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Shaved heads and sonnenrads: comparing white supremacist skinheads and the alt-right in New Zealand

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ABSTRACT

This article looks at two periods in the history of white supremacy in New Zealand: the short-lived explosion of skinhead groups in the 1990s, and the contemporary rise of the internet-driven alt-right. It looks at the similarities and differences between the two groups, looking at style, symbols, ideology, and behaviour. It looks at the history of these two movements in New Zealand and compares the economic and social factors that contributed to their rise, in particular how the different social class of members produced groups with near-identical ideology but radically different presentation and modes of action.

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Introduction

On 12 March 2019, New Zealand experienced its worst act of terrorist violence when a man murdered 51 people in two mosques in Christchurch. While unprecedented in scale, it joined a history of racially motivated murders and attacks. To that point, New Zealand's most obvious and publicly visible white supremacist element had been skinhead gangs. Mirroring trends in the UK, skinheads have had an often-significant presence, an amplification of the undertones of casual racism that permeate most countries. The terrorist attack, however, was linked to the online white supremacist community known as the alt-right. Both the skinheads and the alt-right are motivated by the same forms of issues and concerns, but present in considerably different ways. This paper will look at the recent history of two white supremacist movements in New Zealand, beginning with the rise of skinheads in the 1980s and the factors that created and influenced them. It will then look at the alt-right and argue that this new development is not an extension of the skinhead phenomena, but a new movement with only limited connections to past groups. It will also look at the factors that motivated the rise of each group, and discuss the parallels between them.

The scene is set

Following overseas trends that stemmed initially from England in the late 1960s (Pollard 2016), the skinhead subculture emerged in various locations around New Zealand during

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the late 1970s (Jefferson 1976; Hamm 1993; Addison 1996) perhaps most prominently in Christchurch. Three skinhead gangs formed there in the 1980s: the Christchurch Skins, the United Skinheads (known as the 'Uniteds'), and the Firm. These were not the only skinhead groups in the city. Other less formal collectives were simply known by the suburb from which they came – for instance, Papanui skins or Linwood skins – many of whom were not overtly racist (Addison 1996, p. 101). Driven by local and international music, for many youths, the skinhead look – tight jeans tucked into Dr Martin boots and braces – was simply a fashion and a sense of identity, with no extreme ideology involved. But as the economy began to shift, the harder, racist edge of the movement soon came to the fore.

Radical economic reforms that were enacted by the Fourth Labour government (1984–1990) and continued in the first term of the following National government (1990–1993) led to significant social upheaval.

Despite promises that the post-1984 reforms would make it stronger, things got worse before they got better and the economy went into recession during 1991 and 1992. Total unemployment, already high post 1984, soared and eventually peaked at between 10% and 11%, and one in four Māori were unemployed. New Zealand was experiencing the most significant rise in unemployment since the Great Depression (Massey 1995, p. 161).

A consequence of this economic malaise was the creation of social conditions identified by international researchers as critical to gang formation and maturation – such as poverty, strain, and multiple marginality (See for example, Hagedorn 1988; Taylor 1989; Jankowski 1991; Short 1996; Vigil 2002).

One consequence of this that was particularly obvious in the 1990s was the rise of Pākehā street gangs, often with neo-fascist and white power tendencies, the most easily identifiable of which were skinheads, who had largely turned from a fashion to fascism.

Focal concerns and ideological outlook

While exceptions were made for some Māori, perhaps driven by cohabitation in prisons, the skinheads and white supremacists of this time railed against all of the usual suspects, but their primary focus was Asian immigrants.

Contributing to, and a consequence of, New Zealand's economic woes was a net loss of migration. During the 1980s, New Zealand – a migrant nation – suffered a net outflow of 30,000 people (Kasper 1990), which impacted on economic growth. Consequently, a drive for suitable immigrants was proposed. And for this, New Zealand turned to Asia. By 1990, 10,000 middle-class Asian migrants had settled in New Zealand (Belich 2001, p. 537). The policy was keenly supported by the Business Roundtable which saw the benefit of attracting wealthy migrants in stimulating economic growth (see Kasper 1990).

This influx of migration created tension among those who saw migrants as unwelcome outsiders, in particular the skinheads, for whom anti-immigrant sentiment became a rallying cry.

Although the different skinhead groups across the country were generally motivated by many of the same focal concerns, they tended to be disparate and fights between the groups were common. But while the internal politics of the white supremacy scene tended to be riven with conflict, to outsiders the groups had obvious similarities.

The skinhead style was the most evident, but the symbols used in the scene also tended to be somewhat universal between skinhead and white power groups; primarily the swastika, the numbers 88 and in the latter end of the 1990s 14, and runic symbols used by Nazi organisations such as the SS. The swastika needs no definition here, except to say that it has a long and potentially confusing history with New Zealand's gang scene. The swastika was taken up by rebellious motorcycle gangs around the world and copied by local gangs, including the patched streets gangs that were predominately Māori (Gilbert 2013, p. 42). The use of the swastika by these groups did not equate to white supremacy; it was simply used as a way of thumbing their nose at society. For the white power gangs, it was returned to its more common meaning. The number 14 relates to the 'fourteen words' of US white supremacist leader David Lane, which read, 'We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children' (Michael 2009). The number 88 is a substitute for HH (H being the eighth letter of the alphabet), which is an abbreviation of Heil Hitler. 14 and 88 were often used together, and as with the swastika, these would be scrawled as graffiti, displayed as tattoos or stitched or drawn onto clothing. Unlike the swastika, these numbers were more coded and thus could be used as covert signals to those in the know. In many instances, these numbers are used to express white supremacy while hiding it in plain sight, but in the case of the skinheads they were often worn alongside more overt signifiers like the swastika.

While the Asian focal concern and certain symbols bonded these groups together, the ideological underpinnings of this movement were notably primitive. Many skinheads were open advocates of fascism and ethno-nationalism, and were proponents of antisemitic conspiracy theories, but in practice these ideologies were often little more than set-dressing designed to justify racism and violence, and were often put to the wayside whenever they became inconvenient. Much like the patched street gangs, the factors that drew young men toward membership in skinhead gangs were more related to status, excitement, and brotherhood than ideology. Certain key figures attempted to solidify and develop these political aspects, but were met with far more failure than success.

Colin King-Ansell, who despite being the leader National Socialist Party of New Zealand in the late 60s and a founding member of the New Zealand Fascist Union, was a fringe figure who in the 1990s saw the growth of skinhead gangs as a chance to rekindle whatever ambitions he had. He attempted to influence one group in particular, Unit 88 in Auckland, but that went the same way as his Nazi Party: nowhere.

In 1990, far-right ideologue Kerry Bolton formed a group called The Order of the Left Hand Path, which attempted to marry rising interest in the far right with ideas of the occult and satanism (Leeuwen 2008). He was also the director of the National Front in the 1970s, in 1981 he co-founded the New Zealand branch of esoteric-fascist Church of Odin in 1981 (Spoonley 1981, p. 105), and remains a prolific author on far-right topics.

Kyle Chapman was a teen skin and drug addict in Invercargill, before moving to Christchurch, becoming clean from drugs, and moving into more political pursuits. Chapman attempted to lead groups into great political realms, firstly under the banner of the Hammerskins, and then later under the name the Right Wing Resistance, and encouraged his members to be clean of drugs and alcohol and stay fit. His rationale was that in battle his men needed a clear mind strong body – but his battle was more often with his troops, who were far more interested in partying than politics. Ultimately this tension was fatal to the group's longevity.

In all, the white power gangs that flared in the 1990s were characterised by young men who occupied street corners, drank cheap cider and sneered at outsiders. While they were pushed toward gang membership by economic factors, and were bound together by shared racism, skinheads' engagement with far-right ideology was often limited. Their philosophical underpinnings were crude and often poorly understood, and their gangs were primarily an outlet for disposed pākehā youth who wanted an identity and status.

The peak and the fall – the 1990s

In the early 1990s, there was a surge of white supremacist or reactionary groups around the world and the advent of the internet meant that their literature was easily spread (Dennehy and Newbold 2001, p. 188). In New Zealand, a 1997 book – largely a photo essay – on New Zealand gangs by Bill Payne called *Staunch* featured a section on skinheads, and this gave the movement a 'minor shot in the arm' (Addison 1996, p. 103). Also influential was the 1992 film *Romper Stomper*. It became a cult classic for many youths who identified with the skinhead characters and sought to mimic their beliefs and lifestyle. The film had a major impact in shaping the skinhead scene in New Zealand (Addison 1996, pp. 102–3; Dennehy and Newbold 2001, p. 188.). Many predominantly Pākehā motorcycle gangs, particularly those in the South Island such as the Epitaph Riders, the Devil's Henchmen, and the Road Knights, went through a dramatic visual change as their traditionally shaggy appearance gave way to close-cropped or shaved heads. Indeed, many skinhead gangs had close links with the mainly Pākehā outlaw motorcycle clubs, particularly the South Island clubs and the Satan's Slaves in the North Island. Perhaps the most significant group to emerge from the white power ranks was Christchurch's Harris Gang, at the core of which was four brothers: Daryl, Ricky, Paul and Russell. They established a clubhouse and a staunch group of followers and a reputation for violence and perverting the course of justice through intimidation. In 1993, fulfilling their outlaw club ambitions, the Harris Gang became the Christchurch chapter of the Road Knights.

By this time, the Road Knights in Invercargill and Timaru were being bolstered by a young, staunchly white power-oriented skinhead gang called the *Bandenkrieg* (in German: 'gang war'). Also informally known as the 'Germans' or 'Young Germans', the group acted as a feeder club to the Road Knights and was at least partially under the outlaw club's control. Another notable group was the Fourth Reich, which formed in Christchurch's Papanui Prison (now called Christchurch Men's Prison) in the early 1990s, a small but hard-core gang who controlled the prison's East Wing as well as much of the jail in Invercargill. During the mid-1990s, it was said that any 'skin' who was sent to East Wing would be stood over by the Fourth Reich and told "he must join them, grow his hair back, or 'go West' [to the protection wing]" (Addison 1996, p. 197). Although formidable within the prison, the Fourth Reich struggled to maintain strong numbers on the outside, but nevertheless did develop a presence in Christchurch, Nelson, Greymouth, Timaru and Dunedin (Dennehy and Newbold 2001, p. 189).

In 1991, two members of the Fourth Reich killed Hemi Huntley, a Greymouth Māori man, in a racially motivated murder. Ironically, one of the killers, Neihana Foster, was himself part-Māori. This seemingly anomalous situation highlighted the often special – though seldom explicitly discussed – status given to Māori in skinhead gangs, as exhibited by their occasional inclusion in such groups. It is unclear, however, why this status did not

extend to the Māori victim. Such a paradox highlights the lack of ideological or philosophical rigour evident within many skinhead groups. Prominent skinhead leader Kyle Chapman, using the words of Robert Mathews – the leader of an American white nationalist group called ‘The Order’ – put it thus: ‘If it looks white, acts white, and fights white, then it is white.’ For his part, Foster told police that his father was white and his heart was white (Gilbert 2013, p. 144).

The killing was not the only time the Fourth Reich came to national attention. Alongside other attacks and murders, in 1997, a member of the gang – who described himself as having the rank of ‘private’ – had his finger cut off. The victim told the Christchurch High Court he was punished for wanting to leave the group (Gilbert 2013, p. 144), but it is widely known to those close to the gang that the punishment was for theft of the gang’s drug supply.

In one response to growing concern around skinhead-related violence, and in recognition of the damaging publicity to the city at the centre of skinhead activity, the Christchurch City Council helped fund the New Way Trust in 1994. Established by Kyle Chapman, the trust’s objectives were:

- (a) To enable and assist young people alienated from Mainstream [*sic*] society (particularly those known as Skinheads) to participate in rehabilitation programmes.
- (b) To assist young people who are unemployed to increase their skills and obtain useful employment (New Way Trust 1994, p. 1).

An evaluation of the trust’s work commissioned by the Christchurch City Council and the police Crime Prevention Unit in 1995 gave a largely positive view of the work being undertaken (See Addison 1996). Nevertheless, the trust quickly became controversial when Chapman confessed to numerous historic race-based crimes he had carried out as a skinhead in Invercargill, including the firebombing of a marae. At the time, Chapman told the media the confession was to ‘ensure he paid his debt to society’ (Gilbert 2013, p. 145), commenting later that it was part of an Narcotics Anonymous pledge he had taken after giving up drugs and alcohol and becoming a Christian (Kyle Chapman, personal communication, 2007). Despite the seriousness of the crimes, Chapman escaped a jail sentence, largely due to his positive work at the New Way Trust. The trust’s chairperson and Christchurch City Councillor, David Close, told reporters he admired Chapman’s courage in confessing, something he took ‘as evidence of his commitment to a new way of life’ (Gilbert 2013, p. 145).

However, in 1997, Chapman again created headlines when he was linked to the distribution of racist literature which called on ‘Young patriots ... for the formation of a fascist youth group’. The pamphlets, which were distributed to many Christchurch mailboxes, carried a picture of a paramilitary figure and implored: ‘If you love your race and nation and have the courage to fight for your homeland ... Join Now!’ Chapman’s desire to help motivate disillusioned Pākehā youth had clearly taken a more radical path. His association with the trust became untenable and he left to establish a new skinhead gang – the Hammerskins – which became a chapter of an international skinhead movement that, for a short time, became quite prominent in different parts of the country. Under Chapman’s leadership the group shunned drugs, encouraged only moderate use of liquor, and promoted general wellbeing because ‘your better fitness may be the deciding factor in battle’ (New Zealand Hammerskins, c. 2003).

The most obvious skinhead and white power activities occurred in the South Island where there are smaller populations of Māori and Pacific peoples. One notable exception to this trend was the rise of a group called Unit 88 in West Auckland,¹ which formed under the guidance of Colin King-Ansell. Unit 88 was overtly racist and established a base in an industrial area in Henderson, soon receiving significant media attention simply for their brash appearance in the heart of an area with a significant Māori and Pacific population. A co-founder of Unit 88, Karl Warlock, said to the media that attacks on black families had led the public to believe Christchurch was the main centre for white power activities, but '[y]ou might be surprised how many skinheads there are in the Auckland district' (Gilbert 2013, p. 146). The gang began printing and distributing white supremacist leaflets and the Race Relations Conciliator, Rajen Prasad, said he would look to take legal action as such material 'incites racial disharmony and breaches our anti-discrimination laws' (Gilbert 2013, p. 146). The gang also elicited comment in Parliament with opposition MPs calling for race-hate laws. Minister of Justice Doug Graham responded that he was satisfied existing legislation was adequate and that the Race Relations Conciliator would act as necessary (New Zealand Parliamentary Debates 1997). But a more immediate deterrent came from both the Black Power and the Head Hunters who told the media that Unit 88 would not be tolerated and would be subjected to 'street justice' (Gilbert 2013, p. 146). The threats were not hollow, and following a visit from the Head Hunters, Unit 88 vacated their clubhouse and quickly petered out (Gilbert 2013, p. 146).

The sudden rise and fall of Unit 88 is a microcosm of skinhead gang evolution generally. As with the Fourth Reich and the strength of white supremacy in South Island prisons, the white supremacy movement flared significantly in the early and mid-1990s began to fade by the end of the decade. Even in the stronghold city of Christchurch, the street prominence of skinheads all but disappeared. The wider skinhead fashion had ebbed, and with it, the skinhead gangs. Unlike the patched gangs, they were unable to achieve significant longevity. Many of these groups lacked the organisational structure of the patched gangs, and although some skinheads held on to their ideals, the improving economy and lower unemployment – particularly among pākehā – robbed the scene of recruits. Moreover, unlike the majority of the established gangs who were born in a period in the 1960s and 1970s that prided itself on shunning private material possessions and a culture of sharing and collectivism, the skinheads were of a time when individualism and self-attainment were to the fore. Such an ethos was not as conducive to successfully forming the bonds – or purchasing a physical base, such as a clubhouse – that had previously gelled the patched gangs together. Underscoring the idea that gang formation is a consequence of social conditions and not ethnicity, while ethnic minorities may face 'multiple marginality' (Vigil 1988) and therefore be more susceptible to gang formation, the establishment of gangs by a dominant ethnic group is achieved when the necessary conditions present themselves.

The alt-right

But for all that, in the 2000s the visible face of white supremacy appeared to disappear to all but very small pockets. That was until it sprang to life in the form of the terror attack of 15 March 2019.

That was, at least, how it appeared. In reality, white supremacy in New Zealand hadn't disappeared as much as it had transformed. While connections between New Zealand groups such as skinhead gangs of the 1990s and the accused Christchurch shooter have been widely speculated about, no evidence of any such connections has emerged, and thus far it does not appear likely that any will. Instead, his primary contact with white supremacist communities appeared to have been online, through websites like 8chan. Alongside the fact that he was Australian, and had only resided in the country for a few years before the attacks, this was taken by many as being evidence that the attack was not representative of any significant concentration of white supremacists in New Zealand. In fact, however, the attack was the outcome of an international 'alternative right' movement that had taken at least some root in New Zealand long before, but had gone largely unnoticed up until that point.

The alt-right² is a movement that began on the internet and grew to prominence through its support of Donald Trump's 2016 US presidential election campaign (Hawley 2017, p. 115). Although they share many of the ideas and conspiracy theories of older far-right groups, their demographics and mode of engagement are significantly different. While still predominantly young, white, and male, they are much more likely to be of middle-class origin³ and relatively well educated. This demographic change produces a movement that rejects the gang-like behaviour of the skinheads, and is instead much more concerned with the quasi-intellectual aspects of the extreme right that often fell to the wayside in past groups, such as fascist ideology, and conspiracy theories such as Cultural Marxism (Lynn 2018) and white genocide (Perry 2003). This focus, in turn, creates much grander ambitions: instead of fighting for control of the streets, the alt-right see themselves as an intellectual vanguard, poised to take over a weak and decadent west like the Nazis did to Germany in 1933. In this sense, the alt-right have much more in common with the more intellectually-oriented figures in the 90s skinhead groups – such as Kyle Chapman and Colin King-Ansell – than the groups that they tried and largely failed to influence.

Compared with other political groups, the scale of the alt-right movement is difficult to quantify because the bulk of their activity is undertaken through the internet. Many among the alt-right are radicalised online, often without real-life contact with any radicalising influences, and participate anonymously in the movement through large far-right communities in lawless online forums like 4chan and the now-defunct 8chan, the right-wing focused twitter-alternative Gab, and the encrypted messaging system Telegram. These online spaces provide many of the benefits for their members that could previously only be found in offline groups: members can openly indulge in hate speech and conspiracy theories among a large group of peers without fear of being punished or ostracised, and can enjoy support, brotherhood and friendship where they were otherwise cut off from their real-life community. In this way, the psycho-social factors are similar to the skinhead gangs, but the delivery is significantly different. As a result, the drive to create and participate in real-life groups is much weaker than the 1990s gangs.

Similarly, and perhaps as a result of having emerged on the internet rather than the street corner, the alt-right are much more concerned with the personal repercussions of being identified as members of an extreme movement. Where shaved heads and swastika tattoos were a permanent or semi-permanent costume that could not be removed when members went to work, the alt-right often prefer to keep their extreme views hidden

from outsiders by keeping them shrouded in plausible deniability. While the movement's discussions online froth with extreme racism and calls for racial violence, members also share methods of subtly converting others to their ideas without exposing themselves to the social stigma of being outed as a fascist. Alt-right groups regularly cover their ideals in a veneer of either irony or humour, with the goal of communicating to those who share their views while leaving little of any substance for their enemies to latch onto (Greene 2019).

This online focus means that New Zealand's geographical isolation is no longer a significant barrier against the influence of radical overseas groups. Although some skinhead gangs had international connections – notably Kyle Chapman's Hammerskins – this pales in comparison to the contemporary movement. While the alt-right preach ideas of nationalism and nativism, their decentralised online communities make them naturally internationalist, and the movement is best understood as something with little relationship to nationality or physical geography. The movement has its origins and largest base of support in the United States, and therefore takes much of its language and outlook from the American system, but members tend to view themselves as fighting for the survival of a wider western or white civilisation that transcends national borders.

Changing motivators

As with the rise of New Zealand's skinheads in the 80s and 90s, the ascent of the alt-right has been bolstered by economic factors. The majority of the young people participating in the alt-right reached the age of entering the workforce during or after the 2007–2008 global financial crisis, in a period that has seen increased concerns around issues such as income inequality, the increased cost and necessity of university degrees and the decline in their value, the rise of the precarious employment of the 'gig economy,' and the decline of the middle class. Members of the millennial generation have borne the brunt of much of this instability, and as a result are generally not experiencing the economic outcomes that they were raised to expect, either in the USA (Kurz et al. 2018) or New Zealand (Munro 2018). In New Zealand, rising house prices have put home ownership – a traditional marker of middle-class success – out of reach of many. Most significantly, this economic pressure is impacting a different section of society than the recessions of the 80s and 90s. Instead of pushing the working class into unemployment, the shrinking middle class is instead pushing young people into the working class (OECD 2019). As a result, those pushed toward the far right in a similar manner to New Zealand's skinheads are now those who were raised to be in the lower middle class, but whose economic outlook is less rosy than they expected. While the economic hardship faced by this group is demonstrably less than others, in relative terms it has proven substantial enough to produce the kind of anger and alienation needed for the far right to grow. Although it may not be accurate to say that economic upheaval necessarily precipitates the outgrowth of far right movements – indeed many past economic downturns have gone by without far right groups emerging – it is apparent that such upheaval is a significant precondition for it, should other social features also be present.

Similarly to the focal concern of the gangs of the 1990s, the alt-right have a focus on immigration, but in keeping with their more global community it is far more international in focus. Economic concerns are intertwined in public discourse with issues of

immigration in countries around the Western world, and this has further fuelled the rise of the far right. In the UK and Europe this was reflected in concerns around the European migrant crisis and the alleged economic burden created by refugees, while in the USA debate has focused on immigration through the border with Mexico and its distorting effect on the labour market. In New Zealand, similar concerns have been based around the effect of foreign land ownership and immigration on the housing market. Whether well-founded or not, these fears around immigration have been significant and widely-felt enough to give rise or contribute to a range of political responses, including America's proposed border wall, Britain's exit from the EU, and, to a much lesser degree, New Zealand's 2017 ban on foreign land purchases. As with the rise of Asian migration in the 90s, these issues have also given the far right a significant advantage by pushing their xenophobic views closer to mainstream political discourse. Although the alt-right are ideologically prejudiced against a wide range of groups, and are particularly antisemitic, they have largely chosen to focus their anti-immigration efforts on islamophobia, primarily because the narrative of an Islamic terrorist threat is a particularly easy sell in the west in the post-9/11 age, and because the movement of large numbers of refugees into non-English speaking countries in Europe has made disinformation about the alleged crimes of refugees in those countries easier to spread without challenge.

Real-world groups

Determining the size of the alt-right movement in New Zealand is particularly difficult because of its online focus. The primary websites that the alt-right use are notoriously difficult to investigate: because users on 4chan and 8chan are anonymous and discussion threads are active for no more than a few hours, even the size of the communities there are not readily apparent. 4chan itself is very large, with 22 million average monthly users according to its own data (4chan n.d.), but the alt-right on 4chan are largely confined to a single subforum called /pol/, for which visitor numbers are not available. It is more possible to discern the proportion of New Zealanders who participate in the community on /pol/: users marked as being from New Zealand make up 0.66% of all posts on /pol/ since 2014 (4plebs 2019), and a study of /pol/ by Hine et al. (2017) found that although the forum was dominated by posters from the USA, New Zealanders created more posts per capita than any other nationality.

Instead, we are left to gauge the movement's significance by the real-world action that it undertakes. Overseas, a range of alt-right affiliated groups have appeared in the real world. Much like New Zealand's competing skinhead groups in the 1990s, however, the alt-right as a whole is leaderless and prone to internal rifts and ideological disputes, and as a result there is no official or broadly agreed-upon alt-right organisation. The movement briefly coalesced behind Donald Trump during his election campaign, but lost interest and confidence in him after his presidency began, and has struggled to agree on support for any person, group, or course of action since. As a result, the groups that spring from the alt-right vary considerably in style, from groups like the Proud Boys, a men-only organisation that has been described as an 'alt-right fight club', (Southern Poverty Law Center 2017), to Atomwaffen Division, a Nazi-themed paramilitary terrorist group whose members have been involved in five murders (Mathias 2018). Members of the alt-right have reportedly also had some success infiltrating existing political groups, with the

intention of pushing them toward alt-right ideas: members of an alt-right group called The New Guard gained executive positions in the youth wing of the Australian National party before being found out and expelled (Mann 2018), and in the USA a member of Identity Evropa who had marched in the Unite the Right rally was elected as a precinct committee officer for the Republican party in Washington state (Weill 2018).

As of 2019, only a small number of alt-right style real-world groups have emerged in New Zealand. The most dramatic of them was the Dominion Movement, who came to public attention in 2018 after putting up recruitment posters in bus stops in the Manawātū. The group's website claimed that they were a 'grass-roots identitarian activist organisation committed to the revitalisation of our country and our people: White New Zealanders', and opposed consumerism, transgenderism, and immigration (Kilmister 2018). The website avoided overt references to racism or fascism, but used terminology commonly employed by the alt-right to signal white nationalism while maintaining plausible deniability. Pictures on the website showed young white men posing with their faces covered, often holding New Zealand flags, and in one picture a black flag bearing a white Sonnenrad, a symbol which was also worn by the accused Christchurch mosque shooter (Enoka 2018). The group's numbers were not advertised, although they claimed to have groups in both Auckland and Wellington. The group abruptly announced that it was shutting down immediately after the shootings, however, and has not visibly resurfaced since.

A similar group called Action Zealandia surfaced a few months after the shooting, and appears to be growing. The group's website uses similar language to the Dominion Movement, but has noticeably pulled back on the former's use of overt far right imagery, presumably as a reflection of the greater scrutiny levelled at such groups after the March 15 attack. The website's monthly 'Action Reports' show images of groups of young men with blurred faces exercising, hiking, collecting rubbish, and posing with New Zealand flags and historical monuments, and posts articles on subjects such as 'Chinese influence in New Zealand politics', and 'Nationalism and the environment'. The group claims to have chapters in Auckland, Palmerston North, and Christchurch. Zealandia's links to the online alt-right communities are clear: on the second of August 2019, a user claiming to be a member posted a thread on 4chan announcing the group's formation and soliciting new members in major New Zealand cities. While it is not apparent whether they share membership with any other current or previous groups, the group is connected to older movements by Kerry Bolton, whose name appears in comments on the site's articles and is reported to be mentoring the group, but we have no evidence to confirm that. The group's membership appears to be growing, with reports on their website claiming that they have added new chapters, and showing pictures of what appear to be new members in different locations around the country.

As they have overseas, alt-right groups have also targeted New Zealand universities for recruitment. In 2017 posters bearing the slogans 'White lives matter!' and 'Let's take our country back', were put up around Auckland university by a group called the Western Guard, who had a recruitment website that claimed links to an overseas alt-right group called Vanguard America (Collins 2017). In 2019 a sticker campaign by Action Zealandia targeted universities (among other sites), with stickers reportedly discovered in the University of Auckland and the University of Canterbury. New Zealand Universities have also played host to at least two student groups that were accused of having far right

leanings: at Auckland University a group called The European Students Association had a stall at the university's Clubs Expo, but shut down in response to a public backlash, and at AUT a New Zealand European Association was established but not formally incorporated by the university (Collins 2017). Both groups still have pages on Facebook, but neither appear to be active. Fears of these groups may be overplayed, however: the Facebook pages associated with them attracted only a handful of followers, and any evidence of far-right allegiance was so heavily couched in plausible deniability as to be functionally non-existent. Nevertheless, students at Auckland University have continued to raise concerns of far-right activity at the university (Auckland University Students' Association 2019), but no further organised groups on campus have become apparent.

Despite having a greater interest in politics than the skinheads, the alt-right have thus far shown limited signs of engaging with any political parties in New Zealand. This appears to be because there is no obvious home for them among the existing parties: New Zealand's right wing parties are primarily neoliberal (which conflicts with the alt-right's ideas of National Socialism) and the primary source of anti-immigrant rhetoric in the most recent election was the Labour party, with which they disagree on most other points. There was some interest in the New Zealand First party, whose ideals generally hew against neoliberalism and immigration: during the 2017 election posters on 4chan created Winston Peters memes, and Peters publicly signed a printed meme depicting Pepe the frog holding a SuperGold card, but after the party went into coalition with Labour many appeared to lose interest.

Symbols and fashion

The alt-right display their affiliation using many of the same symbols and identifiers as their skinhead predecessors, but use these symbols in ways that reflect their substantially different background and goals, and groups in New Zealand have followed the overseas pattern of cloaking their ideas and actions in a shroud of plausible deniability.

While the alt-right use symbols of the Third Reich such as swastikas, SS runes, and the numbers 14 and 88, which were also used by past groups, they also make use of symbols that were generally not previously used by groups in New Zealand, but which have become popular among far-right groups overseas in recent years, such as the *sonnenrad*, or 'black sun' symbol, which serves as a less obvious stand-in for the swastika among many groups in the US or Europe. The alt-right have also developed a range of unique symbols that are derived from their origins in online communities such as Pepe the frog, a cartoon frog that became a meme on 4chan and was then appropriated by the far right, and the 'OK' hand gesture that the accused Christchurch shooter famously flashed to press photographers during an early court appearance.

While the majority of the signs used by the alt-right would be recognisable to a skinhead from the 1990s, the alt-right use their symbols in significantly different ways. Reflecting their middle-class backgrounds, members of the alt-right are much more concerned with social stigma than earlier groups were, and therefore tend to avoid giving visible signs of their affiliation. As a result, their offline appearance is radically different: instead of signalling their alienation and rebellion with shaved heads and tattoos, they adhere to no proscribed standards of dress, and their use of overt symbols is generally kept to online safe spaces such as 4chan.

Members of the alt-right in the USA have previously flirted with more overt displays of ideological adherence: during self-styled alt-right leader Richard Spencer's brief moment of cultural relevance many adopted his vaguely Hitlerian short-back-and-sides haircut as a subtle (but deniable) signifier, while others bought clothing with memes and in-jokes such as Pepe the frog printed on them. As their confidence grew, some began demonstrating in public and regularly clashing with antifascist counter protesters. This culminated in the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia in 2017, a far-right rally where members of the alt-right were seen carrying flags and shields bearing symbols including swastikas, sonnenrads, and confederate flags.

Charlottesville showed initial signs of being a success for the alt-right, as images of a column of young protesters marching at night with flaming torches were shared around the world by a shocked media. Ultimately, however, the rally proved to be a harsh lesson in the consequences of acting in public. When a white supremacist killed a counter-protester with his car on the second day of the event, protesters and their groups found themselves the subject of intense scrutiny from the media and the law, and quickly realised that they had lost the ability to claim that they were the victims of anti-white persecution. As public shock turned to anger, protesters who had been filmed bare faced were quickly identified and 'doxed,' (Atkinson 2018) with many facing social stigma and losing their jobs (see for example McKay 2017; Pasha-Robinson 2017). Realising that they had neither the stomach nor the numbers to endure a battle for public acceptance in the streets, the alt-right abruptly and near-universally withdrew from efforts to present themselves in public as fascists.

Following these issues, many alt-right groups have focused on finding ways to exist in public without attracting meaningfully dangerous negative attention. The most obvious tactic – and one that many groups and individuals were already used to using – is to create plausible deniability by suppressing their more obviously extreme aspects and cloaking their ideology in generalities. Alt-right groups in New Zealand have followed this blueprint: the short-lived Auckland University European Students Association, for example, chose Celtic patterns and iconography that were often used by white supremacist groups, but not exclusive to them, and a slogan that was similar to – but distinct from – one used by the SS (Loren 2017). Similarly, Action Zealanda's website is careful to create plausible deniability by avoiding overt references to fascism and racism, couching its ideological statements instead in broad or misleading terms like 'our degradation', and 'demographic integrity'. Whether these attempts at obfuscating their intentions will be effective for these groups is not yet possible to say, however.

Conclusion

White supremacist ideology in New Zealand flared briefly in the 1990s in the form of the skinheads, who were momentarily prominent within the gang scene but declined rapidly as fashions changed and the groups failed to achieve longevity. While these groups were involved in gang wars and multiple race-related murders, they were ideologically inconsistent and generally more interested in fighting and partying than any serious political goals.

The newly-arising alt-right are a considerable deviation from past far right groups, but are similar in many ways as well. They are much more focused on ideology and quasi-

intellectualism, and are part of a larger online community that sees itself as transcending national borders. The extreme edge of this movement made itself known most visibly through the March 15 terror attack, but organised groups that aim to be more socially acceptable have begun to appear around the country as well.

While very few members have carried across the two movements save for a few ideologues, both inherited a similar bank of symbols and identifiers from the wider history of the far right movement, such as the swastika and the numbers 14 and 88, to which the alt-right have added a few unique symbols based on memes and in-jokes. Where the movements differ is how these symbols are used: where the skinheads shaved their heads and tattooed their bodies to express anger and alienation from society, the alt-right cloak their allegiance in plausible deniability in order to avoid social stigma.

Economic upheaval appears to have been a key feature in the rise of both the skinheads and the alt-right, but varying types of upheaval produced markedly different groups. Where the skinhead gangs of the 1990s were populated by young men who had been pushed into unemployment by an economic recession, the alt-right draw their membership from those pushed out of the shrinking middle class, and as a result their priorities, goals, and methods of action are strongly reflective of their middle class origins.

The alt-right are the newest heirs to a long history of far-right white supremacist ideology and action, both in New Zealand and overseas. While we cannot say for certain what the future holds for this movement, it is clear that it represents both a continuance from the past as well a considerable change.

Notes

1. The name is derived from the letter 'H' being the eighth letter of the alphabet, and so 88 is HH which in turn is a contraction of 'Heil Hitler'.
2. The alt-right movement has largely abandoned the name 'alt-right' in favour of less specific and more plausibly deniable terms such as 'nationalist' and 'identitarian'. We have elected to use the term here because it is a name that was originally chosen and used by the movement, and because it refers exclusively to the recent internet-based movement.
3. Because of their online anonymity, no census of the alt-right and their economic backgrounds exists. It is clear to us that from our observation of this movement online however that their modes of expression reflect middle-class attitudes and concerns, and their goals explicitly target a return to the middle class ideals of the American 1950s.

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