusively (or primarily) political behavior, against which extrapoli...
tial. Instead, participants in these scenes may center their activities on the production and consumption of genres of symbolic expression and the maintenance of group boundaries. Miller-Idriss’s analyses also highlight clothing as an expressive mode distinguished by its ephemerality. Displaying statements and symbols via shirts, hats, and shoes constitutes an experimental and flexible type of identification with a cause compared to, say public electoral candidacy or authorship of text (much the same could be said of the casual consumer of Far Right music). Also of note is the author’s conclusion that official bans fail to stop Far Right socialization, propaganda, and cultural production, and that countermeasures based instead on dialogue could prove more successful. This conclusion merits consideration by those inside and outside of academia.

An additional benefit of The Extreme Gone Mainstream is that, thanks again to its originality and the skill of its analyses, it prods scholars to carry its investigation further, especially by exploring other perspectives on visual aesthetics and clothing in the Far Right. Future study on the topic could extend Miller-Idriss’s focus on reception to consider those producing Far Right clothing. How, for example, do the designers at Thor-Steiner reason about the symbols they create? Attention to creators’ intentionality would likely lead to deeper investigation of what insiders to these scenes often refer to as “metapolitics”—a frequently discussed agenda, inspired by Antonio Gramsci, of cultivating political sympathy through cultural (rather than militant or political) campaigning. Further, it would be fruitful to consider the ways that this particular frame for isolating participants in the Far Right (consumers of fashion) relates to others like party membership, participation in online communities, music consumption, et cetera. Do the circles who engage with the stylistic trends Miller-Idriss analyzes parallel party politics or ideological groupings? The potential that these are not entirely overlapping social spheres—something suggested by the author’s own formulation of the fuzzy boundaries delineating consumers of Far Right fashion—suggests that such an investigation could further illuminate the extrapolitical dimensions of the Far Right.
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