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Perceptions of the 'mainstream' and the mainstreaming of the far right: from Ed Sheeran to Keir Starmer

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ABSTRACT

While people use the term 'mainstream' on a regular basis, there has been relatively little discussion about what it actually means. Within far-right studies, attempts to define the mainstream often center around party politics and the impact of mainstream party strategies on the far right. While a useful starting point, this focus has led to more rigid conceptions which encourage particular normative assumptions about its identity. Through poststructuralist discourse theory, supported by insights from music studies and critical discourse studies, this article proposes a definition which accounts for its contingency and construction, challenging dominant narratives about its nature. These issues are crucial when we consider the relationship between the mainstream and far right because they encourage us to question their perceived relative positioning. By introducing the concepts of talking 'with' and 'about' the far right, this piece establishes the need for us to take the role of the mainstream in the mainstreaming of the far right seriously.

The term 'mainstream' is one that we all hear on a regular basis, whether used to describe political parties, media institutions, education settings, music genres and more besides. On the surface, it seems that we all have some shared understanding about what it might mean in these different milieux. It is often easy to immediately point to two or three political parties or list a series of newspaper outlets within a national context that seem to fit the bill. In class, when I ask students to identify a mainstream music artist, one name without a doubt always tops the charts. . . and that is none other than the epitome of the mainstream himself, Ed Sheeran! However, it does not take long for cracks to appear in these shared assumptions about the identity and nature of the so-called 'mainstream'. When asking my dad the same question, he responded unequivocally and without hesitation: 'ABBA'. Now, regardless of whether my dad remains in a 1970s time warp or not, this anecdote illustrates that the mainstream may not always be quite what it seems. Indeed, while we may imagine that the mainstream is fairly easy to identify in a particular context, our failure to interrogate its meaning and significance can lead to misperceptions about the phenomena that it is used to describe.

Whether in music or beyond, this lack of concrete engagement with the concept can have serious implications for our understanding of sociopolitical issues. With the term

regularly used in politics to label specific parties, individuals or even society more broadly, we risk misinterpreting the significance of these powerful groups through this evasion. Such concerns become particularly salient when we think about the relationship between the mainstream and far right. Despite the significant role played by the mainstream in the mainstreaming of far-right politics,[1] its position within this process remains largely underdeveloped in the field. With the ongoing normalization of far-right discourse across a range of contexts,[2] it is crucial that we start to grapple with the mainstream and its active role in these developments. It is only through putting the mainstream at the heart of our analyses, therefore, that we can begin to adequately account for its influence.

This article places the mainstream front and center, interrogating and problematizing its meaning both on a general level and more specifically within far-right mainstreaming processes.[3] I first provide an overview of dominant understandings of the mainstream within political science, underscoring how limited engagement with the concept has led to harmful misperceptions. In order to clarify the term, I draw on insights from post-structuralist Discourse Theory (DT), supported by music studies and critical discourse studies, to put forward a broad definition and outline the key assumptions that underpin it.[4] With these facets as a baseline, I then discuss the specific role played by the mainstream in mainstreaming, introducing the notions of talking 'with' and 'about' the far right. Overall, these reflections point to the need to take the mainstream seriously in our analyses and to imagine alternatives beyond hegemonic constructions and perceptions.

The 'mainstream' (or lack thereof) in politics literature

The field of far-right studies has been marked for many years by terminological and definitional debates around the most appropriate way to characterize the far or radical right.[5] In contrast to the abundance of competing conceptualizations put forward for the far-right party family, there has been very little discussion or debate around definitions of the so-called 'mainstream'. It is often assumed, even in works where the mainstream forms a crucial category of analysis,[6] that its meaning is clear in the context of the study. Where the classification of those outside the mainstream usually attracts significant attention – in the above cases, these were niche or radical-right parties – approaches to the mainstream have instead been characterized by relative silence, with its meaning often based on what it is not rather than what it is.[7] Aristotle Kallis[8] already pointed to a lack of basic engagement at the definitional level, suggesting that there has been uncharacteristic laxity within academia around this particular identity. That said, there have been some limited attempts to define the mainstream in the context of party politics within some prominent works in the field. They generally account for two main factors in identification, relying on a party's perceived position on the left-right spectrum and their electoral dominance as benchmarks for inclusion. These frameworks provide a useful starting point for identifying underlying assumptions about the character of the mainstream, but the way that they tend to overlook their capacity to change means that they run into difficulties when applied to different contexts.

Bonnie Meguid's[9] study of party competition has been particularly influential in framing understandings of mainstream party strategies toward niche parties, employing the following definition:

> Mainstream parties are defined as the electorally dominant actors in the center-left, center, and center-right blocs on the Left-Right political spectrum. In this classification, the center-left parties explicitly exclude left-libertarian parties, whereas the center-right categorisation excludes right-authoritarian, or right-wing, populist parties. The criteria generally yield three mainstream parties per country, one in each category.

The markers of mainstream parties are therefore taken as a generally strong electoral performance in combination with centrist political positioning. Of the definitions provided within this body of literature, this one is perhaps the most useful in that theoretically the notion of the 'moving centre'[10] could help to allow for contextually dependent differences among parties and countries. Nevertheless, even within the limits set out above, there are some practical classificational difficulties. If we take Italy as an example at the party level (rather than coalitions), we might identify Partito Democratico (center-left), Italia Viva (center) and Forza Italia (center-right) as 'mainstream' from the perspective of political positioning within the 2022 elections. However, their individual results certainly did not equate to electoral dominance, nor for instance does Forza Italia's history of exclusionary politics and far-right coalitions point to its avoidance of right-authoritarianism.[11] Thus, neat classification systems such as this one face challenges when situated within the specificities of diverse democratic systems and the highly volatile political landscape.

Like Meguid,[12] Jae-Jae Spoon and Heike Klüver[13] list criteria both for inclusion and exclusion based on party characteristics:

> We define mainstream parties as those belonging to the Christian-democrat, conservative, social democrat/socialist or liberal party families. Non-mainstream parties are those belonging to the communist, agrarian, green, ethno/regional, nationalist and Eurosceptic party families.

Rather than emphasize centrism, therefore, they specify the particular category and ideological orientation of parties that should be included. Others meanwhile have focused on mainstream parties' governing credentials, with Catherine De Vries and Sara Hobolt[14] arguing that they 'regularly alternate between government and opposition, occupying winning positions within the system.' Anna Grzymala-Busse[15] adopts a similar approach whereby they should be seen as 'centrist "natural" parties of government'. We see again how centrism is emphasized, but this notion of a 'natural' place within the political system speaks to the importance of deconstructing taken-for-granted identities, something I return to in the following section.

Another strand within the party-politics literature places emphasis on their ability to attract voters. Grigore Pop-Eleches[16] juxtaposes mainstream parties with personalized politics or extreme positions and claims that their 'ideological orientation [...] can be mapped with reasonable accuracy onto the mainstream ideological spectrum of established Western democracies.' Meanwhile, Liubomir Topaloff[17] relates the mainstream to where public opinion lies and the ability to capture the support of many voters. However, by stating that mainstream parties can be mapped onto the 'mainstream ideological spectrum' or 'public opinion', there is the assumption that these too are fixed and well-defined, rather than contingent and subject to change.[18] Little space is therefore afforded to problematizing the role of political actors themselves in shaping the dynamic interests of voters through mediation and agenda-setting.[19] Accordingly, such conceptions

encourage us to view the driving force behind mainstream party positions as voters' opinions, rather than consider the key role that mainstream actors play in contributing to the formation and legitimization of these opinions as well.[20] In a recent intervention, Mirko Crulli and Daniele Albertazzi[21] proposed a bi-dimensional definition to incorporate both supply and demand sides. While it is certainly welcome to bring the two into conversation, the over-reliance on party politics remains and prevents a wider conception of what the 'mainstream' may signify.

Thus, although it is laudable that these interventions have attempted to define what others have ignored, there clearly remain some significant issues within these conceptualizations that must be addressed. Moving away from strictly party-based definitions, Kallis[22] has been responsible for some of the most insightful work on the mainstream, starting to unpick its relationship with the extreme and therefore its constructed nature:

> [...] The appellation extremist, which is juxtaposed to an alleged mainstream. One exists by virtue of the recognition of the other; in theory, however, it is the latter that draws the lines of admissibility regarding the former and formalises the distinction. These boundaries have both fixed and mutating contours.

Here, there is an acknowledgment of the relational difference between the mainstream and extreme, where they are significant in determining one another's meaning. In particular, this quote is notable in its recognition of the power held by the mainstream itself in being able to establish the conditions of the distinction, based on the superior position it occupies in terms of discursive resources. In a later piece, Kallis[23] revises this somewhat to suggest that both the extreme and mainstream play an equal role in constructing one another, but his earlier position is more helpful as it reflects the uneven power dynamics between them that are so often lost in analyses. Thus, although Kallis touches on these themes, they have been subject to limited development since.

Aurelien Mondon and Aaron Winter's book[24] offers one of the first in-depth critical reviews of the concept itself within politics, problematizing its construction and the generally positive attributes with which it is accorded. Situating these assertions alongside discussion of the far right, they underscore that the mainstream does not necessarily act as a bulwark against far-right parties and politics, so the notion of a fixed border between them can mask similarities. Drawing inspiration from this approach, Katy Brown, Mondon and Winter[25] put forward a framework for mainstreaming which acknowledges the mainstream's multifaceted influence on this process. Other work too acknowledges the potential porosity between far-right and mainstream repertoires, reflecting 'their mutual adherence to hegemonic ideals',[26] as well as the mainstream's capacity to shift 'the threshold of acceptability'.[27] In this way, we begin to see an acknowledgment of the powerful agenda-setting role that mainstream groups can play.[28] These contributions mark an important opening in the literature toward studies that take the mainstream seriously as an object of enquiry, so it is vital that we continue to unpick its identity and the sociopolitical dynamics that its uncritical proliferation may obscure. This article takes these concerns as a driving force to dig deeper into dominant constructions and consequent perceptions of the mainstream. It deconstructs the signifier of the 'mainstream' and considers the implications of its use, arguing that we must reframe our understanding if we are to adequately reflect on the fundamental role of the mainstream in far-right mainstreaming.

Towards a definition of the mainstream

It is in light of these developments that I propose a definition for the mainstream which aims to capture its chameleonic nature across different contexts. To do so, I draw on insights from poststructuralist Discourse Theory (DT) which is often concerned with the 'constitution of political identities'.[29] DT emphasizes that when identities are assumed, with shared 'common-sense' understandings of their meaning making them seem simple and fixed, they may constitute important sites of hegemony which require interrogation. Indeed, the need to probe seemingly natural or established identities is paramount because they represent a closure of meaning, masking the inherent contingency that operates in society, and thereby exercise considerable power.[30] In the case of the 'mainstream', its omnipresence within political, media, academic and public discourses has not been matched by similar levels of curiosity around dissecting its meaning. These endeavors are further complicated by its 'status as a functional floating signifier',[31] used in a variety of contexts both as a noun or adjective to describe specific subjects (politicians, parties, media outlets, etc.) or to refer more generally to societal phenomena ('the mainstream', mainstream society or ideas, etc.). However, it is precisely this widespread and wide-ranging use that makes such interventions necessary because it is part of the power of the mainstream that its identity appears uncomplicated on the surface level and that it is presumed to need no introduction.

Bucking this trend, the field of music studies has been much more attentive to its conceptualization, where various critical approaches to the term have flourished. The starter activity in class (and my dad's alternative response) piqued my curiosity in what had been done beyond arbitrary disciplinary boundaries. What I found were fascinating discussions around the meaning and implications of what it is to be 'mainstream' (or not) in the music scene.[32] While as a newcomer I cannot claim to do justice to this rich body of work, I hope to convey some of the lessons that political science can learn from music studies. Rather than allowing it to hide in plain sight, as has often been the case in the politics literature, Alison Huber[33] offers astute reflections on the metaphor of the 'mainstream' within the context of music, emphasizing its fundamental intertwinement with hegemony. Meanwhile, Tamara Roberts[34] suggests a shift 'from defining the mainstream as simply "not Elsewhere" but rather as a marked "Here," a space in which images and material from various Elsewheres come into dialogue.' If we take it as a marked 'Here' therefore, it is no longer something that can be largely ignored and we must instead think critically about the implications of its taken-for-granted nature.

With these concerns guiding my approach, I offer a broad definition to encapsulate its various iterations and formulations.[35] As with any conceptualization of this kind, such generalizability may pose problems for the level of precision that can be achieved, but the intention is to encourage critical debates about the meaning of the mainstream and for others to apply it more precisely within their respective contexts. This is what happens, for instance, when discussing its relevance to the mainstreaming of the far right. As such, the mainstream can be defined as follows:

> A contingent identity that is hegemonically positioned, both through internal and external construction, as representative of the norm or centre however defined in a particular context.

To elaborate on the core assumptions underlying the definition, I discuss three key points individually in the following subsections, but it is first important to summarize the overall message conveyed through this conceptualization. Ideas around what it is to be 'mainstream' or not are constructed through discursive practices. Thus, while it may seem obvious what the mainstream represents in a given context, this is not innate or natural but rather the result of dominant articulations of its identity. It is this hegemonic depiction that can give the mainstream a veneer of fixedness and benevolence, whereby it is assumed to consistently represent 'sensible', 'reasonable' and 'inoffensive' positions typically associated with the norm or center. By underscoring the role of discursive construction in its formation, however, we are encouraged to acknowledge the contingency of both the mainstream and norms/center as reference points. In this way, we can account for its capacity to define, be defined and redefine itself across different contexts. Internal and external depictions are constitutive of its identity, where both those within the mainstream and those outside of it contribute to its formation. Clearly, this article is no exception, also playing a role in the construction of the mainstream, but it is hoped that by viewing it as a dynamic entity, it opens the floor to more varied and critical accounts of its identities. To further develop these ideas, three core premises and constitutive elements of the above definition are examined below, establishing that the mainstream is not fixed but constructed in various ways and that we must therefore challenge dominant perceptions.

Rejecting the mainstream's fixedness

The first key assumption that underscores the definition, deriving directly from the work of Mondon and Winter[36] and our subsequent coauthored article,[37] is a rejection of the perception that the mainstream is fixed in its identity and possesses essential qualities. Instead, this conceptualization highlights that the mainstream can be ascribed with different characteristics and that it is capable of transformation and evolution. This principle is grounded in one of the core foundational premises of discourse-theoretical work, namely the notion of contingency. As Johan Farkas and Jannick Schou[38] summarize, DT 'stresses the political and contingent dimensions of meaning, arguing that social reality is the product of continuous hegemonic struggles'. These assumptions apply at the subject-level too, where DT holds that identities are discursively determined and do not possess essential qualities free from discursive influence.[39] In accounting for contingency, we are acknowledging that the mainstream may take on a particular meaning here and now, but that it may not always have been the case, nor may it be so elsewhere or continue to be in future.

The importance of incorporating contingency into the definition of the mainstream is twofold, as it both produces (1) a clearer understanding of an evolving rather than static mainstream, and (2) a basis from which to challenge taken-for-granted assumptions which derive from its perceived continuity. First, it means that the definition can adequately reflect the mainstream's dynamic nature, varying across time, sector, place and other relevant factors. To return to the music example at the start of this piece, what was considered mainstream in the 1920s, 1970s or 2000s would generally no longer be considered so in the present (though there may be those like my dad who would still view it as their 'mainstream' reference point). As Emmanuel Deruty and François Pachet[40]

underscore, 'Mainstream popular music is in constant evolution. There may be more differences than common points between progressive rock albums from the 1970's such as Pink Floyd's best-selling "Dark Side of the Moon" and contemporary rap albums such as Nicki Minaj's platinum-certified "Roman Reloaded".' Furthermore, what constitutes mainstream music in one country, area, social group or demographic may not be so for another, and vice versa. This does not mean that it cannot become mainstream in other contexts[41] or return to the mainstream in later years, but this may entail further processes of evolution, the reframing of contingent norms or a specific catalyst to bring this change. For example, Sophie Ellis-Bextor's 2001 hit *Murder on the Dancefloor* saw renewed success in the UK in 2024 after featuring in the film *Saltburn*.

While these discussions could on the surface level seem distant from the world of politics, the evolving face and perceptions of mainstream music have also long been tied to prevailing power structures[42] and political struggles.[43] Heteronormativity, for example, has long shaped its image.[44] Whiteness too has been commonly perceived as a marker of the mainstream in this context,[45] with the music of Black and brown artists sidelined for many years.[46] As new genres have found their way into the mainstream, again pointing to its capacity for variation, these developments have also seen changes imposed on the artists in question. For instance, Roberts[47] emphasizes how Black artists must navigate complex 'racial negotiations' for mainstream success, including 'sonic and visual "whitening"' in some cases, while Crystal Belle[48] charts the different Black masculinities that are conveyed in underground versus mainstream hip-hop music. Additionally, Mengyu Luo and Wei Ming[49] discuss how the online talent show *The Rap of China* brought commercialization to underground rappers who moved into the mainstream: 'In the empowering process, the subversiveness of subculture is eroded and modified.' As such, the evolving contours of the mainstream and those who enter it (or those who do not) teach us about the power dynamics that underly it.

These principles apply also in electoral politics, where ideas are similarly not stable and unchangeable. Universal suffrage in the UK, for example, was far from mainstream at the turn of the 20th century, whereas now it would be unusual for a party to not at least openly campaign on such a platform. Again, however, this does not mean that this principle is now fixed in stone, with the implementation of voter ID requirements impacting the access of certain (often minoritized) groups to the polls.[50] Similarly, electoral status can fluctuate greatly, where many parties that would have once matched Meguid's popular definition[51] no longer do. If we take the evolution of the French presidential elections, Le Parti Socialiste (center-left) consistently finished in the top three spots in the first round from 1974 to 2012 (and only in 2002 failed to make it to the second round), thereby matching both Meguid's ideological and electoral dominance criteria. However, in 2017 they slipped to fifth place, and in 2022, they were down in tenth with only 1.75% of the vote. It is therefore fundamental that our understanding of the mainstream reflects a changing identity so that its evolution and reframing can be tracked over time, place and context.

Furthermore, not only does the centralization of contingency encourage engagement with the dynamism of the mainstream and its development but it also allows us to challenge dominant perceptions of its identity which can lend it, and those associated, even greater power and legitimacy. The nature of these perceptions is dealt with in detail in the third subsection, but at this stage it is important to establish how an

acknowledgment of contingency is critical to challenging unproblematized assumptions about essentialized qualities. This aligns with the main objective of discourse-theoretical work, which is:

> Not merely to provide novel descriptions or facts about specific objects of investigation but to produce new interpretations either by rendering visible phenomena previously undetected by dominant theoretical approaches, or by problematising existing accounts and articulating alternative interpretations.[52]

When an identity appears ossified, a hegemonic conception of it has prevailed which excludes alternative possibilities available in the field of meaning. As Mark Wilkinson[53] establishes, drawing on the work of Sean Phelan and Lincoln Dahlberg,[54] this leads to sedimentation, whereby contingency is obscured and 'routinised social practices' prevail. In this way, the lack of reflection on the mainstream has bred further paucity in this regard, allowing its position and associated assumptions to be further sedimented over time. For those benefitting from its sedimentation, there is an interest in maintaining a fixed conception of its identity, because it allows its capacity to shift and adapt to go unscrutinized. Indeed, according to this logic, how can the mainstream be responsible for normalizing far-right politics if it is seen as emblematic of the 'moderate' and 'good' centre? An examination of the role and changing faces of the mainstream is therefore critical to challenging dominant power structures and sites of hegemony.

Acknowledging the mainstream's construction

Closely related to the above point, in rejecting the fixedness and essentialization of the mainstream, there must consequently be an acknowledgment of how its identity has still come to be formed and sedimented. Drawing again on discourse-theoretical perspectives, discursive construction is understood to be key to its development: 'the identities of social agents are constituted within structures of articulatory practice'.[55] Thus, rather than possessing innate qualities which exist in a vacuum, the mainstream is constructed and reconstructed through discursive processes, particularly in relation and opposition to other identities. Indeed, it is this relativity that is core to contingency, which 'describes how any entity is dependent on relations with other entities, rather than self-grounded'.[56] To exist relationally, the construction of identities relies on the drawing of antagonistic frontiers between different groups.[57] If we are to approach the mainstream critically therefore, we must examine the interactions of these different groups and their constitutive role in identity formation.

Returning to Kallis's[58] insightful work on this topic, where he highlights the significance of the relationship between the mainstream and extreme in articulating one another's very existence, we can see how antagonism feeds into the mainstream's identity. As such, the construction of in- and out-groups plays a fundamental role in mainstream identity formation. Out-groups can take on many forms according to the context (political parties, music styles, education systems, etc.), but in whatever case, the opposition created between them is constitutive of both their identities.[59] In this way, the construction of the mainstream relies on both an internal process of delineation with the out-group (i.e. establishing what it is not), and an external process whereby the out-group itself may ascribe characteristics to the mainstream (i.e. also establishing what it is not). In music, for

example, Jason Toynbee[60] highlights this dual process whereby 'mainstreams produce others: self-conscious others like Thornton's (1995) elite club goers who use the mainstream as a means of distinction, but also, and more importantly, marginalized musics and identities – low-others.' In media too, mainstream outlets may distinguish themselves from alternative media, and alternative media may distance themselves from the mainstream, with both attempting to further their image as trusted news sources according to the criteria that they lay out as desirable. The BBC has long constructed itself as a respectable source of news based on its commitment to neutrality in comparison to politically partisan press,[61] while the recently formed GB News claims to speak truth in the face of 'woke' mainstream outlets.[62] Thus, the antagonism constructed by both in- and out-groups plays a fundamental role in this identity-building process.

Although they are both constitutive of each other, we must also consider the respective capacity of each group to influence how the other is perceived. Insights from Critical Discourse Studies are instructive in this regard because power conceived at the actor level too can draw attention to these imbalances. As Martin Reisigl and Ruth Wodak[63] suggest, it captures 'an asymmetric relationship among social actors who assume different social positions or belong to different social groups'. Under this rubric, it is clear that those associated with the mainstream are in a position of greater power than those outside of it. Indeed, by way of its association with the norm or center, and the set of assumptions that accompany it (discussed shortly), the mainstream gains legitimacy, authority and resources. As a result, it has a significant power to determine what is or is not mainstream, indicating that '[it] is self-perpetuating [and] active in defining itself'.[64] This does not mean that out-groups cannot play a role in constructing it, but we must account for the relative positions of power occupied by different groups in influencing such conceptions. We can think, for example, about the role of influential music executives, TV shows and streaming platforms in constructing and reinforcing what mainstream music is or is not. Figures such as Simon Cowell and shows like *Pop Idol*, *X Factor* or similar[65] have had a dynamic influence on what 'mainstreamness' looks and sounds like in music, while platforms like Spotify reproduce mainstream norms through recommender systems.[66]

In politics, the decision to hold an EU referendum in the UK has often been attributed to the influence of UKIP pushing David Cameron and the Conservative Party into making such a strategic choice.[67] However, while we should certainly not dismiss UKIP's impact entirely, it is crucial, as CDS suggests, to consider the asymmetrical relationship between actors within this scenario. When Cameron announced that there would be a referendum should the Conservatives win the next election, UKIP had never received more than one million votes in a general election, nor had they won a single seat in parliament.[68] Even though their growing profile may have exerted some pressure, the decision to hold the referendum and bring associated arguments further into the mainstream lay ultimately in the hands of the already-governing mainstream party. It is critical therefore not to lose sight of such significant power dynamics when providing interpretations of social phenomena.

Challenging assumptions about the mainstream

The final key point to support the proposed definition is that this more critical view of the mainstream allows us to reevaluate and contest common assumptions which serve to

reinforce its position. As has already been established, the mainstream is portrayed as representative of the center or norm, entailing certain expectations around what this means for its character. Inherent in the appellation of centrist, for instance, is the idea that there are elements either side which may be pushed to their extremity; in being placed between them, the mainstream becomes emblematic of balance and fairness, a moderate 'middle-ground'.[69] Equally, a positioning within the norm means that there is an expectation that others fall outside of it, making them 'abnormal', and therefore less acceptable and reasonable in comparison. Crucially, these antagonisms place the mainstream in a position of automatic legitimacy and hegemony, associated with the 'positive' values of moderacy and rationality. The implication is that these qualities should be aspired to and are not possessed by those within the out-groups. However, if we acknowledge the mainstream's constructed and contingent nature, these attributes no longer become a given, nor necessarily aspirational, and we can challenge notions pertaining to the mainstream's intrinsic 'goodness'.

Given that out-groups can take on many different forms, it is important to emphasize here that this is not a general point about them, but rather about how we understand and view the mainstream itself. Indeed, part of the problem with placing the mainstream unquestionably as the 'good guy' is that progressive causes are often falsely equated with reactionary forms under the umbrella of being 'extreme', so any calls for radical change to the system which seek to bring greater equality are often dismissed as similarly dangerous. Instead, we are encouraged to look to the 'sensible centre' as the solution. Podcasts such as 'The Rest is Politics' embody this message, where former Labour Press Secretary Alistair Campbell and former Conservative cabinet minister Rory Stewart claim to '[bring] back the lost art of disagreeing agreeably'. This kind of narrative around the need for sensible debate often emerges in discussions of 'polarization', where actors violently denying the very humanity of minoritized groups are placed on an equal footing with those who are defending their rights:

> The result is to create a false equivalence between a far-right position and the pushback against it no matter how mild in form [...]. As such, the polarisers include the openly and violently racist, sexist, homophobic, transphobic, classist, climate-change skeptic — but also those standing squarely on the side of anti-racism, anti-sexism, for LGBTQ rights, and against poverty and inequality as well as for radical change to address the climate crisis.[70]

Rather than being the solution to these 'polarized times', the 'moderate middle-ground' forms a crucial part of this violence by failing to take a stand or actively perpetuating it. For example, the UK Labour Party[71] vocally criticized the border policies of the Conservative government not for their violent and deadly consequences but for not being effective enough. In questioning the mainstream therefore, we can point to its clear perpetuation, rather than dismantlement, of the structures of inequality that the far right seeks to entrench and that the mainstream itself has been fundamental in building and sustaining. In so doing, we challenge the notion that it is to the mainstream whom we must turn as our protection against the far right, instead opening avenues to more radical progressive alternatives.

It should be noted at this stage that the mainstream's often-assumed association with positive values may seem to run counter to some common and increasingly prevalent portrayals, whereby the signifier is used derogatorily. In the context of music, for

example, both listeners and artists often readily distance themselves from the main-stream. As Bernhard Steinbrecher[72] suggests, 'mainstream is a description and an evaluation simultaneously'. In class, I ask students to share what they would associate with mainstream music and many responses center around the idea that it is bland, bad and uninspiring. When I mentioned Ed Sheeran earlier, I nearly wrote a comment about 'his mediocre music' and thereby would have placed myself as sitting antagonistically outside the confines of the mainstream with better music taste. However, as my Spotify Wrapped attests to, my penchant for pop music and lifelong Westlife fandom would have made that quite disingenuous on a number of levels. For artists themselves, there may be a similar impulse, with Stormzy's[73] first line in the song *Big Michael* strongly refuting the accusation that he 'went mainstream'. Additionally, Karen Bettez Halnon's[74] study underscores how common this outward rejection is in 'anti-mainstream mainstream bands'. We see the negative connotations of the signifier replicated in political discourse too. For example, the coinage of 'mainstream media' and acronym 'MSM' in right-wing circles has gained ground as a mode of criticizing traditional media outlets and news sources.[75] Furthermore, it would certainly be rare for a politician to wear it as a badge of honor and state explicitly that they themselves form part of the 'mainstream'.

However, even though it may be used negatively to denote something as run-of-the-mill or protective of the status quo, and may be avoided for the same reason, similar ideas to those described in the first paragraph of this subsection remain underlying. While the label 'mainstream music' may invoke a negative response, the numerous benefits that such exposure brings for artists' careers are clear, and despite their vocal protestations, many people clearly continue to listen to them (myself included). Such power means that 'even seemingly bland, middle-of-the-road music still constructs its own ideologies and makes meaning in a particular way.'[76] Similarly, even though a politician may not openly describe themselves as mainstream, they may still seek to portray themselves as posses-sing the qualities associated with it and reap the benefits that such an identity bestows. This can clearly be observed in Theresa May's 2017 UK General Election 'strong and stable' campaign message, or in statements attesting to Keir Starmer's supposed 'sensible leadership' of the Labour Party.[77] For those outside of the mainstream too, laying claim to such attributes is not uncommon, with far-right actors often depicting themselves as purveyors of 'common sense' and thereby aligning themselves with 'sensible norms'.[78] Thus, while as a label it may not be openly embraced by those attached to it, it is clear that it still denotes a certain type of 'respectable' status which is dominantly portrayed as desirable.

In some cases, it is not even a question of being presented as desirable or not, but simply taking on the quality of being 'the only acceptable way'. This speaks to its hegemonic status where its position is continuously perpetuated through the erasure or minimization of alternatives. In academia, for example, we can think about how 'main-stream' knowledge is often dominantly framed as originating from the Global North, where epistemic injustice sees certain epistemologies, methodologies and geographies privileged as the benchmarks of 'real knowledge',[79] where white men's experiences are taken as universal,[80] and where research from the Global South is commonly portrayed as only localized in its scope.[81] Ayesha Masood and Muhammad Azfar Nisar[82] underscore how these dynamics have specifically shaped the study of far-right politics. These kinds of assumptions are reinforced and reproduced through institutions, publication metrics and

academic practices, so the dominance of 'mainstream' perspectives becomes further entrenched. Attempts to resist these structures, for example through decolonizing work,[83] face significant resistance and structural barriers, but they emphasize that alternatives are possible and that the mainstream does not have to be this way.

This discussion points to the importance of questioning seemingly uncontentious assumptions, whether they are framed negatively or positively, because they can serve to further sediment contingent identities. In political scenarios, regardless of whether 'mainstream' is used as an insult or attribute, it remains hegemonically associated with the 'center'. This means that even if enthusiasm is lacking, it is still seen to epitomize an innocuous or benign form of politics (i.e. the idea that 'at least it is not extreme'). Through such perceptions, the mainstream has not only evaded much scrutiny around its role in normalizing exclusionary politics but it has also developed a reputation as the only solution to the far right within much academic and public discourse, thereby minimizing the potential of more progressive alternatives. Indeed, by opposing the mainstream to the extremes, we are encouraged to view both the far right and left with equal trepidation. However, by placing contingency at the heart of our definitions for both the mainstream and center, we can reflect more critically on their capacity to change and evolve. Neither are automatically representative of intrinsic goodness and they can indeed be the vectors of exclusionary politics. Hence, the mainstream does not necessarily work against the far right and can actually play a central role in its mainstreaming, altering what is deemed acceptable or legitimate in society, and shifting where the 'center' lies on such topics. It is critical to challenge assumptions relating to the morality of the mainstream in order to establish its fundamental role in mainstreaming and ultimately aspire for more progressive alternatives.

Putting the mainstream in mainstreaming

Situating these assertions within our approach to the mainstreaming of the far right, the mainstream itself becomes a key center of focus. Accounts of mainstreaming in the literature have often instead taken the far right as their starting point,[84] either as agents of their own mainstreaming[85] or as instigators pushing the mainstream to act differently.[86] While certainly important factors, our field of view is narrowed in various interconnected ways when eyes are firmly set on the far right above all else.[87] First, our primary concern may center around whether far-right parties succeed in elections because it is *their* performance that we are interested in. This comes from the idea that becoming 'mainstream' in the party-political context means strong electoral results and governing potential. If a far-right party does well, mainstreaming is said to have occurred,[88] while if it does poorly, it may be commonly inferred that mainstreaming has not taken place and that we can therefore all breathe a sigh of relief. With the latter scenario as the ultimate goal according to this logic, it follows that attempts to counter mainstreaming should rely predominantly on stopping far-right success at the polls.

This has seen the development of growing interest into how mainstream parties may best respond to the far-right electoral threat. One of the first to follow this line of enquiry was Meguid,[89] identifying three potential strategies for addressing niche-party themes: dismissive (ignoring the issue), accommodative (adopting the issue as their own) and adversarial (challenging the issue). The piece claims:

> Assuming that voters find the niche party's policy stance attractive, mainstream parties can undermine niche party vote with dismissive or accommodative tactics and boost it with adversarial strategies.

Although important in taking the mainstream's role seriously, it offers a potentially harmful message if not carefully nuanced. The notion that accommodating these ideas (e.g. around immigration) can harm the far right's progress may apply in terms of votes, but we should certainly be wary of overstating the benefits because it can serve to legitimize the far right in other ways. Although work since has questioned the effectiveness of accommodation,[90] as evidenced by recent electoral results in the Netherlands following mainstream legitimization,[91] the continuing focus on party competition privileges electoral results as the ultimate mainstreaming yardstick. However, it is vital that we also look beyond these confines to center the impact that such trends have on targeted groups. Accommodation is not just a vote-winning tactic devoid of other consequence; it has real and tangible effects for those on the sharp end. The experience of those who face the effects most acutely must never be lost from view.

Thus, if we take a more flexible approach to understanding the mainstream, we can move away from viewing the far right as *the* key determining factor and from reproducing the problematic narratives that come from this position. Rather than the mainstream occupying a more passive bystander function, it becomes a central component with an active and evolving role both as part of the process and in being defined by it. Mainstreaming becomes constitutive of the mainstream itself because the process is critical in determining and redetermining the ever-fluctuating position of the mainstream while also playing a role in its apparent fixedness. In this way, reflecting on the mainstream's contingency, construction and assumed qualities not only helps to form a definition but can drive the direction of research; if we accept that the mainstream is not static nor essentially good, then we necessarily need to interrogate the process by which these characteristics have come to be associated with it. We must consider how what is or is not mainstream, what is or is not the norm, and what is or is not acceptable is determined within a particular context. From this perspective, we can start to examine the complex interactions at play in the process of mainstreaming, not only focusing on out-group influence but also on the powerful role of the mainstream itself.

Using this understanding of the mainstream as a foundation, and building on the conception developed in our article,[92] mainstreaming can be defined in the following way[93]:

> The process by which parties/actors, discourses and/or attitudes move from a position of unacceptability (outside the norm) to one of legitimacy (within the norm). These norms themselves are not fixed and are subject to discursive construction and reconstruction.

While there are a number of components and mechanisms involved in this dynamic process, elaborated in detail in our prior work,[94] here I focus on the influential role that the mainstream, and specifically mainstream elite discourse, plays in mainstreaming. Of course, the far right is not without agency in this scenario, and we must continue to study its own strategies for success if we are to counter this process. However, it is clear that mainstream actors benefit from reputational and material advantage, with perceptions of respectability lending greater credence to their claims and heightened access to discursive platforms and resources accelerating their capacity to set the agenda. For instance,

government ministers within a ruling mainstream party gain authority through their institutional role and have various opportunities to exert influence as a result of their ability to partake in parliamentary debates, develop and enact policy, communicate these actions to the public, etc. To portray the mainstream as a second-order component therefore, simply reacting to public demand and the far-right threat, is to ignore crucial power dynamics at play. It is a vicious circle, as not only does such an interpretation provide an incomplete picture of the contributing factors to mainstreaming but it also serves to further embed the mainstream's hegemonic identity, which in turn enables it to further normalize inequality while facing limited scrutiny.

To understand how the mainstream occupies this position in the mainstreaming process, where it can both adopt an exclusionary agenda and maintain a 'respectable' identity, I put forward the concepts of talking 'with' and 'about' the far right. The idea behind these two categories is to capture the discursive dynamics of the mainstream's self-positioning and repositioning strategies. As earlier discussions indicated, when discourse emanates from those in powerful positions, it has greater reach and weight behind it. Consequently, it is crucial that we pay attention to the ideas that are pushed within mainstream elite discourse. In the following subsections, I outline the meaning of talking 'with' and 'about' and suggest how they help us to interpret the role of the mainstream, before finally, highlighting how they come together to contribute to mainstreaming.

Talking 'with' the far right

Talking 'with' refers to shared discourses between the mainstream and far right, encompassing any similarities between them, both in terms of content and style. This could mean converging anti-immigration positions or the use of dehumanizing language, for instance. The far right is defined here as follows[95]:

> A position characterised by a generalised commitment to inequality, with racism at its core. This may be accompanied by a broader 'politics of fear'[96] which encompasses various forms of exclusion targeting different marginalised groups.

However, this does not mean that these features are the exclusive domain of the far right, and indeed, viewing them as such contributes further to the neglect of the mainstream as an object of study. Research on the Brexit referendum,[97] for example, underscores the role of colonial nostalgia and amnesia, entangled as they are fundamentally with racism, in the discourse of the various campaign groups. The expression of these ideas was certainly not limited to the far right, nor the Leave campaign more broadly, instead used as justification by both sides of the debate to support their respective positions. Consequently, a focus on talking 'with' allows us to turn our attention to these shared features, make comparisons between them and specifically account for the mainstream's role in discursive normalization and mainstreaming more broadly. It is critical to stress that a core premise underlying the exploration of talking 'with' is that there is no assumption that the mainstream is pushed into adopting these positions by the far right or other groups, such as the electorate. The power dynamics discussed in the previous section are at the heart of this conception, with the aim of bringing accountability for the mainstream's actions.

There is also no expectation that these ideas originated within the far right, because as diverse research traditions within post- and de-colonial thought, critical race theory, gender studies and others have shown, exclusionary politics and discrimination have been woven into the fabric of our society for many years. More precisely, especially in the context of countries in the Global North, they are fundamentally constitutive of historical and contemporary manifestations of the 'mainstream'. For example, despite dominant representations, the inception and development of liberalism is intertwined with racism, misogyny, classism and other forms of structural oppression.[98] As such, talking 'with' is not about the mainstream taking on a new identity or ideas necessarily but rather seeing how closely its positions align with those of the far right. The main question to be answered in this endeavor, therefore, is the following: *do mainstream actors and the far right express similar ideas and perspectives, and if so, which ones and how?*

Talking 'about' the far right

Moving now to talking 'about', this idea denotes the way in which mainstream actors discursively construct the far right, either explicitly through direct references or implicitly through more subtle allusions. This could include portraying far-right parties or politicians in a certain way (e.g. 'Nigel Farage is dangerous') or making more general statements (e.g. 'populism is dangerous'). These assertions can be either positively or negatively inflected, or indeed both, so while we may often see warnings of the danger posed by the far right, there are a range of other ways that the mainstream can talk 'about', with varied implications for mainstreaming.[99] Of course, these strategies play a role in constructing the subject position of the far right itself, because they are descriptions of this group, but they are also constitutive of the mainstream's identity through the relationship that is conveyed between them. In this way, the mainstream itself has significant power to construct and reinforce antagonisms between in- and out-groups, friends and enemies, playing a decisive role in defining what or who falls within or outside its bounds. It thereby constitutes an exercise of hegemony, with the mainstream in a self-perpetuating position of privilege to delimit the lines of admissibility. By exploring how the mainstream refers to the far right therefore, we can learn about how those within the mainstream may themselves wish to be viewed.

This relates back to the earlier discussion of identities, whereby DT underlines the importance of relativity in this constitutive process; in particular, attention is paid to the construction of antagonistic boundaries to determine in- and out-groups. In relation to the far right, we can draw on Lasse Thomassen's[100] perspective that 'social identities are not necessarily constituted around antagonistic frontiers, and that there are only degrees of antagonism, never "pure" antagonisms.' In this way, we should remain open to the varied possibilities in the mainstream's construction of the far right, with the ability to move away through antagonism but also draw closer in certain instances. Media representations of the far right, for example, can take many different forms,[101] oscillating between headlines such as 'Cat-loving Le Pen shows cuddly side with new blog'[102] and 'Marine Le Pen is as dangerous as ever'.[103] Talking 'about' is therefore a complex and dynamic phenomenon, which may appear overtly antagonistic, and in some cases not, but with a clear capacity to legitimize the mainstream's position and consequently also the discourses it espouses. It is an overlooked area of study but one that is critical in

understanding the mainstream's ability to shift discursively while ostensibly remaining static. Studies of talking 'about' can examine the ways in which mainstream actors refer to their far-right counterparts, exploring the strategies that are used and their potential effects. The principal question posed is: *how do mainstream actors discursively construct the far right (including groups, individuals and their ideas/discourse), and what does this mean for the identity of the mainstream and wider mainstreaming process?*

Talking 'with' and 'about' together

To close this section, it should be emphasized that the relationship between talking 'with' and 'about' is interdependent and symbiotic. By using these elements as a baseline for exploring mainstream elite discourse in relation to the far right, we can uncover their reciprocal role in obscuring the mainstream's significant contribution to mainstreaming; talking 'with' explicitly acknowledges the mainstream's capacity to push exclusionary positions, while talking 'about' establishes how it is still able to maintain its 'good guy' image in spite of this. In the Brexit referendum, both official Leave and Remain campaigns sought to outwardly distance themselves from the far right, but the number of shared discourses between them undermines these claims.[104] Attention to the implications of such strategies is therefore crucial to understanding how the mainstream solidifies and sediments its reputational identity regardless of its role in entrenching inequalities.

With this in mind, we must place an understanding of how talking 'with' and 'about' reinforce one another as key, not only in the object of study but also in how we approach our own interpretations as academics. Given our involvement in conveying and mediating people's understanding of political events, we must take heed of how talking 'about' the far right in certain ways can actually contribute to talking 'with' it too. In relation to the theme of this piece, has our own obsession with talking 'about' the far right amplified its importance at the expense of meaningful engagement with the mainstream? It is hoped therefore that by drawing attention to these features and the way they work in unison, we can start to move away from placing the mainstream in a neutral and passive position, instead pointing to its fundamental and driving role in mainstreaming. Only through doing so can we understand that it is not simply the far right that we must counter to strive for equality (though of course this remains critical), but also that our efforts must be directed at the exclusion that finds root at the very heart of what is deemed to be representative of the norm or center in society.

Conclusion: challenging mainstream accounts of the mainstream

This article has sought to bring the mainstream into focus. Even though the term is used ubiquitously, it has rarely been dissected or defined in a substantial way, with its unproblematized use serving to further embed its reification. Drawing inspiration from work that challenges our understanding of dominant signifiers,[105] this piece uses insights from Discourse Theory and music studies to unpick the identity of the mainstream and the common perceptions that surround it. In particular, it emphasizes that the mainstream is not a fixed identity but one with mutating boundaries and contours,[106] to which we must remain attentive. Its constructed position is maintained both by those within

and outside its confines, where in- and out-groups position themselves relationally to it. In any account of its construction, we must consider the relative power dynamics that determine whose voice is loudest in shaping the direction it takes. By moving away from a static account of what the mainstream represents and understanding its self-perpetuating power, we can start to challenge resulting assumptions about its generally positive influence across different contexts. This is especially important when we consider the relationship between the mainstream and far right, with dominant accounts positioning it as a bulwark against reactionary politics. However, by considering the way that the mainstream may talk 'with' and 'about' the far right, we can see how it is able to maintain perceived antagonism toward this group and yet be implicated in producing and reproducing the same inequalities that far-right groups pursue. As a result, it is vital that we challenge mainstream accounts of the mainstream in order to take its powerful role in mainstreaming processes seriously.

Where next for the mainstream?

These discussions can lead us in many directions, and it is hoped that greater engagement with the signifier and concept can bring new insights into the phenomena that it is used to denote. While the examples in this piece largely underscore how the political mainstream has pursued and continues to pursue exclusionary ends, I want to finish with some more hopeful reflections, albeit tentative ones. Notably, with contingency come possibilities for different paths to be taken. We do not have to accept the mainstream as it is, nor celebrate it for simply not being as bad as the alternative. We do not have to accept the mainstreaming of the far right as a given, nor view it as inevitable. We do not have to look to the mainstream as the source of the solution, nor wait patiently for concessions to be made. In affirming that mainstreaming does not have to travel in a rightward direction, we acknowledge the transformative potential of counterstrategies. Despite notable difficulties in practice,[107] gender mainstreaming is an example of an attempt to mainstream progressive initiatives through embedding gender equality within various structures. Of course, there are always issues when radical and progressive agendas are taken up within mainstream circles, the language of decolonization a case in point.[108] However, various forms of activism and resistance illustrate the power of collective action in challenging hegemonic norms. As academics, it must always be this drive for radical change that motivates our approach too. When researching injustice, there is no other position worth taking.[109] Clearly, we must firmly oppose any inroads made by far-right parties into the political arena, but we must equally stand unwaveringly against the way that exclusionary ideals continue to be woven into what is mainstream. We need to reflect carefully on how we talk 'about' the far right, ensuring that we do not talk 'with' it in any way. Instead, by standing in persistent opposition to what it represents, we must find ways to mainstream talking, acting and fighting 'against' exclusion and inequality at every level.

Notes

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