

Commentary

By Harjeet Badwall, Teresa Macias, Anne O'Connell, Brenda Polar, Ashkan Rahmani, Pablo Ramos, and MJ Rwigema

Anti-Fascism, White Supremacy, and the “New” Right Teach-In

This past school year (2018-2019), the Social Action for Social Change Committee at York University's School of Social Work hosted a week-long Teach-In focused on the rise of fascism, white supremacy, and the “new” right across Canada and internationally. Our committee is made up of students, faculty, and staff concerned with pressing social and political issues that arise alongside the curriculum we deliver in both our undergraduate and graduate program. This year the committee wanted to respond to the staggering rise of white supremacist violence and to situate this development in ongoing neoliberal and colonial policies. We decided to focus on the theme of anti-fascism, specifically on how to resist fascism that is grounded in resurgent white nationalism/white supremacy in mainstream politics in North America and Europe. According to Michael Niman (2019), we have started the year 2019 with “neo-fascists and assorted other “populists” and ethnonationalists holding office in eleven European nations and scoring recent double-digit vote tallies in Finland, Sweden, Germany, the Czech Republic, Austria, Hungary, Italy, Switzerland, Denmark and Netherlands.”

The U.S president has admitted to being a “nationalist” and openly courts the support of white nationalists/supremacists while enacting overtly discriminatory policies such as the Muslim travel ban and the forced separation of children from their families at the southern border, who are then imprisoned. In Canada, an openly white nationalist candidate - Faith Goldy - came in third place in Toronto's mayoral race and other politicians across the country are openly supporting or engaging in white nationalist rhetoric. For example, Ontario premier Doug Ford, conservative federal leader Andrew Scheer, Alberta premiere Jason Kenney and leader of the People's Party of Canada, Maxime Bernier, either sent messages of support or spoke at the pro-pipeline, anti-immigration “United we Roll” convoy to Ottawa on Feb 19th, 2019. The Canadian Anti-Hate Network made up of leading Canadian researchers and experts on hate crimes and hate groups have noted that the Yellow Vest Canada/ United we Roll movement is led by and affiliated with members of white supremacist hate groups. Meanwhile, the Liberal government's stated commitment to reconciliation with Indigenous Nations is proving questionable given many of its choices to forego Canadian rule of law and international agreements, for example in allowing the RCMP to raid Wet'suwet'en territory.

Part of the challenge of naming and challenging white supremacy is that it is viewed as exceptional, a break from the everyday ways of governing, of living, in Canada. It is this break that limits an interrogation into the ways in which white supremacy and colonial thinking is embedded in politics, policies, programs and institutions related to immigration, citizenship,

education, income support, policing, health, the labour market, etc. As the Truth and Reconciliation Commission reminds us, colonialism is alive and well with social work featuring as a central player in constituting its past and present.

How does social work understand its past involvement in colonial practices and institutions and how does that history continue to play out in child welfare, youth care, residential care, etc? What kind of analysis and actions do we need to develop to challenge social work and resist the current rise of white nationalism? These questions become all the more urgent given a federal election in the Fall of 2019, where pro-pipeline and anti-immigrant sentiment promises to saturate public discourse. Given the radical shifts towards openly anti-migrant, anti-Indigenous, anti-Black, anti-trans, anti-queer, anti-Semitic, anti-Muslim, and misogynist policies and practices, the radical increase in hate crimes and media (right wing, social media, and mainstream) accounts against these targeted groups, we believed it was urgent for the School of Social Work, whose mission is to address oppression and subordination as experienced and mediated through class, race, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual identity, age, and ability, to teach our students about these dangerous shifts.

From March 18-22, 2019, full and part-time faculty members were asked to engage their classrooms with the materials provided in appendix 1. Throughout the duration of the week, undergraduate and graduate courses in our School devoted class time to reading, viewing, and discussing the selected articles and documentaries with summaries and discussion questions attached. Students also screened the Boots Riley feature film, *Sorry to Bother You*, an anti-capital sci-fi critique of white corporate America, featuring activists of colour and their attempts at unionizing a call centre. The week was capped off by our annual commemoration of the United Nations Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, with a keynote lecture by Dr. Arun Kundnani, *Anti-Muslim Racism and the Politics of Empire*. Drawing on the work of Stuart Hall and Aimé Césaire, Dr. Kundnani traced the origins of anti-Muslim hate in a history of racism and empire building.

The Social Action for Social Change Committee invites other Schools of Social Work to adopt a pedagogical model that devotes a concentrated time period to a specific and urgent topic for students and social workers. Over three hundred students participated in the Teach-In and filled out evaluation forms. A large majority of students were positive about setting aside this time and made further suggestions for future Teach-Ins.

Figure 1: Do You Want to See More Teach-Ins?

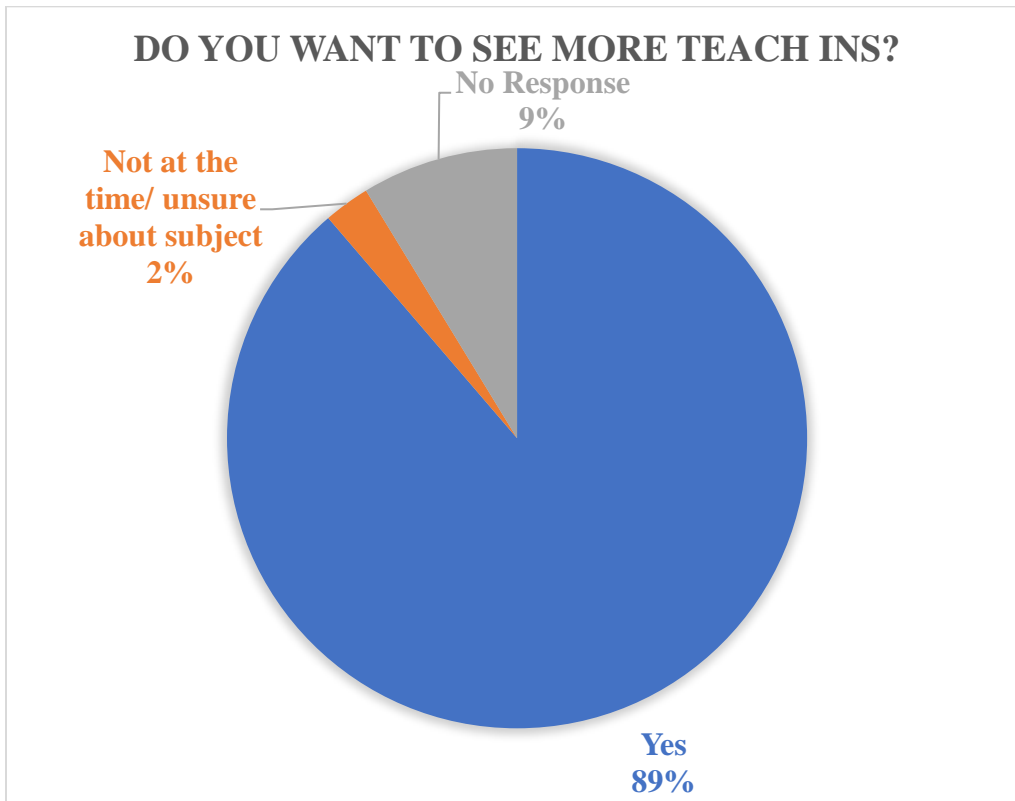
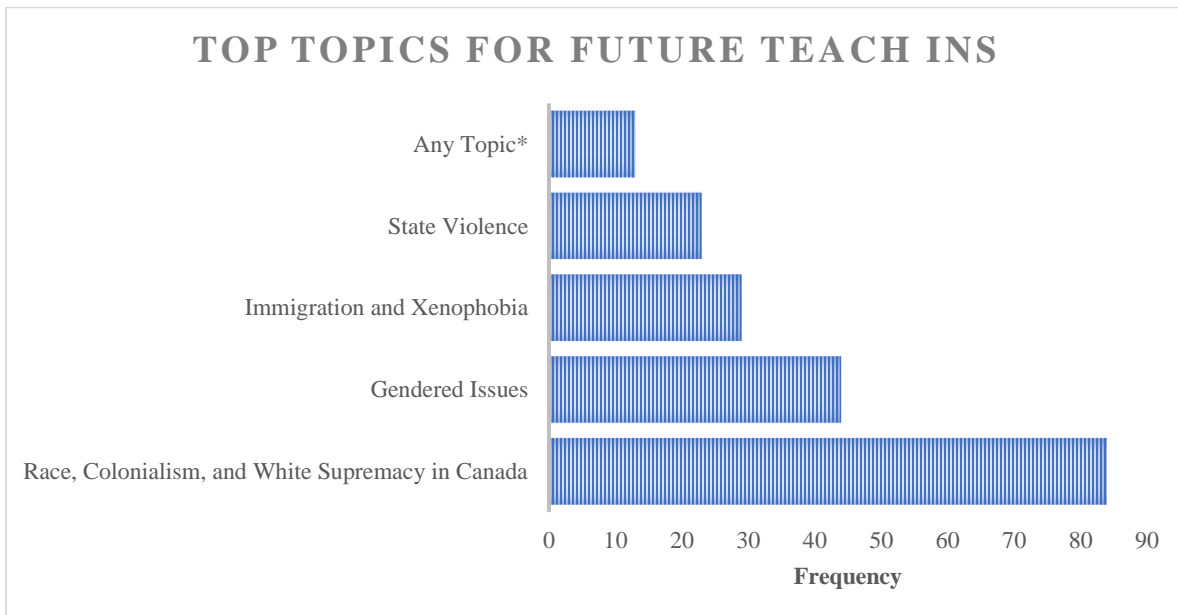


Figure 2: Topics for Future Teach-Ins



*Employment and poverty, creating radical social work solutions, mental health crises among youth in Toronto, harm reduction, and community development.

Students felt that more time was required to have a full conversation about these topics and that Teach-Ins should not be scheduled near the end of the term. Many racialized students felt that the material was not new and were astounded that some students were surprised by the content, others stated that: “student engagement needs to improve,” “we are all implicated in white supremacy – it’s not an immigrant or Indigenous issue,” “we need a current events course,” “we need more work on allyship,” and “more discussion on social work’s relationship to politics and the state.” For the content of the Teach-In, please see the following appendix.

Appendix 1.

Anti-Fascism, White Supremacy, and the “New” Right Teach-In Materials

Article summaries and discussion questions

1. The ‘Beyak Effect’: Fighting

Brake, Justin. (2018, February 21). The ‘Beyak Effect’: Fighting anti-indigenous racism and settler denialism in Canada. *APTN News*. Retrieved from <https://aptnnews.ca/2018/02/21/beyak-effect-fighting-anti-indigenous-racism-settler-denialism-canada/>

Summary

Justin Brake discusses some of the events that happened after the Beyak controversy. Senator Lynn Beyak publicly denied the pervasive harms of residential school on First Nations, Métis, and Inuit people, as well as, criticized the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. Beyak called it biased because it mainly shows the negative aspects of residential schools. In Brake’s views, these actions point to a larger problem: a resistance to recognize the mistreatment of Indigenous peoples in residential schools and the ongoing discrimination against Indigenous people in Canada. Brake describes some of the events that took place in the aftermath of Beyak’s declarations such as instances of overt discrimination against Indigenous people. A psychology professor, Dr. Mehta, at Acadia University openly showed support of Beyak’s comments, claiming the need for freedom of speech. As well, Professor Mehta agreed with Beyak’s criticism of the TRCC and its portrayal of residential schools. Brake discusses another instance where posters that defended white supremacy and ideologies depicting Europeans as the founders of Canada were placed throughout a New Brunswick campus.

This article is relevant to social work studies and universities to understand how free speech becomes weaponized as a policy avenue for hate speech to thrive on campuses and in the Senate. Despite the work on decolonization, this article shows how settler colonialism is embedded in our major institutions.

Discussion questions

How does the freedom of speech policy attempt to silence critical and progressive thought?

Why does a provincial government attack critical thinking and how might this be connected to funding changes at universities?

How is the political world of party politics and senators connected to universities?

2. Don't Let the Alt-Right's Rebrand Fool You

Khandaker, Tamara. (2017, August 24). Don't let the alt-right's rebrand fool you. *The Walrus*. Retrieved from <https://thewalrus.ca/dont-let-the-alt-rights-rebrand-fool-you/>

Summary

This article analyzes the relationship between conservative and right-wing politicians within “Alt-Right” institutions, such as, Rebel Media. The change in tone and public association between these groups revolves around the “Unite the Right” protest in Charlottesville, which brought Nazism and anti-Semitism in the Alt-Right to light and led to the death of Heather Heyer, a white woman, at the hands of a white supremacist. The article asks readers to reflect on why the death of Muslims at the hands of these groups and the promotion of Anti-Black racism for decades prior to this event did not elicit a similar reaction. The author also questions the legitimacy of conservative politicians, such as Andrew Scheer, right-wing media outlets like Rebel Media, and Neo-Nazi groups that denounced the Alt-Right and distanced themselves from this group following the Charlottesville events.

Discussion questions

How do you describe the relationship between right-wing or conservative politics and the Alt-Right? Has this relationship changed in recent years? How?

What are central events in this transformation if you believe there is a change?

Is the Alt-Right political discourse in any way related to mainstream Canadian politics? If yes, how?

What can be done in the “mainstream” realm to counter the growth of the Alt-Right?

Where do the Alt-Right members come from? If these are fringe political views, why do conservative politicians such as Andrew Scheer, Doug Ford, or Maxime Bernier stay close to the institutions that represent this fringe movement?

What can be done to disrupt the vanishing distance between the Alt-Right and mainstream right-wing/conservative politics?

3. Disembowel Enoch Powell

Kundnani, Arun. (2018, April 18). Disembowel Enoch Powell. *Dissent Magazine*. Retrieved from https://www.dissentmagazine.org/online_articles/enoch-powell-racism-neoliberalism-right-wing-populism-rivers-of-blood

Summary

Kundnani traces back the rise of racial neoliberal populism through the figure of Enoch Powell, a British member of parliament who in 1968 called for the ejection of a million or so people of colour living in the United Kingdom. Although he was fired for his speech, his famous rivers of blood speech remained a template for the racial neoliberal populism we see in Europe, the UK, and North America. Enoch was one of the first to re-work populist racist thinking in new ways after the era of formal European colonial rule. In many ways liberal politicians rejected his form of racial populism yet used his ideas to create racist immigration laws in many countries. Kundnani makes critical connections between racism, liberalism, and neoliberalism.

Discussion questions

How do we connect colonialism, liberalism, and neoliberalism in Canada?

If neoliberalism is an inherently racist project, how do social workers incorporate this analysis in their own world view?

How do we understand colonial racism as an ongoing organizing feature of immigration policies and how migrant populations are treated?

4. Why Canada Missed Its Best Change to De-radicalize the Alt-Right

Mastracci, Davide. (2017, September 7). Why Canada missed its best chance to de-radicalize the alt-right. *The Walrus*. Retrieved from <https://thewalrus.ca/why-canada-missed-its-best-chance-to-deradicalize-the-alt-right/>

Summary

Mastracci describes how Canada can fight against hate groups. Mastracci argues that the increasingly visible alt-right hate groups have established themselves under the backdrop of the war on terror. The journalist explains that Canadian alt-right groups have been able to join larger political conversations about immigration and refugees since many Canadians have the same racist fears that refugees are terror cells. Mastracci contends that hate groups pass easily in Canadian society because they are white. The journalist believes that in order to fight against the alt-right, they should be on the terror list so that police can stop their activities. In addition, he argues that the media needs to continuously report on hate groups to pressure the government. Finally, the author writes that communities need to be a part of the fight against hate groups.

Discussion questions

What arguments are missing in this article?

Where are indigenous views and experiences in this article?

What colonial histories and forms of structural racism are absent?

5. Five Forces Driving the Ride of Fascism in 2019

Niman, Michael. (2019, January 13). Five forces driving the rise of fascism in 2019. *Truthout*. Retrieved from <https://truthout.org/articles/five-forces-driving-the-rise-of-fascism-in-2019/>

Summary

In this op-ed, Michael Niman traces the ascent of fascism in contemporary world politics. In so doing, he goes beyond already well-rehearsed critiques of current US Trumpism and links the fascist rhetoric dominating U.S. political and social circles to the alarming rise of “democratically” elected “populist”, reactionary, and ethno-nationalist governments in places such as Europe, the Philippines, and Latin America. Niman identifies five forces at play which drive the rise of fascism: 1) practices of surveillance sustained by the seemingly invisible weaponization of big data and the not-so-invisible surveillance and criminalization of racialized and marginalized targeted populations’ 2) the empowering of mega-monopolies that control commerce, communications, etc. and detrimentally impact on free-speech; 3) anti-immigration and ethno-nationalist xenophobia evident in the ongoing weaponization of biopolitical discourses of racial, religious, and cultural difference; 4) attacks on, and funding cuts to, education, a tactic historically used by fascist regimes to suppress dissent; and, 5) the media’s deployment of false equivalences through which “she said/he said” narratives ultimately obscure lies, create the illusion of “balanced reporting,” and promote antipathy among the public. By drawing clear and well-articulated connections between apparently diverse and disconnected political, social, and economic tactics across transnational lines, Niman offers a critical analysis of the way in which racism, white supremacy, and neocolonialism rely on biopolitical discourses of difference to secure the establishment of fascist ideologies and regimes. Niman argues that the only way to counteract fascism is to engage in political and social activism and hitting the streets.

Discussion questions

How are these five tactics at play in social work, i.e. in processes such as the collection of client information in databases developed and controlled by international conglomerates?

How are the imposition of managerial and competency-based regimes present in the social work labor force in ways that are delinked from social movements?

How are funding structures connected to the recruitment of social workers who participate in the surveillance and policing of marginalized, racialized, and migrant populations?

Film summaries and discussion questions

1. Documenting Hate

Raney Aronson-Rath (Producer). (2018). *Documenting Hate* [video]. Available from (in Canada) <https://www.cbc.ca/passionateeye/episodes/documenting-hate>

_____ In this 45-minute documentary film, reporter A.C. Thompson begins in the days before the “Unite the Right” white supremacist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, U.S on August 11 and 12, 2017. Thompson, throughout the documentary, attempts to make sense, starting with the Charlottesville rally, and tracking back to a number of other white supremacist rallies in the

years prior, of who the players are in the burgeoning out-in-the-open white nationalist movement that has been emboldened with the election of Donald Trump. Trump is shown later in the film referring to white nationalists as “very fine people,” a statement approved by former KKK leader David Duke.

Throughout the film, Thompson continuously raises the question of why law enforcement authorities (police) did not intervene and stood by and watched in numerous incidents in which counter-protestors were violently attacked by well-armed white nationalists in Charlottesville (which culminated in the killing of Heather Heyer). As the documentary progresses, Thompson starts to identify individual white nationalists who show up in video footage in rally after rally attacking people. One of the individuals he identifies turns out to work for a defense contractor and is a Ph.D candidate at UCLA, another is active in the marine corps. and yet another lives in a suburb of Washington, D.C known for being a neighbourhood where members of the “intelligence community” live. Thompson identifies two of the white nationalists and the groups they are affiliated with and passes on his information to the authorities. He then interviews a former FBI agent and starts to question why law enforcement and the FBI are not already tracking and arresting violent white nationalist groups. He also realizes that many white nationalists are in the military and again he asks why this is not being addressed.

Discussion Questions

The film draws attention to the reality that armed white nationalist groups are currently comfortable being out in the open- why do you think this is the case?

The film draws attention to ‘state-sanction’ for the activities of white nationalist groups, what does this mean and why do you think this is the case?

Is white nationalist organizing in Canada an issue? What are examples?

Does the Canadian State sanction white supremacy/white nationalism? How so?

As social workers, is it important to resist white nationalist organizing? If so, how so?

2. The Skin We're In

Stuart Henderson (Producer). (2017). *The Skin We're In* [video]. Available from (in Canada) <https://www.cbc.ca/firsthand/episodes/the-skin-were-in>

_____ In this documentary, director Charles Officer follows Desmond Cole on his journey across Canada to critically examine anti-black racism throughout the nation. Building on his own experience of racial profiling by the police, Cole brings our awareness to the ways in which police violence against Black communities is hidden and dismissed in Canada. The documentary engages Black communities across the nation to discuss the murders of Mike Brown (in the US) and Andrew Loku (in Canada). Critical of our focus on the United States, Cole urges Canadians to turn the lens back on this nation and expose the countless ways violence against Black communities is permitted to take place by the nation-state. Cole examines how Black

communities are cast out of humanity, exposing how fear and stereotypes drive violence. Critical of Canada's reputation as a "less" racist place than the United States, Cole spends time with Black Lives Matter (Toronto) to discuss solidarity movements with BLM in the States, but to also expose racism closer to home, arguing that Black people are in a state of emergency in Canada. Cole demands that we grab hold of the dominant narratives about Black communities in the media and unapologetically turn the lens on to white supremacy.

Discussion Questions

Identify the ways in which police violence against Black communities is perpetuated in Canada?

What strategies to challenge anti-black racism are identified by Black Lives Matter and Desmond Cole?

3. White Right: Meeting the Enemy

Darin Prindle (Producer). (2017). *White Right: Meeting the Enemy* [video]. Retrieved from <https://www.tv.o.org/video/documentaries/white-right-meeting-the-enemy>

(Content warning)

In *White Right: Meeting The Enemy*, filmmaker Deeyah Khan meets with male neo-Nazi leaders in the United States who come from a variety of troubled and privileged backgrounds. As a Muslim women of colour, she wants to challenge neo-Nazis and is interested in uncovering the magnitude and source of their hatred through one-on-one conversations and coverage of rallies and training sessions designed to strengthen violent racist attacks. The film explores the personal histories of these men which is compelling, however, less attention is given to the structural and systemic forms of racism that supports their actions. As a result, an over focus on racism as a psychological or personal phenomenon dominates. *Content warning: the documentary is filled with anti-black and anti-Semitic slurs.* An interesting account of reformed white supremacist Arno Michaelis is presented, who meets up with Pardeep Singh Kaleka, the son of a murder victim from the Sikh temple shooting in Wisconsin in 2012.

Discussion questions

What do you think drives the motivations of these individual men?

How do you think gendered racism plays out in the film?

Are there limits to hearing the personal stories of these men? What critiques do they invite, what do they miss out on?

How does the filmmaker examine structural racism (or not) in the film?

Is the reformed neo-Nazi ever held to account for the multiple racist attacks he is responsible for? What does this tell us?

4. Three short films by the Aging Activisms Research Team at Trent University

Available here: <https://www.thepeterboroughexaminer.com/news-story/8760452-white-supremacy-nationalism-focus-of-videos-from-trent-university-research-team/>

1. Solidarity Weekend

Solidarity Weekend took place over three days starting on September 30, 2017 in Peterborough, Ontario. It was meant to be a rally to oppose the Canadian Nationalist Front that was planning to hold an anti-immigration event which they cancelled in the end. There were around 45 people at the Solidarity Weekend, from the ages of 20 to 80 years old. The three videos were produced by the Aging Activist Research collective based at Trent University. They were invited by the Solidarity Weekend organizers to carry out some research with the rally participants. This collective was interested in finding out the thoughts and feelings of rally participants. The event involved a series of protests and events; more than 1000 people came out to Confederation Park in Peterborough. White supremacists showed up to the rally. People tried to block them with banners, altercations began, the police got involved and two people were arrested. Most of the media focused on these altercations. This video is meant to show what else happened that weekend.

2. Structural Racism: It was Never about the Bad Apples

This video talks about the importance of confronting blatant racists and ongoing structural racism. Speaker Desmond Cole explains: "We have to stand up against white supremacy not just white supremacists." What did people say about the importance of this weekend? A few people talked about the nationalist group as "a few bad apples" and their organizing as an isolated expression of hatred. But most people talk about how the threat of neo-Nazis was not an isolated event but a part of the ongoing policies and institutions.

3. Where Are You From?

This video talks about the hypocrisy of white nationalism on stolen lands. Indigenous people partaking in the rally question how there could be an anti-immigration rally in Canada calling for a return to white European ethnic make-up considering the history of Canada's land. The video also discusses the need to establish relationships amongst each other while recognizing that these relationships are built on colonized lands; we have to recommit to addressing ongoing colonial histories. The video highlights the need to continue to act in solidarity even if we are not affected by overt acts of white supremacy.

Discussion questions

How is racism and white supremacy manifested in your neighbourhood?

What does it take to move past the "few bad apples" or "multiculturalism" discourse?

How do we stand up to and resist white supremacy, the alt-right and liberal racism? How do they work together?