

**Review of Jeff Sparrow: *Fascists Among Us: Online Hate and the Christchurch Massacre* (London: Scribe Publications, 2019) ISBN 978-1-912854-69-1**

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On 15<sup>th</sup> March, 2019, two consecutive mass shootings were carried out during Friday Prayer at Mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand. Fifty-one people were killed and forty-nine injured. The tragic events immediately made news headlines around the world. The perpetrator of these crimes was Brenton Tarrant, a 28-year old Australian from Grafton, New South Wales. He was arrested shortly afterwards, intercepted by local police as he made his way to a third Mosque to continue his killing spree. The self-styled white supremacist at first denied being the killer. However, in March, 2020, Tarrant suddenly dropped his original 'not guilty' plea and, in a hastily arranged hearing at the Christchurch high court, where he appeared by video link from his Auckland prison cell, he admitted carrying out the killings.

This short but nevertheless richly detailed book by the award-winning writer and broadcaster Jeff Sparrow was one of the first studies to examine what he calls the massacre's 'fascist roots', and what the murderous episode both represents and threatens in the context of the 'new politics' of the twenty-first century. Sparrow's main objective is to provide a history of fascism and the contemporary far right (which he deems 'fascisms old and new'), and to demonstrate how today's new generation of media-savvy fascists have adapted their ideas and tactics to the internet and, especially, to the maximisation of instant publicity via 'heroic' individual acts.

Tarrant (referred to as 'Person X' in the book, as it was published within months of

the massacre and before Tarrant admitted his crimes in 2020) had live-streamed the first shooting on Facebook, and had evidently been planning the massacre carefully beforehand, possibly for at least two years in advance. Just prior to the shootings, he published a 74-page 'personal' manifesto online and, with barely minutes to go before he embarked on what Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern called 'one of New Zealand's darkest days', Tarrant e-mailed the manifesto to over thirty recipients, including the PM's office and various newspaper and TV outlets. Copies of the live-streamed video were quickly re-posted on numerous social media sites, often by far right sympathisers, despite the attempts of the authorities to prevent this. Within hours, if not minutes, the publicity and revulsion surrounding the massacre became global news. Copies of the manifesto were shared by journalists seeking to understand what had occurred and by the 'usual suspects' among far right activist networks.

It is Sparrow's analysis of the manifesto that makes *Fascists Among Us* so useful, together with his incisive discussion of the potential longer-term impact of Tarrant's actions, which could possibly serve as a kind of strategic blueprint and role-model for other far right activists across the world who view terror as a legitimate political tool (indeed, there is already persuasive evidence that this has happened over the last year in the USA, UK and Germany). Sparrow notes that in the immediate aftermath of the killings carried out by Tarrant, while a number of far right leaders voiced concern that the extreme violence employed would hurt their cause, other activists, 'particularly those attuned to the online environment', expressed enthusiasm for the public impact Tarrant's massacre had created and the consequent 'dialogue' favourable to the far right's perspective.

On the manifesto itself, to which Tarrant had given the title 'The Great Replacement', Sparrow provides some cogent summary of the various ideas and rhetorical embellishments that went into the document. As Sparrow points out, Tarrant's manifesto 'makes his philosophy entirely clear'. At the outset, Tarrant

asked himself rhetorically: 'Are you a fascist?' 'Yes', was his response, and he added: 'For once, the person that will be called a fascist, is an actual fascist'. Elsewhere in the manifesto, Tarrant also made it plain that he considered the British fascist leader Sir Oswald Mosley to be 'the person from history closest to my own beliefs'.

However, Tarrant did not just cite the 'classical' fascism of the past to explain his 2019 worldview. He also described himself as a 'regular white man', inspired by the acts of the far right mass-murderer Anders Breivik in Norway in 2011. Indeed, at the heart of the manifesto was the demographically nonsensical idea of 'The Great Replacement', which has become an increasingly popular theme shared by far right ideologues across the globe: the pessimistic and inherently racist idea that, as a result of the policies supposedly pursued by the ruling political and economic elites, white European culture will be destroyed by the 'mass migration' of non-white non-Europeans, who can breed faster, leading to the ultimate replacement of European and Western civilisation with 'alien' values and peoples. Tarrant appears to have wanted to provoke a 'race war' in the present to somehow disrupt this process; he gave notice that the aim of his attack was to (as he put it) 'incite violence, retaliation and further divide between the European people and the invaders currently occupying European soil'.

Displaying sound awareness of the scholarly debates over the possible differences and continuities between interwar fascism and today's far right, Sparrow conveys interesting points about how core fascist ideas have been re-attuned to the extreme right's views on society today. Sparrow reminds us, for example, that Mosley's career straddled both the pre-war and post-war eras and, in this sense, 'provides an ideal illustration of the evolution of twentieth-century fascism'. As he notes - on its own - Mosley's career does little to explain the reverence in which Tarrant evidently holds him. Yet the fascist leader's post-1945 focus on anxieties arising from new immigration from the developing world, and his presentation of 'Europeanism' as an

expansive category, 'a political ideal as much as a geographical identification', were echoed in Tarrant's own writings about defending 'our lands' against 'invaders'.

Sparrow's study is shaped by the journalist's instinct for what constitutes the first draft of history, and does not claim to be an academic study as such. Nevertheless, what the book still offers is a high-quality form of journalism, one that shows thoughtful understanding of the main theories in the historiography. All in all, the book contains valuable reflections on the way the extreme right has fully embraced social media and is now disturbingly adept at employing the shock value of individual acts of terror as a mass political propaganda tool. As Sparrow rightly argues, the Christchurch killings have made the need for analysis and understanding of this online fascist culture even more urgent.

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