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‘Straighten Up and Fly Right’: Radical right attempts to appeal to the British LGBTQ+ community

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Abstract

This article explores an emerging strategy by sections of the British radical right towards the LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer) community, who the radical right claim are existentially threatened by the alleged violent homophobia of Islam and their ostensible betrayal by ‘the left’. Consequently, parts of the radical right present themselves as the ‘true’ protectors of LGBTQ+ individuals through what we term *alter*-progressivism. By analysing recorded speeches, discussions and interviews by and with key British radical right figures, we demonstrate three themes: (1) the broad radical right discourse of a ‘Great Replacement’ specifically tailored towards LGBTQ+ anxieties, (2) a narrative in which the radical right portray themselves as the defenders of (some) minorities and (3) an emerging distinction between the far-right and radical right concerning LGBTQ+ rights. We conclude that these themes represent a significant rhetorical shift and reveal the flexibility of radical right narratives in an attempt to appeal to diverse communities. This represents a serious challenge, which compels social scientists to adapt their understandings of radical right ideologies, objectives and strategies.

Keywords

alter-progressivism, British politics, Islamophobia, LGBT, populism, radical right, social media

Introduction

In recent years, Western nations have seen a right-wing upsurge (Kassimeris and Jackson, 2015). This ‘right-turn’ is a heterogeneous phenomenon variously motivated by economic hardship, fears of civilisational decline (Eatwell and Goodwin, 2018) and anxieties about the conditions of modernity. Consequently, strands of contemporary rightist populism

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demonstrate significant differences in approaches to social issues. One difference is the changing nature, in some Western countries, of radical right discourses on LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer) communities. While the far-right has traditionally been (and remains) very hostile to LGBTQ+ people, in recent years some *radical* right groups have sought to portray themselves as protectors of some sections of the lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB; but not commonly T or Q) community.

In this article, we examine the discourse of radical right groups concerning Islam and LGBTQ+ issues in the United Kingdom (although, as our empirical analysis demonstrates, these narratives transcend national borders). Substantial research has been conducted on the relationship between the far-right/radical right and the LGBTQ+ community from diverse theoretical and methodological approaches and in various national and international contexts (for recent examples, see Ayoub, 2019; Ayoub and Paternotte, 2014; Bosia et al., 2020; Christou, 2019; Dell’Omo and McEwen, 2021; Dietze and Roth, 2020; Downes, 2021; Gray, 2018; Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017; McEwen, 2020; Paternotte, 2018; Sloopmaeckers et al., 2016; Wielowiejski, 2020). This growing corpus of literature illuminates two salient points: first, the changing nature and increased visibility of the radical right; second, it urges consideration of how transnational forces interact with local discourses to create unique national contexts (Kamenou, 2021). Although radical right electoral successes have been limited, their influence on politics through ‘mainstreaming’ (Miller-Idriss, 2017) of formerly fringe ideas is significantly greater in the age of social media. While these groups are frequently combined in a category of ‘right-wing populist’, two areas of distinction must be considered. First is that beyond superficial similarities such as claims to represent ‘the people’, and the ‘Othering’ of internal and external enemies (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017), there are substantial differences between ‘populist’ movements. Second, many of these radical right groups continue to reproduce twentieth-century far-right discourses while promoting a degree of social liberalism opposed by the far-right: a phenomenon we term *alter-progressivism*.

We define *alter-progressivism* as the expression of *some* socially agreed ‘progressive’ views that ostensibly claim to defend vulnerable minorities from external threats. We use the case of British radical right relations with LGBTQ+ issues to illustrate three points. First is the fluidity of radical right politics and the emergence of a radical right which reproduces some far-right discourses. However, it is simultaneously distinct from, and frequently actively opposed to, the traditional social roles advocated by the far-right. Third, we argue that some elements of the British radical right deploy *alter-progressive* narratives designed to encourage cisgender LGB people, but rarely trans people, into not only tacitly supporting the radical right but actively identifying with it. This is done by instrumentalising perceived tensions between Islam and LGBTQ+ people, with the former narrated as an existential threat to the latter. The result is radical right movements explicitly endorsing (some) gay rights. In doing so, they challenge assumptions that LGBTQ+ people inevitably lean left. We analyse videos by key figures from political rallies, speeches and vlogs of prominent activists. We identify key discursive themes, highlighting how such narratives are constructed to attract primarily young, cisgender, gay/bisexual people to political extremism. We conclude that such appeals represent a powerful strategy that needs to be taken much more seriously by academics and policy makers.

However, we would like to make two clarifications. First, we acknowledge that there is very substantial homophobia, biphobia and transphobia among the radical right (Davey and Ebner, 2019). Second, despite this homophobia, some radical right movements

advocate acceptance and protection of *some* formerly victimised identities. By claiming that they offer protection to some marginalised groups, radical right groups can communicate an *alter*-progressive narrative whereby they are the sole defenders of liberalism, while (according to the same narrative) the left privileges the rights of other, ostensibly existentially threatening, minorities over LGBTQ+ persons.

Although the United Kingdom cannot be used as a template for studying all radical right discourses on LGBTQ+ communities globally, we argue that it demonstrates emergent themes in the political sociology of extremist politics. This phenomenon in the United Kingdom perhaps has Western European counterparts (Wielowiejski, 2020) but is distinct from Eastern European contexts where radical right movements are openly homophobic (see Kováts and Pető, 2017: 117–131; Polyakova, 2014; Takács and Kuhar, 2007). The case also reveals the fluid nature of the radical right in the United Kingdom, with the ostensible adoption of gay rights aligning with narratives of protecting other communities persecuted by the far-right, such as the *English Defence League's* (EDL) 'solidarity patrols' of Jewish urban areas deemed at risk of Islamic violence (Burke, 2017; Mepschen, 2018; Puar, 2007). In making this argument, we stress that we do not seek to negate or erase queer Muslim identities. Indeed, the literature indicates that intersectionality of gay Muslims represents far more than a putative clash of civilisation discourse emphasised by both the far-right and some mainstream discourses. Momin Rahman (2010) argues that the existence of gay Muslims challenges the positioning of Western and Eastern cultures as mutually exclusive and oppositional. Indeed, gay Muslims 'occupy an intersectional social location *between* political and social cultures' and 'suffer oppression through this position' (Rahman, 2010: 945). Intersectional paradigms demonstrate that oppression cannot be reduced to one singular type and that gay Muslims illustrate a nexus of oppression that is 'caught between cultural and political Islamophobia and homophobia' (Rahman, 2010: 945). Our intention is *not* to replicate this discourse, only to comment on how it is narrated by the radical right.

While radical right homophobia and far-right threats to LGBTQ+ people in the United Kingdom certainly exist (BBC, 2018), radical right groups are able to adapt to changing social norms; this allows them to appeal to previous victims by promoting *alter*-progressive narratives.

Alter-progressivism and the radical right

A veil of progressivism is a recurring theme among radical right parties (Duina and Carson, 2020) who claim to support social liberalism. The phenomenon is exclusionary, yet its adherents narrate their (selective) liberalism as progressive and protecting of (selected) minorities. We do not argue that this is actually progressive, but the internal logic of this narrative presupposes progressivism, and its adherents claim to not only accept marginalised people but actively defend them against constructed threats. Therefore, it is not *anti*-progressive (i.e. a self-acknowledgement of its exclusionary logic) but *alter*-progressive (i.e. a self-delusion that they are the 'true' defenders of minorities against intolerance and violence). This aligns with populist narratives according to which they are the true defenders of 'the people' against 'the elite' (Wodak and Boukala, 2017). Contemporary British radical right movements therefore adopt and adapt some elements of older far-right ideologies and modernise them (to an extent), replacing open homophobia with an acceptance and protection of (some) non-heterosexual identities and communities. We also note that contrary to popular narratives in which LGBTQ+ people lean left politically, some may be

susceptible to supporting a narrative prevalent on the heteronormative radical right: an apparently censorious culture of political correctness, the erosion of traditional gender roles, trans rights as a threat, immigration and fear of Islam. What appears to be occurring in these examples is twofold: first, a radical right attempt to reposition the LGBTQ+ individual as a victim of the ‘left’, and second, increasing social acceptance of homosexuality since the 1980s which has resulted in emerging, marginal divisions within the LGBTQ+ community, which radical right movements can exploit by appealing to members (particularly bi/gay, cisgender people) who are narrated as sharing common anxieties about Islam and queer identities.

These radical right narratives advocate *exclusion* of particular groups and *inclusion* of *some* but not *all* historically (and contemporaneously) marginalised or oppressed communities, purportedly in the name of social liberalism. Where far-right movements are openly homophobic and, at the opposite end of a spectrum, social liberals ostensibly advocate legal and social equality between all people, many radical right movements fall in the middle, advocating acceptance and protection of *some* (but not all) marginalised communities. The reasons for this are detailed below, but essentially they combine radical right desires to be seen as legitimate and liberal, with the desires of some LGB people to be socially accepted and protected from perceived threats in the form of Islam and a regressive left (Times, 2019).

Simultaneously, these narratives distinguish the radical right from the openly homophobic far-right but simultaneously reproduce the same far-right themes of exclusion and violence (Hope not Hate, 2019: 29–85). This aligns with the radical right’s preoccupation with the ‘Great Replacement’ narrative, whereby the structure of Western (i.e. White) civilisation is existentially threatened by two enemies (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017: 25): internal elites and external Muslims. Islam is presented in these narratives as an ultra-conservative, rapidly expanding demographic (Murray, 2017) which, through weight of numbers and the collaboration of leftist ‘elites’, aims to overthrow Western civilisation and replace it with a Eurabian Caliphate under Sharia Law (Davey and Ebner, 2019). Any subtleties, internal variations, disputes or debates within Islam (including LGBTQ+ Muslims) are dismissed by the radical right as non-existent, irrelevant or smokescreens. This makes Islam a particularly powerful site of projection for radical right accounts of the LGBTQ+ community (Huneke, 2019), and as this article argues, it is in the interaction of LGBTQ+ and radical right groups that extreme (and overlooked) exclusionary and Islamophobic rhetoric is found. While a tense narrative of a violently homophobic Islam and a ‘regressive left’ has united parts of the LGBTQ+ community and the radical right since the early 2000s, the more recent ‘populist’ explosion has propelled LGBTQ+ rights from indifference or hostility by the radical right into a trope used to attack Islam and ‘elites’ imagined to be protecting Islam at the expense of existentially threatened ‘native’ minorities – specifically LGBTQ+ persons.

Homosexuality and cisgender discontent

While British radical right discourses on the LGBTQ+ community are complex, our research indicates that an overlap is found among cisgender White males (but, as our empirical analysis shows, this is far from exclusive to men). One of many explanations is a dissatisfaction with contemporary society and a perceived ‘crisis of masculinity’ (Buchbinder, 2012; Kimmel, 2015: 15–17), characterised by male resentment at the imagined erosion of their former hegemony. Michael Kimmel (2018) argues that

masculinity bridges disenchanted males and extremist political groups by appealing to the disillusioned:

young men in these groups often feel a sense of righteous indignation, seeing themselves as victims, their birthright upended in a world dominated by political correctness. Offering the promise of being able to ‘take back their manhood’, these groups leverage stereotypes of masculinity to manipulate despair. (Kimmel, 2018)

It remains unclear as to what extent radical right agents genuinely believe in supporting the LGB (but not LGBTQ+) community, or whether this is a cynical effort to legitimise the radical right by portraying it as distinct from the far-right and an imagined militant, monolithic left – an *alter*-progressive strategy. Kimmel (2010) demonstrates that the process is reflexive, a two-way street between a radical right which appeals to disillusioned cisgender homosexual males in order to construct a veneer of socially liberal legitimacy, and cisgender homosexual males longing for acceptance within a heteronormative, hegemonic masculine ‘mainstream’ via ‘overt symbolic efforts to claim a distinct “manhood” . . . to which others do not have access and which will restore manhood to the formerly privileged’ (Kimmel, 2018: 145). This aligns with Koen Sloomaeckers’ (2019) research on overt homophobia as an Othering device deployed by hetero- and homonationalists, and echoes what Nishant Shahani (2011) terms ‘retrosexual’ – the rejection of queer identities and stereotypically camp gay lifestyles in favour of overt cisgenderism, constructed and communicated by homosexual males through ‘manly’ personal and public performances intended to convey strength, resilience, personal responsibility and adherence to hegemonic masculinity. These are performed through an admixture of physical and political culture, from non-competitive bodybuilding to online political forums. For radical right groups, it is the protection of *some* deviant sexual identities (namely, homo- and bisexuality), but a rejection of other sexual and gender identities, the construction of an apparently monolithic Islam and a monolithic illiberal left as unacceptable identities. For LGB adherents of these groups, *alter*-progressivism is the public performance of historically marginalised or oppressed ‘deviant’ sexual identities, but within a cis-normative framework. Therefore, the narration is not progressive (as with mainstream liberalism), nor is it *anti*-progressive (as with neo-Nazism), but *alter*-progressive.

These narratives overlap with research into changing gay identities. While the phenomenon is found among bi- and homosexual men and women (as outlined below), it is overwhelmingly visible among men. This is not a coincidence, as the efforts of some radical right groups to reach out to LGBTQ+ people are significantly influenced by gay male discontent in a heteronormative, male-hegemonic society.

Andrew Cooper (2013: 10–11) argues that gay men struggling with their identities in a heteronormative world demonstrate two strategies: ‘fortress identities’ and ‘sticky identities’. The former is motivated by *exclusivity*, creating an identity which provides a psychological shield against social abuse, humiliation and rejection by the mainstream. The latter is characterised by *inclusivity*, gay men’s conscious efforts to join the same mainstream and gain acceptance. This involves reconciling different, competing or even mutually exclusive, elements of their identities in order to replicate straightness, therefore allowing them to be accepted by the heteronormative mainstream. These replications can include heteronormative and ‘straight’ behaviour, such as *hypermasculinity* and hyper-masculine performances, to overtly distinguish the self from, *hypomasculinity* in the form of camp, trans and queer. This is febrile ground for radical right attempts to appeal to

LGBTQ+ communities. Alan Klein's (1993: 194–233) classic study of the politics of bodybuilding outlines a pathway for bi- and homosexual males into radical right politics. In Klein's model, gay males are much more vulnerable than their straight counterparts to feelings of physical and social inadequacy and long for recognition and acceptance in heterosexual society. This can subsequently propel cisgender LGB individuals towards overtly heteronormative behaviour to gain social acceptance through Cooper's (2013) aforementioned 'sticky identities' and a more authoritarian politics ('fortress identities') to deal with rejection by the mainstream. Through this combination, feelings of insecurity can be projected onto those even further down the hierarchy of social acceptability. This aligns with research into a broader crisis of masculinity in the post-industrial West (Johnson, 2017: 229–250). Meanwhile, high-profile media debates on 'toxic masculinity' reinforce radical right narratives circulating in the digital 'manosphere' (Ging, 2017) which claim that males (specifically White, cisgender, heteronormative straight, bi or gay males) are persecuted or disadvantaged by a system apparently biased against the condition of being male (Akkerman, 2015). These anxieties, which may overlap with radical right discourses on sexual roles and what Mudde and Kaltwasser (2015) term 'strongman politics', are not unique to heterosexuals. The result is that cisgender bi- and homosexual individuals, weary of an 'identity politics' ostensibly characterised by excessive political correctness (Campbell and Manning, 2018), and exhibiting fortress and sticky identities in which a longing for acceptance merges with an overt rejection of trans and queer, are perhaps *more* vulnerable to radical right politics than their cisgender heterosexual counterparts (Kimmel, 2018).

This conscious construction and performance of a 'sticky' identity is inextricable from what James Kirchik (2019) calls 'post-gay' Western society. This is particularly so for gay men, who perform 'a task of invention and self-invention' (Weeks, 2005, in Cooper, 2013: 8) in response to the shifting nature of homosexuality in Western nations. While still not perceived as completely equal to heterosexuality, homosexuality has become more socially accepted and attitudes in the United Kingdom to homosexuality have 'become increasingly liberal over the last 30 years' (Policy Institute at King's College London, 2019). Whereas 40% of Britons in 1989 viewed homosexuality as morally wrong, this view is held by only 13% in 2019 (Policy Institute at King's College London, 2019). Economically, gay males outperform their straight counterparts (Carpenter and Eppink, 2017). In law, Western LGBTQ+ communities enjoy far greater protection than at any time in history (but this is far from universal). The increasing visibility and acceptance of LGBTQ+ individuals in mainstream Western society and among the radical right, however, is conditional. It is largely (but not exclusively) 'white urban gay men' (Kimmel, 2010: 5), who conform to either hegemonic heteronormativity or 'clever, campy, and culturally sophisticated' (Kimmel, 2010) stereotypes, who acquire social acceptability and even respectability. However, this is not equally applicable, and a hierarchy is visible in which lesbians, gay men of colour (Cooper, 2013: 49–64), transgender individuals and bisexuals are not necessarily granted equivalent status with White gay men. This intersects with changing understandings of homosexuality and rightist politics in recent decades which can be partially explained through what Kimmel (2010) terms a 'malaise . . . from anxiety to anger' (Kimmel, 2010: 2), in this case directed towards a left which is narrated as promoting and protecting the religious rights of an ostensibly virulently homophobic Islam over the existential rights of the LGBTQ+ community (Pilkington, 2016: 63–64; 134–136). This further aligns with masculine discontent surrounding claimed 'toxic masculinity' (Achilleos-Sarl and Martill, 2019) and perennial

rightist rhetoric which portrays Islam as an existential threat. Anxious or resentful of a perceived ‘crusade against men’ (Furedi, 2019; Kirchik, 2019) LGB persons (particularly, but not exclusively, gay men) may perceive an ostensible new ‘competitive victimhood’ culture war (Campbell and Manning, 2018: 161) distinguished by ‘*mansplaining . . . whitesplaining . . . straightsplaining . . . fatshaming . . . heteronormativity, cisnormativity . . . misgendering . . . and toxic masculinity*’ (Campbell and Manning, 2018: 87–88), as part of a purported left-leaning agenda to delegitimise the LGBTQ+ community in favour of an apparently homophobic and threatening Muslim community. This antagonism to political correctness, invariably portrayed as exclusively leftist, intersects with the radical right’s narrative of a left which promotes and protects Islam at the expense of LGBTQ+ safety, causing individuals to develop radical right-leaning sticky identities (adopting their rhetoric) for protection.

As a social and political phenomenon which promotes traditional, hierarchical gender roles for males and females (to the exclusion of other genders), the radical right thus narrates itself as an antidote to what Leslie Heywood (in Moore, 1997: 166) terms ‘the aphanasis [*vanishing*] of masculinity’. In mainstream Western societies, this finds an audience among, primarily but not exclusively, gay and bi cisgender men experiencing masculine anxiety. Overlapping with these themes is a constant trope of masculinity (specifically, a heteronormative, hegemonic masculinity) which politically coincides with the ideological faction that most emphasises traditional gender roles and heteronormativity – the radical right.

LGBTQ+ people and the UK radical right

In the United Kingdom, both main parties’ incremental decriminalisation of homosexuality in the late 20th century significantly contributed to a narrative of the ‘lavender vote’ and an assumption that LGBTQ+ individuals lean left. As one of the earliest LGBTQ+-centred reports on Brexit argues,

To play up to stereotypes and to make sweeping generalisations, we LGBT people tend to be less parochial and more internationalist in our outlook. We look for communities beyond those that we were traditionally raised in. By and large, we celebrate difference and diversity. (Gay Star News with Bristol University, 2018)

Recent research does suggest a Western European correlation between exclusively homosexual people and support for left-wing parties (Turnbull-Dugarte, 2019), but this is not universal. Some studies have explored similar themes to the *alter*-progressiveness of the radical right, such as how they usually avoid defending homosexual rights, but only instrumentally if it ‘enhances’ arguments against Islam (Akkerman, 2015; Spierings et al., 2015). Additional literature discusses the utilisation of LGBTQ+ rights to advance nationalistic causes. Jasbir Puar’s concept of homonationalism (Puar, 2007) reveals the complexities of how acceptance and tolerance ‘for gay and lesbian subjects have become a barometer to evaluate the rights and capacity for national sovereignty’ (Puar, 2013: 336). The closely related pejorative term ‘pinkwashing’ illuminates how organisations promote themselves as overtly pro-LGBTQ+ to conceal oppression (Mahdawi, 2017). Whether this is homonationalism, pinkwashing or a different concept altogether, there are clear examples of radical right movements advocating these ‘liberal’ values as part of *alter*-progressivism. This distinguishes their discourses from those of the far-right.

In the United Kingdom, far-right political movements have sought (and continue to seek) to ostracise, harm or kill LGBTQ+ people. In 1999, neo-Nazi David Copeland planted nail bombs in London's Brick Lane and the LGBTQ+ *Admiral Duncan* Pub, resulting in three deaths and 140 injuries. More recently, Ethan Stables, a self-declared neo-Nazi who vowed to 'slaughter every single one of the gay bastards' (Independent, 2018), was convicted for planned terrorism against a Pride event in Cumbria. Far-right violence clearly still exists. Where the formal far-right failed electorally and the street far-right turned to illegal violence, the radical right is arguably more successful. By ostensibly rejecting far-right strategies and the openly homophobic philosophies underpinning them, radical right movements can narrate themselves as accepting, and protecting, of people targeted by the far-right.

Puar emphasises strategies by movements like the EDL to appeal to racial and sexual minorities, who are 'offered a way of reclaiming an otherwise withheld national belonging – to be British is to be anti-Muslim – while maintaining their exceptional minority status' (Puar, 2010). The EDL, formerly led by the pseudonymic Tommy Robinson, seeks to pressure the government to confront 'Islamic fascism', instrumentalising minority communities and rights to portray themselves, *alter*-progressively, as the defenders of liberty and even as an 'anti-racist human rights organisation' (Kassimeris and Jackson, 2015). Furthermore, the EDL has an '*LGBT Division*' as part of a broader attempt to engage with other marginalised groups, such as Jewish and Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities, who have historically been targets of the far-right (Allen, 2014; Verkaik, 2010). This '*LGBT Division*' frames itself in opposition to Islam left's failure to tackle it or overt discrimination (Pilkington, 2016). The EDL has attempted to publicly demonstrate its appeal to some LGBTQ+ people. Prior to a rally, they once met in London's LGBTQ+ bar *Halfway to Heaven* (Pinfold, 2013). Although interviews with members of the group are rare, the former leader of the EDL's *LGBT Division* 'Tommy English' (a likely pseudonym) has justified his participation on the grounds that 'the spread of (Islam) will increase homophobia and homophobic attacks' in the United Kingdom (Left Foot Forward, 2013). While there are multiple ideological overlaps with the far-right, the EDL should not be conflated with traditional fascist movements and may perhaps be better referred to, along with new movements such as Laurence Fox's *Reclaim Party*, the remnants of *UKIP* and the *Reform Party*, as part of the 'populist radical right' (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017).

It is also crucial to note that although specific movements and groups decline in popularity, a fluid membership is able to migrate between overlapping radical right groups. For example, the EDL is currently in decline from its 2010s peak. However, it has served as a gateway to other movements such as the *Democratic Football Lads Alliance* (DFLA), the *North West Infidels*, *North-East Infidels*, *South East Alliance* and *Combined Ex-Forces* (Jackson, 2011: 30). The DFLA, a self-proclaimed anti-extremist organisation, includes in its manifesto an *alter*-progressive commitment to 'being inclusive and acceptable to all colours, creeds, faiths and religions' (DFLA, 2017). Yet there have been numerous reports of DFLA members exhibiting threatening behaviour, anti-Muslim rhetoric and associations with far-right activists (Times, 2018). Crucially, an under-discussed movement that has former EDL membership is *Gays Against Sharia* (GaS), which purports to defend marginalised sexualities. After leaving the EDL, Tommy English has led *GaS* and undertaken demonstrations against the perceived homophobia of Islam. They have been politically active, holding demonstrations in Manchester, Bristol and Stockton-on-Tees in the United Kingdom between 2017 and 2019. Other key figures in this broader movement,

such as the lesbian former UKIP leadership candidate, Anne-Marie Waters (current leader of *For Britain*), illustrate a discursive pattern. Such individuals explicitly promote their sexual orientations in an instrumentalist style as justification for involvement in radical right politics. This demonstrates an ostensibly progressive shift in the public-facing acceptability of homosexual participants in radical right activity. However, as we will demonstrate, this represents not progressivism but *alter*-progressivism.

Method

Radical right and far-right groups are extremely adept at digital communications, transcending geographical boundaries through ‘slick, digital campaigns’ and social media (Davey and Ebner, 2019). YouTube videos provide activists with a popular platform to engage in longer monologues about particular issues that concern them. Here, we have found the most prominent themes in discourses (Wodak et al., 2013). Searching for videos by keywords, key phrases, and uploaded by principal agents, we identified 14 videos in which well-known British radical right activists spoke explicitly on themes which we identified as indicative of *alter*-progressivism. These 14 videos directly address, and are exclusively dedicated to, LGBTQ+ issues and directly target LGBTQ+ audiences. The key themes we identified included, at various times, cisnormativity, an imagined incompatibility of a monolithic and illiberal Islam with an ostensibly liberal West, an apparently existential Islamic threat specifically towards LGBTQ+ people and claims that only the radical right is able and willing to protect marginalised groups. These recorded speeches and interviews were located entirely on YouTube and ranged in duration from 5 minutes to over 2 hours each. We focused on the period from 2013 to 2020 because of the emergence of the EDL’s *LGBT Division* in 2012/2013 (Pilkington, 2016: 23, 63, 121–122), arguably the first formal manifestation of an *alter*-progressive radical right LGBTQ+ group in the United Kingdom. We analysed these videos not in terms of their visuality (most are talking head or basic dialogues with no visually remarkable content) but instead their spoken content. We found that these *alter*-progressive themes were emphasised in the rhetoric of a few dominant radical right activists, whose online followings and ability to easily move between digital communities give them maximum exposure among an otherwise fragmented and geographically atomised radical right.

A clarification on the distinction between ‘discourse’ and ‘rhetoric’ is required. We adopt a social constructivist approach, according to which discourses are a key feature of social realities. While there are many definitions of ‘discourse’, we see it similarly to Fairclough and Wodak’s definition of discourse as ‘socially constituted as well as socially conditioned . . . it constitutes situations, objects of knowledge, and social identities of and relationships between people and groups of people’ (Fairclough and Wodak, 1997: 258). Consequently, when we use the term ‘construct’ in our analysis, we are referring to the notion that, regardless of the ontological veracity of a claim about reality, the very process of articulating it requires social construction into discourses. Such discourses constructed by radical right movements simplify multifaceted subtleties and debates, particularly surrounding Islam and ‘the Left’, in order to construct an *alter*-progressive narrative that portrays each as an ostensible monolith.

Alongside discourses, we analyse these activists’ rhetoric. The concept of rhetoric has an enormous trajectory and may have pejorative connotations in contemporary parlance. Yet in Ancient Greece, rhetoric was understood in a more neutral sense as the ‘formal

study of persuasive communication' (Charteris-Black, 2014: 3). The common purpose (both implicitly and explicitly) of the rhetoric below is to persuade the audience. The messages communicated are reflective of, and contribute to, discourses that simplify multifaceted subtleties and debates within Islam in order to construct an *alter*-progressive narrative that portrays Islam as a monolithic 'evil' enemy. While the empirical material we analyse below is in video format, we focus on language as the basis of our analysis. The videos were not analysed in terms of their imagery but the content of the speeches. It is from this content that we identify the most prominent themes of *alter*-progressivism.

Analysis: 'Real' friends and enemies

The marriage of convenience between some sections of the gay community, and elements of the radical right, is neither universal nor unconditional. Still, the perceived irreconcilability between homosexuals and the radical right is not completely ignored by the latter. Indeed, in most cases, there are explicit strategies to address this perception through (1) concrete examples of being ostensibly pro-gay, and (2) asking audiences loaded questions which reduce LGBTQ+ and Muslim identities to hostile, irreconcilable opposites, with the latter portrayed as an existential threat. In this section, we highlight key examples of the issue being more directly addressed. There are appeals to '*alter*-progressivism' that most commonly appears among radical right movements that explicitly identify as pro-LGB. In at least two interviews (English 2017a, English, 2017b). In an interview for the *Red Pill Factory*, Tommy English is asked who is 'really intolerant', those who 'criticise an ideology, or people who throw gay people off roofs?' English's response forms two interrelated arguments:

English: *laugh* 'The ones who throw gay people off roofs! It's a no-brainer! I mean, when you look at someone like Tommy Robinson, he's been pushed as some sort of *evil* bigot, someone who's got to be like countered and feared and when we look at Nick Griffin, of the BNP, he *was* intolerant of black people, of Jews, of gays, of anyone who wasn't a white heterosexual male'. (English, 2017b)

This response articulates distinctions between openly homophobic far-right (a label he actively rejects) towards an *alter*-progressive radical right, narrating the LGBTQ+ community (alongside ethnic and religious minorities) as directly threatened by a monolithic Islam *and* the far-right, and therefore in need of protection from those who identify as liberal and the guardians of Western values against an uncaring and untrustworthy left/globalist elite (Wielowiejski in Dietze and Roth, 2020: 143–145). This newer movement is underpinned by Tommy Robinson, who Tommy English claims is unfairly portrayed as an 'evil bigot', despite being ostensibly less problematic than former British National Party (BNP) leader Nick Griffin. Instead, English reframes this by adopting strategy (2) in distinguishing sharply between being gay versus being Muslim:

... yet for us as infidels of the kuffar, we are women, we are Jews, we are Christians, we are young children, we are gay, we are everything what [*sic*] Islam hates – and we are proud of that! We are proud to be the very thing what [*sic*] Islam hates because it gives us a thing to unite. (English 2017b)

Both interviewer and interviewee (English) refer to themselves as 'Kufar and proud', before English recycles old debates on the compatibility of native populations and Islamic immigrants:

. . . it just really winds me up, this politically correct bullshit where East London, which was a big gay area in the 1980s, and now is just known as a hotbed for Islamic extremism. Same with Luton, there has not been in a gay pride in Luton since 2001. What does that tell you? (English, 2017)

GaS is an unusual demonstration of radical right attempts to appeal to ostensible LGBTQ+ anxieties. While *GaS* generally refer to themselves as a mainstream LGBTQ+ group that could be at any Pride march, they distance themselves from what they perceive as a left-wing infiltration of the movement. What we find here is a distinct *alter*-progressivism that ostensibly seeks to be just another movement in favour of gay rights. It does this partly through critique of other gay-rights movements and figures within them. It also adds a hostile dimension that advocates *exclusion* rather than inclusion and diversity, which we argue is the essence of *alter*-progressivism – inclusion of *some* but not *all* historically (and contemporaneously) marginalised or oppressed communities, in the name of social liberalism. An example of this is the aftermath of the *Pulse* nightclub shootings of 2016. Which was described as *GaS* held a demonstration in Stockton-on-Tees in 2016 was described as being in solidarity with the Orlando attacks (Duffy, 2016).

The main objective here appears to be shifting the perception that gay people should be inclined to left politics. The goals of *GaS* are similarly expressed by Anne-Marie Waters, the lesbian leader of *For Britain*, who was previously a Labour Party supporter. Waters has utilised her defection from ‘the left’ as a response to the perceived betrayal, especially the Labour party, who she accuses of now defending ‘Sharia Law’ (Waters 2018a). In response to 2019 protests by mostly conservative Muslims around LGBTQ+ inclusive education, through the ‘No Outsiders’ programme at a school in Birmingham, Waters objects to left-wing ‘complicity’ in ‘importing’ such hatred. Responding to a man who stated that his ‘religion is not there to be changed’, Waters seeks to ‘alert’ gay people of these issues:

. . . if I were you, open-border gay-rights activist leftists, they’re not going to change, you expect them to, you expect them to become just like you, it isn’t going to happen. The disgust for homosexuality is very, very deep, and as I said vast numbers believe gays should be killed. You are bringing this into the UK. And what’s quite telling, is in the same speech, the man complained of saying it was okay to be gay – that was his problem, you shouldn’t tell people’s it okay to be gay – are you listening gay rights activists? Are you listening? You are importing this. You are importing a very, very dark future for gay people and beyond. Wake up, please. Wake up. Stop this now. Speak up! (Waters, 2019c)

Waters’ rhetoric reinterprets gay identities in two ways. First, it disentangles left-wing gay activists who allegedly support ‘open borders’ from the wider gay population – a typical populist trope of ‘elites’ and ‘the people’, repurposed for homosexuals. Second, it strengthens the perceived hostility between homosexuals and Muslims, with the latter narrated as a violent existential threat to the former. For Waters, this signifies at best the misguided nature of the left, and at worst an attempt to deceive people into accepting the cause of their own destruction. Waters’ 2018 speech was subsequently counter-protested:

Lefties over there [*are*] protesting against a group protesting against a group against the execution of gays. What does that tell you? It tells you how upside down and inside out everything has become. People think it’s a mystery. People today have come up to me and said ‘why do these lefties support a religion, an ideology, that openly wants to kill gays?’ I tell you why . . . they’re stupid [*laughter*] but also . . . also . . . they are racist [*cheering*] this is what drives them . . . these fools over there. (Waters, 2018b)

Citing a 2016 poll in which 52% of British Muslims said homosexuality should be criminalised, Waters argues that the ‘fools’ [*left-wing counter-demonstrators*] ‘may be standing with Muslims, but I can guarantee them that the vast majority of Muslims will not be standing with them’ (Waters, 2018). The strategy here is *alter*-progressive – appealing to an ostensibly liberal rationality to construct an existentially hostile threat towards homosexuality from Islam. The extra logical leap implied by Waters’ speech is that LGBTQ+ people more clearly align to the identity narratives of those on the ‘radical right’. Similar sentiments have been expressed by figures often associated with the ‘alt-right’. Former *Breitbart* editor Milo Yiannopolous, a British ‘journalist’ who identifies as a gay man, has argued that the ‘alt-right’ is a natural space for him to be in:

. . . the press seems to determine the alt-right this hateful, misogynist, racist, homophobic anti-Semitic movement and yet at the same time tries to crown a gay Jew who never shuts up about his black boyfriend as the leader of it. Something isn’t right here. (Yiannopolous, 2016)

This is indicative of competing ‘fortress’ and ‘sticky’ identities which gay males can often deploy. Yiannopolous quite frequently reinforces these points with humour. In a 2016 speech titled ‘*10 Things I Hate about Islam*’, he remarks that humour is a tool to ‘counter’ the threat of Islam. One example is that five times a day Islam ‘rounds up all their men to stick their bums up in the air’ (Yiannopolous, 2016). He further belittles Islamic dress and the ‘thin-skinned’ reaction to the *Jyllands-Posten* cartoon controversy in 2005 and the *Charlie Hebdo* shootings in 2015. On a less jocular note, Yiannopolous lists Islam being ‘scared of gays’ as a thing to hate about it:

I do not want to be thrown off a building or stoned to death or beheaded or gunned down in a nightclub. (Yiannopolous, 2016)

Such narratives are not restricted to individual countries, and American and British discourses shape and reflect one another (Beirich in Wodak et al., 2013: 89–104). As an example, Yiannopolous further warns that America’s ‘gay establishment’ conspires to enable ‘hordes’ of ‘homophobic Muslims [*to be*] imported into the West’ to ‘shoot up gays in nightclubs’ (Yiannopolous, 2016). Responding to claims that he is a ‘self-hater’ for being a conservative homosexual, he gives an *alter*-progressive response:

I am not the self-hater. The whiny gay leftists who cry when I say something offensive but are silent in the face of an existential threat; they are the self-haters. They hate themselves so much that they want to commit suicide; suicide by Islamic immigration. And that has got stop. (Yiannopolous, 2016)

While these narrators tend to portray themselves as holding sway based on their own sexual orientation, heterosexual commentators have nonetheless made similar appeals on the perceived threat of Islam. British commentator Paul Joseph Watson (who, with his British counterpart Milo Yiannopolous, demonstrates the reflexive discourses from different countries which inform one another) has five speeches on YouTube that focus specifically on the threat that Islam poses to LGBTQ+ people. He positions LGBTQ+ left and ‘liberals’ against Islam, through broad statements that a society tolerant of both homosexuality and Islam is not possible, meaning we must ‘choose one’ (Watson 2016a; Watson, 2017; 2018; 2019). In a monologue titled ‘*Dear Gays – The Left Betrayed You*’, recorded as a response to the 2016 nightclub attack in Orlando, Watson criticises what he perceives

as the left's 'virtue signalling' *anti*-progressive response. He begins the monologue with a series of statements that repeat an *alter*-progressive narrative of constructing gay identities as threatened by an apparently monolithic Islam, and therefore in need of protection.

adding a rainbow filter to your Facebook profile picture isn't a substitute for calling out Islam's violent hatred towards gays

creating some lame sappy hashtag like #prayfororlando isn't going to stop Islam's violent hatred towards gays

tweeting #prayfororlando so you can virtue signal to your friends about how compassionate you are isn't going to stop violent hatred towards gays

tweeting #loveislove so you can get one over on right-wing Christians isn't going to stop Islam's hatred towards gays. (Watson, 2016b)

Watson reinforces this with examples of speakers compelling audiences to display their feelings on whether all punishments outlined in the Koran and Sunnah are justified, and therefore that homosexuals should be executed. Watson claims this is 'evidence' of mainstream Muslim views, normally publicly concealed, by citing Turkish media references to nightclub goers as 'perverts' and *Al-Jazeera* viewers celebrating the attacks. The implication is that the 'left' is *regressive*, versus a radical right which he perceives as progressive (but which we identify as *alter*-progressive). Watson claims that this 'regressive left' has sold gay people out:

. . . the regressive left does not have your back. While telling you to obsess over transgender bathrooms and gender-neutral pronouns they are making an alliance with people who literally want to criminalise your lifestyle . . . just like they sacrificed Western civilisation in exchange for political correctness, the left has sacrificed the safety of gay people on the altar of multiculturalism, lowering the drawbridge for the monoculture of Islam that is completely intolerant of any kind of diversity and would rather see gay people behind bars or dead. (Watson, 2016)

A recurring theme throughout these speeches is the emphasis on homosexual and bisexual people, but with what we argue is a defining characteristic of *alter*-progressivism: the exclusion of trans people. The acceptance of homosexuality has paradoxically reproduced, and perhaps reinforced, the splintering of queer identities as cisgender LGB persons adopt strategies of 'compartmentalising, de-emphasising, or de-prioritising a gay identity' (Hunter, 2010, in Cooper, 2013: 88) as they negotiate with other elements of their identity. This coincides with radical right cisgender homosexuals who engage in controversies over the role of trans people within society and who narrate a plurality of genders as a threat. Therefore, many narratives espoused by homosexual radical right politicians and activists draw a sharp demarcation between trans people versus cisgender homosexuals and bisexuals. Waters has argued that divisions have existed between 'LGB' and 'T+' for over 20 years. 'LGB people', she claims, wondered 'what the T had to do with them', whereas 'the T side essentially wanted somewhere to belong'. What nobody could predict, she claims, was that:

T would become TQ . . . ABCDE or whatever the hell it's become, and nor could they have predicted that every gay rights organisation would suddenly become all about the T. And that if

LGB people rejected to [*sic*] this dominance of T, that they would in fact become excluded from LGBT. (Waters, 2019a)

This illustrates how radical right appeals to the “. . . appeals to the LGB (but not TQ+) community . . .” community are not exclusive to gay men. Waters blames women primarily, such as those in the movement ‘Get the L out’. These exist because ‘T is dominating L organisations . . . so Lesbian groups are effectively dominated by men’. She subsequently claims that trans people, and therefore ‘LGBT’, are responsible for a perceived regression in rights for LGB people. Waters “. . . claims cisgender LGB . . .” people were made aware of something that is ‘wrong and dangerous’, and that the expansion of ‘plus-plus-plus-plus-plus is being used by paedophiles to try and sanitise, justify, and make acceptable, their abuse of children’ (Waters, 2019). She concludes by proclaiming her determination to not be associated with the ‘insanity, with subversion of reality, with this imposition of . . . changing the gender, destroying the body of a child for the virtue-signalling whim of a crazy parent’. Therefore, if we want ‘LGB rights . . . you’re going to have to drop the T, and you’re going to have to do it soon’ (Waters, 2019). Elsewhere, she claims trans-women should not be recognised as women, just because they have ‘cut off their penises’. For Waters, the left and Islam are ineffective in countering homophobia – or actively encourage it. She advances *alter*-progressive narratives in which the radical right can imagine itself as defending vulnerable groups – but only those it deems worthwhile and those which do not, as Wielowiejski (in Dietze and Roth, 2020) suggests, threaten its fixation on static, monolithic, cisgender identities.

This violently exclusionist cisgenderism may represent a form of homonormativity that, as Kendall Gerdes (2014) argues, selectively relegates identities into perceived acceptable ideals and acts. This indicates that the radical right only pays lip-service to the ‘T’ in ‘LGBT’ at best. Indeed, the trans community and those who take a more pluralistic view on gender are subject to derision and mocking from commentators. Paul Joseph Watson produced a monologue attacking Amrou al-Kadhi, a Muslim drag queen, for suggesting that quantum relativity could be deployed as an analogy to understanding gender (Watson, 2018). Elsewhere, in a piece titled ‘The Truth about Gender’, he narrates an essentialist, binary view of sex and gender that highlights immutable differences between men and women (Watson, 2017). The homonormative narratives of *alter*-progressivism are thus predominately upheld by cisgender White gay men but also by lesbians who seek greater autonomy, while side-lining and harming the well-being of trans and queer communities (Flores, 2017).

Conclusion

Far-right parties pose significant threats to the LGBTQ+ community in the United Kingdom. Meanwhile, radical right movements have seen their rhetoric ‘mainstreamed’ into discourses in an ostensibly socially acceptable style. The reasons for this mainstreaming of extremist narratives are contested and their demographic appeals continue to focus on White, cisgender, heterosexual people. But as we have demonstrated, the LGBTQ+ community is far from immune and, due to some angst in the gay community and narratives of Islam posing a specific existential threat, LGBTQ+ persons may in fact be *more* vulnerable to radical right indoctrination.

These appeals have so far had limited success, but this may not always be the case. Researchers interested in radicalisation will need to engage more directly with LGBTQ+ people to understand how and why they may come to perceive:

1. Islam as an existential threat,
2. the left as weak or actively collaborating with a perceived Islamic threat,
3. the radical right as allies.

Clearly there is a toxic mix of increasing Islamophobia which the radical right can tailor to LGBTQ+ fears, particularly when they perceive a radical left which openly endorses homophobia, anti-Semitism and misogyny. It is also possible that young LGB people in Western nations are less likely to see radical right groups as threatening – a phenomenon already identifiable in France (BBC, 2017) and Germany (Deutsche Welle, 2017). In an increasingly fractious and politically divided world, some LGBTQ+ people already feel the need to associate themselves within political collectives which ostensibly defend their interests. Whereas far-right extremists were (and are) threatening to LGBTQ+ groups, the public adoption of LGB causes by some radical right movements may make them appear unthreatening, or at least preferable to an apparent ‘regressive left’ and ‘monolithic Islam’. Therefore, it is entirely plausible that a highly adaptable radical right will develop even more effective strategies of appealing to different LGBTQ+ people and may have unexpected successes.

The observations we have made in this article have numerous implications. We believe that the research indicates that intersectional coalitions are crucial in providing resistance to radical right narratives. Claims of division between cisgender homosexuals and bisexuals, versus trans people are not exclusive to the radical right but are also found in more mainstream discourses. Any resistance to such narratives would require a stronger emphasis on intersectionality within the LGBTQ+ community. This requires urgent research.

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