Introduction

The terrible attack on March 15, 2019, in two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, committed by Brenton Harrison Tarrant that resulted in 50 deaths and 50 injuries recalls the attack in the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, on October 27, 2018, committed by Robert Bowers that killed 11 people and the July 22, 2011, terrorist attack in Norway committed by Anders Breivik that resulted in 85 deaths and over 200 wounded.

All three attacks were committed by lone-wolf white supremacists deliberately targeting their victims. Tarrant, like Breivik, had created a manifesto expressing his hate-filled viewpoint. Tarrant, like Bowers, used social media—Bowers to express his intention, Tarrant to record and post the attack.

The impact from the actors’ perspective is immediate, dramatic, and wide reaching. This represents an important and profound shift from multiple perspectives. From the actors’ perspective, social media enables the attack to be reminiscent of “all the world’s a stage.” From the perspective of “fellow travelers,” it creates an online community that reaffirms their belief system in an immediate and dramatic manner, reinforcing shared opinions that can serve to encourage others. From the perspective of counterterrorism and national security officials, it requires recognition that not only are lone-wolf actors committed to their cause but also their willingness to effectively and dramatically use social media enables them to disseminate their message immediately, literally during the course of the attack. With respect to lone-wolf white supremacists, there is little doubt that the deliberate targeting of minority communities (Jewish in Pittsburgh, Muslim in Christchurch)
requires paying particular heed to their online presence given the manner in which they communicate and interact with each other.

There is little doubt that the terrible Christchurch attack—not only in the number of victims but also in the nefarious use of social media—represents a new challenge to the national security community that demands immediate attention.

The rise of right-wing movements is the current reality in much of Europe, the United States, and Israel. From Victor Orban in Hungary to Benjamin Netanyahu in Israel to Donald Trump in the United States to Sebastian Kurz in Austria to electoral success enjoyed by the Far Right Alternative for Germany party to Brexit in the United Kingdom, there is an undeniable trend. At the same time, it is not an “across the board” sweep, as noted by the electoral success of Angela Merkel (barely) in Germany and Emmanuel Macron in France.

Electoral success is but a manifestation of this trend, extending well beyond success at the ballot box, as important as that undoubtedly is. That is, the rise—as manifested in impressive victories across the board—needs to be understood in a broader context. To view it through the narrow lens of an election is to miss an important piece of the puzzle.

As we discuss in the pages ahead, the “rise” reflects profound changes in society, its values, and its norms. In and of itself, that is not a bad thing. Changing norms and mores reflect the push and pull, give and take, of any society reacting to events, whether domestic or international. That is what makes democracy a living, breathing entity.

Evaluations of the trends mentioned differ significantly (and this is an understatement). Some speak, disparagingly, of “populism”; others are less negative.

The question is whether the change includes—explicitly or implicitly, directly or indirectly—harm to the vulnerable. What should one think of the “populist revolt”? Some of
the proposals made by the politicians mentioned are clearly beyond the pale, but is everything they propose unacceptable from the perspective of more traditional politics? And will not totally ignoring populism run the risk of making it all the more important and pervasive? Politics is a contact sport; rough and tumble interactions are its essence. However—and it is this that gives us pause—is there a cost incurred by the vulnerable resulting from the rise of the political Right?

The notion of the vulnerable and minority groups, the protection of time-honored institutions—such as independence of the judiciary and checks and balances within the democratic system—and the risks to which they may be subjected as a result of the rise of this populist trend weigh heavily on this project. It is in that framework that we probe, examine, and ponder the following questions. We respect the electoral process—sometimes our preferred candidate succeeds, other times not; that is not our concern. Rather, we are concerned about the threats to democratic values, whether intended or unintended.

Right-wing politics, in its present iteration, reflects a turning away from liberalism, inclusion, and tolerance of the vulnerable and minority groups. The “other” is under attack. That raises legitimate questions regarding how this trend should be perceived. After all, any political development casting doubt on the legitimacy of individuals or groups, with the possibility of harm on the horizon—emotional or physical—deserves our attention.

Obviously, one of the most important questions that demands scrutiny is the status of the refugee-immigrant-migrant-asylum seeker. “Status” as we use it extends beyond a particular legal definition; we use “status” simultaneously in a broader existential context and practically—existential regarding the nature of society’s relationship with the other,
practical regarding how the individual is treated when going to the corner market.

In many ways, this issue has become “front and center” in the discussion. Even the disparate terms bandied about in describing “this” person are noteworthy; the lack of terminological clarity suggests we do not know exactly how to define the “outsider.” The notion of the “outsider” extends beyond those seeking to enter a particular society from the outside; it also includes someone living in our midst whose inclusion has never been accepted. President Trump’s catchall terms—“criminal,” “fake news,” or “migrants”—are, arguably, politically effective, reflecting an important aspect of this discussion: word choices. Fear, if not fearmongering, is part and parcel of this discussion. Hours before the polls closed in the 2015 Israel election, Prime Minister Netanyahu engaged in classic racist politics by tweeting, “the Arabs are voting in droves.”

Anecdotes tell a story: a number of years ago, one of us was in a taxicab in the Netherlands; the driver was bemoaning “immigrants” and their increasing influence on society. In saying, “I want my country back,” the driver was referring to new and old immigrants alike. Whether they did not want to be included, or he did not want them included, is an open question. It is also a most important discussion point. In the current political climate, it is primarily the political Right that is most closely associated with identifying the outsider as posing a threat to society. Geert Wilders, Member of Parliament, the Netherlands, brought this issue to a head—whether intentionally or not is an open question—when engaging in

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1. The reference is to Israel Arabs who comprise 17 percent of Israel’s population; this is distinct from Palestinians who live in the West Bank or Gaza Strip; https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2015/03/17/on-israeli-election-day-netanyahu-warns-of-arabs-voting-in-droves/?utm_term=.cdca934a6b38.
a give-and-take with campaign supporters asking—jokingly, according to him—whether there should be “more or less Moroccans” in the Netherlands.²

A casual survey compellingly illuminates its extraordinary relevance to much that we discuss in this book. As these lines were written, the U.S. government is, as part of an immigration policy, separating children from their parents who are seeking to enter its southern border. We do not doubt the nation-state’s right to sovereignty and protection of its borders; that argument, voiced by some in the Trump administration, is a “straw man.”

It is a given that the essence of statehood is determining which noncitizens can live, legally, in a country of which they are not a citizen. We do not sit in judgment of that policy. We do, however, note the contentiousness of the issue; its optics, politics, and posturing illustrate how the contemporary discussion focuses on the relationship between the state, the polity, and the outsider. We observe the manner in which a policy is developed, articulated, and implemented.

It is the notion of threat that is of particular importance; identifying individuals or groups as a threat to society heightens their vulnerability, potentially making them a target. The distance between threat and targeting that threat—perceived or actual—is short, sometimes very short. The notion of target is of great relevance in our analysis: history is pockmarked with tragic examples of the outsider victimized, whether verbally, socially, politically, or violently. Images of Nazi Germany and lynchings of African Americans quickly come to mind.

The discussion is one of limits. To what extent is the “tagging” legitimate, safe, and within the bounds of legitimate,

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tolerable, and acceptable free speech? Conversely, when does political discourse—particularly when at its core is the identifying of another group as the “enemy”—cross the line and endanger individuals? Terms such as “other,” “enemy,” and “outsider” are fraught with danger.

While we do not advocate undue restrictions on free speech or on freedom of religion—two themes addressed throughout this book—we do examine whether unrestrained freedoms endanger vulnerable members of society. While reconciling these powerful competing tensions is an enormous challenge, it is important to engage in a discussion. There is risk in engaging in this discussion; there is, conversely, risk in not doing so. The power, influence, and omnipresence of social media accelerate the need to engage in these questions, discomfort be damned.

At the moment, the contemporary climate reflects increasing intolerance of the “other,” an inward turning in domestic politics, and a growing rejection of globalism. The three need to be understood as linked, reflecting a powerful confluence of interests and philosophies resulting in the rise of the political Right. There is a sense that these trends lend themselves to racism and violence.

That is not unique to the Right; left-wing political movements, historically, have also been marked by violence. This point cannot be sufficiently emphasized. To suggest that the hands of the Left are “clean” of unimaginable violence and horrors throughout history reflects a profound misreading of history. It is not an exaggeration to note that the streets of Europe are flowing with blood spilled by the Left. To deny that is either ignorance or hypocrisy. Or a combination of both. Perhaps in a different era, our book would be titled “The Rise of the Political Left.” Arguably, many of the concerns raised in the pages ahead conjure up images of hate,
racism, and violence of the Left. That, however, is not the case today. It is the reason we focus on the Right. Its ascendancy, at least politically, is undeniable.

Whether the Left has been caught off guard, whether this reflects a cycle (one day up, one day down), or whether the Right is more able to capture the present “mood” of the electorate are all legitimate queries. We explore them in this book. In doing so, we ask two separate questions: Is this rise dangerous to democracy and its values? And, if so, what measures can be taken to minimize the danger posed? In the same vein, it is important to inquire whether imposing limits violates democratic values and principles. The question we pose—with some trepidation—is whether election results warrant inquiring into the limits of democracy if those very results potentially endanger democracy, democratic values, and vulnerable members of society.

Asking this question is problematic because it suggests that a particular political trend—rightward in this case—imposes risks and dangers that merit intervention. Such intervention is fraught with danger. If the people spoke, why should their voice not be respected? Elections have winners and losers. The essence of democracy is majority rule, provided the process that resulted in electoral victory was predicated on fair elections, devoid of machinations and manipulations. That fairness is not always a certainty, as history repeatedly demonstrates.

Ensuring free, fair elections devoid of undue influence is essential to the democratic system. That is the most sanguine and optimistic objective one can hope for; however, that cheerful and rosy aspiration is not always reflected in reality. Election fraud, the “dead voting,” vote buying, external influences, and spending extraordinary amounts of money of a campaign raise questions regarding the fairness of the process.
Russian interference with the 2016 U.S. presidential election brought these questions to the fore. Nevertheless, one must recognize—regardless of one’s political allegiance and philosophy—that uninhibited elections reflect voters’ rejection of a particular candidate or specific party.

Restated: if democracy turns rightward, should that shift be understood as reflecting the will of the people? And should those in opposition more compellingly present their perspectives in order to enhance their public appeal? That, after all, is the essence of the political process: develop a platform, present it to the public, convince the public of its merits, and ask for their votes. Fair enough.

There is danger in suggesting that the rise of the Right or the Left endangers society or individuals. Dismissal of election results, provided conducted in accordance with democratic measures and principles, casts dark shadows over the process. In that spirit, the decision to propose intervention, or to consider mechanisms that limit the consequences of election results, must be undertaken judiciously and with great care. To deny the will of the majority is the essence of antidemocratic measures. The consequences of that can be tragic and devastating.

However, there is—arguably—an additional consideration that cannot be easily dismissed. It is one that we explore: Are there costs to democracy that require reconsideration? We ask this question with a fair degree of trepidation; imposing limits on otherwise protected rights and liberties is a dangerous undertaking. We recognize that danger. However, there are disturbing trends that raise—for us—questions regarding the limits of democracy and the cost of not protecting vulnerable members of society. There is a double-edged sword in this undertaking: in asking whether protection of vulnerable members of society warrants special measures, we suggest—or
at least explore—that limits be placed on, for example, free speech. The flip side is also not risk free: giving the voices of hatred and racism—and, yes, violence—an unlimited playing field is also dangerous.

In a perfect universe, this discussion would not be taking place. That, however, is not the case. Examining the limits question, essential when exploring the rise of the Right (or the Left in previous years), forces us to ask: Can democracy stand still when vulnerable members are at risk, or is democracy strong enough to withstand assaults on members of society who are not, truly and fully, members of society?

To address these issues, this book is divided into the following chapters: Chapter 1: Europe, Israel, and the United States; Chapter 2: Nazism, Communism, and Islamism; Chapter 3: Militant Democracy; Chapter 4: Islamism and Militant Democracy; Chapter 5: Cartoon Wars and Freedom of Religion; Chapter 6: Freedom of Speech in an Age of Radicalism; and Chapter 7: Where Do We Go from Here?

Our approach in addressing these issues is as follows: we drew on our wide range of contacts throughout Europe, Israel, and the United States; our previous writings; our assessment of contemporary society; and our reflections of history. Over the years, we have collaborated on many projects, interacted regularly, and engaged in endless conversations whether in person or electronically. One of us lives in the Netherlands (Cliteur); one of us splits his time between the United States and Israel, with frequent visits in the Netherlands (Guiora). This is a book that we have been discussing over the years; in many ways, it is a culmination of innumerable conversations and interactions that began over drinks in Utrecht (the Netherlands) ten years ago.

In undertaking this project, we hope to challenge the reader to consider the limits of democracy; while we frame
this in the context of the rise of political Right, were we to have written this decades ago, we might well have framed this as the rise of political Left. That is important because we are not wedded to a particular perspective or orthodoxy; rather, our concern is ensuring the protection of democratic values while, simultaneously, addressing the protection of the vulnerable “other.”

As these lines are written, it is our sense that there is a troubling imbalance in the air that calls into question the extent to which sufficient protections are afforded-granted in the context of the rise of the political Right. That unease stretches across the regions and countries addressed in this book; those common themes—in spite of geographical, cultural, political, and social differences—are disquieting.

It is to those that we turn our attention.