A Review of *Alt-Right Gangs: A Hazy Shade of White* by Shannon E. Reid and Matthew Valasik

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Shannon Reid and Matthew Valasik's book *Alt-Right Gangs* aims to diagnose and give a working definition for alt-right gangs. In attempting to define this term, they come very close, but ultimately cannot convince the reader to whole-heartedly adopt their approach. That said, *Alt-Right Gangs* is an incredibly thought-provoking book. It is absolutely worth reading and presents unique ideas that criminal justice scholars and practitioners must wrestle with. While they may not have accomplished their goal, Reid and Valasik's work will inform and enlighten the way we look at group violence, its motivations and how we can address it, especially for groups often thought of as associated with rural localities in the United States.

To its credit, this book boldly and clearly explains its position without concern for hiding the warts on the theory. In essence, the authors' pass the baton to the readers to finish the race. The entire criminal justice field will be better off for the insights, theories, and ideas promulgated by the book.

One of the great strengths of *Alt-right Gangs* is that it takes a very methodical and academic approach to its subject matter. Approaching the subject in this transparent way is sure to encourage further research and exploration. One of the most powerful dimensions of the book is Reid and Valasik's definition of gang. After discussing several different definitions, the authors define gangs as "a durable, public-oriented group (both digitally and physically) whose adoptions of signs and symbols of the white power movement and involvement in illegal activity are part of its group identity" (Reid & Valasik, 2020).

While Reid and Valasik did not create this definition, they set forth a compelling argument for whole-sale adoption of it as a field of inquiry. This definition is powerful because it is both strong and flexible. For example, this definition – with a minor modification to the "white power movement" portion – could be used to define drug cartels, eco-criminals, straight-edge, traditional gangs, and many other groups. The definition is broad enough to encompass many groups while maintaining the essential attributes that distinguish gang members from other criminals. For example, the adoptions of signs and symbols is a necessary aspect to distinguish gang membership. Further, the inclusion of identifying the group through its illegal activity distinguishes it from other groups that share political space and ideology but comply with the law.

One aspect of the definition that deserves a brief, but further explanation, is the durability aspect. Durability does not refer to the long-term commitment of individual members. Indeed, active gang membership usually lasts only a year or two (Densley & Pryooz, 2019). This book illustrated that this phenomenon is true even in these alt-right groups when it discussed that even founding members had left these groups. In other words, the group is durable but individual membership ebbs and flows.

Another thought-provoking aspect of this book is the dispelling of common myths that surround these groups. The authors persuasively debunk many of the commonly held thoughts regarding who belongs to alt-right groups and how committed they are to the radical extremist ideologies that are often attributed to them. For example, they argue that many crimes committed by these groups are not necessarily hate crimes and that these groups are not part of some vast complex international organization. On this last point – the absence of the "big gang" – the book's argument is absolutely compelling.

Howell and Griffiths (2018) have also argued that many of these crimes are committed by copycat groups. Society has often thought about domestic terrorists in a binary fashion. Either you are a violent terrorist willing to commit Timothy McVeigh-like atrocities or you are just an ideological harmless loudmouth. This antiquated conceptualization has hampered the field for decades. Scholars have noted the importance of correctly conceptualizing groups and how the conceptualization can affect the way practitioners operationalize interventions and prevention strategies (Verkuyten, Wiley, Deaux, & Fleischmann, 2019). *Alt-Right Gangs* presents a new paradigm that encourages scholars and practitioners to identify new ways to conceptualize members of extremist groups. This paradigm shift is where the book most thoroughly advances the field and its understanding of this type of deviance. This book should be read for no other reason than this discussion and the application throughout the book that follows. Readers may not always agree with the book's arguments, and candidly, some of the arguments are not very persuasive. But this shift from viewing these groups as yes/no to a continuum is masterfully done.

Finally, the authors convincingly expose that many of the 'push' and 'pull' factors that facilitate membership in these groups mirror those in traditional gangs. Push and pull factors are often referred to as risk factors, but they are nuanced. Push factors are undesirable aspects of mainstream society that deviants desire to escape. For example, people may decide to join an alt-right group because they feel that mainstream society has become overly 'politically correct'. Pull factors are attractive aspects of joining the deviant group. For example, many gang members cite increased protection as a motivate to join a gang. In reality, a single aspect rarely makes a person join or leave a group (Horgan, Altier, Shorland, & Taylor, 2016). *Alt-right Gangs* uses the most common risk factors that push and pull people into traditional gang membership and illustrate the significant overlap between motivations for joining traditional gangs and alt-right groups.

The first weakness in the book is attempting to reconcile applying the gang definition with how these groups actually operate. This is especially difficult because of the substantial history of gang research dating back to the 1800s (Howell, 2019). The vast quantity of research has created clear lines that delineate criminal and terrorist organizations. The main problem is that Reid and Valasik's (2020) own research notes that 71 percent of violence from their "alt-

right gangs" occur at free-speech rallies. This is a problematic figure for the authors. Researchers have noted that crime and terrorism are "vastly different" (Hsu & Apel, 2015). Hsu and Apel (2015) note that one stark difference is extremist ideologies rather than criminal interests drive that terrorist. 71 percent of violent attacks happening at free-speech rallies seems much more supportive of defining these groups as domestic terror groups rather than gangs. Further, an objective of terrorism is publicity as opposed to the criminal objective of anonymity (Hsu & Apel, 2015). As abhorrent as it is, violence at a free-speech rally seems calculated to do two things: (i) compel attendees to conform their attitudes to the violent perpetrators; and (ii) increase the visibility and exposure of the cause that the offenders receive. Both of these motivations seem much more aligned with terrorism than criminal gang membership.

Second, the book makes a compelling argument but distracts itself by discussing popular conservative figures. For example, the authors discuss Fox News television hosts Tucker Carlson and Ann Coulter as members of what they term the "Alt-lite". While Coulter and Carlson are admittedly controversial figures clearly associated with right-wing politics, including Coulter in a discussion about alt-right violence weakens the authors' argument. This discussion seems to be merely a disagreement with Coulter and her colleagues' political positions and not a real concern that she is involved in criminal activities. Perhaps had the authors taken more time to discuss how Coulter and former United States President Donald Trump were connected, their argument would have been more persuasive. The authors could have – assuming they had enough information – potentially linked Coulter and Trump in a similar way that the FBI connected Al Capone to organized crime. Unfortunately, Reid and Valasik did not attempt this. Instead, they engage in an ad-hominem attack against the "alt-lite" by defining them as "a racist, libertarian uncle who uses a lot of inappropriate language and backs up all of his examples with anecdotes instead of empirical evidence". This quote is arguably the lowest academic point in the book. The authors never provide any examples to support their claims regarding anecdotes. Ironically, they do use several controversial statements made by political pundits – wouldn't those be anecdotes? – to support their position. Several statements like these made in the last third of the book really hurt the impact of the book. Sadly, this last third of the book is not nearly as compelling, cohesive or coherent as the first two-thirds. While, the authors never discuss their political leanings, their discussion of Carlson, Coulter and Trump seems more about vindicating the left and less about furthering the understanding of ideologically based crime.

Finally, *Alt-Right Gangs* suffers from numerous small errors that blunt the benefits of the book. One of these problems is that of redundant text. In some ways, this book seemed better suited as a long journal article. Although the authors are clearly outstanding writers, they occasionally recycled text. Another issue is that the book introduces too many new terms without the necessary framework to support those terms. For example, the authors mention – without defining – "trap rap gangs", "Alt-lite" and "alt-right wraith". While not a huge stumbling block, the similarities of new and undefined terms and their proliferation eventually made the book sag

under its own weight. Finally, the book discusses that Trump uses "coded messages" and "dog whistles", although the authors never give examples of what would qualify as these. This lack of explanation made the authors assertions difficult to understand.

In conclusion, *Alt-Right Gangs* is not a perfectly constructed argument that will leave readers firmly convinced to abandon their preexisting far-right extremist or domestic terror definitions and convert these groups to gangs. However, maybe that is okay because this book does something different, but arguably better for readers. Instead of giving readers a simple answer, the book illustrates the complexity of distinguishing these groups and forces readers to grapple for themselves with how best to address this persistent problem. While the book will leave readers without a firm conviction that these groups are gang members it will also illustrate that the membership of these groups are not domestic terrorists either. Instead, they succeed at demonstrating that these groups are indeed a "hazy shade of white".

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