


RESEARCH ARTICLE

The role of right-wing enjoyment in the normalisation of the far right

Pasko Kisić-Merino 

Department of Political Science, Karlstad University, Karlstad, Sweden
Email: pasko.kisicmerino@kau.se

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Abstract

The retreat of the modern liberal order in contemporary democracies can be understood as co-constituted with the normalisation of the far right. The far right has increasingly accessed the political ‘mainstream’ through the enabling of erstwhile-disavowing centre-right and right-wing counterparts. In contexts of political ‘victory’, the identity (re)formation of these mainstream right-wing subjects and discourses can be observed and analysed through celebrations alongside the far right and in emotions and attitudes like elation, gloating, and self-righteousness. In this article, I address how victory-related manifestations of enjoyment – or *jouissance* – are articulated in the discourses of mainstream right-wing subjects. I ask what enjoyment-based rhetoric reveal about the normalisation of the far right and the identity reformation of right-wing subjects and discourses. To address this, I first discuss the role of enjoyment on far-right normalisation by merging Derk Hook’s analytics of enjoyment (2017) with ontological security, expanding on the latter concept as a libidinal fantasy of ideological closure. Subsequently, analysing the case of the 2022 Swedish election, I explore three interrelated dimensions of co-(re)formation of right-wing enjoyment, discourses, and identities: the symbolic space where civilisational-securitising fantasies are produced; the threatening modes of enjoyment of cultural Others; and the imperilled enjoyment modes of the ‘real Swedes’.

Keywords: far right; far-right normalisation; jouissance; Lacan; ontological security

Introduction

The 2022 general elections in Sweden saw the right-wing bloc triumph over their left-wing rivals, winning by a razor-thin margin. This victory was met by supporters with intense emotions and attitudes such as elation, self-righteousness, gloating, and *schadenfreude*. The triumph’s dramatic context and historical significance stemmed from ousting a centre-left order perceived as betraying Sweden’s aspirations, trust, security, and exceptionality. The far-right Sweden Democrats (*Sverigedemokraterna*, SD) played a crucial role in this success. Formerly a neo-Nazi party, SD has sought to whitewash its image, positioning itself closer to the political ‘centre’ by disavowing radical beliefs and adopting modern, aesthetically pleasing, and ‘agreeable’ rhetoric and discourses.

One instance of celebration-in-victory was caught in an impromptu TV interview that went viral:¹ Rebecka Fallenkvist, a former television presenter and SD politician, expressed her elation

¹Gina Gustavsson, ‘The far right’s triumph in my country reveals a very Swedish brand of intolerance’, *The Guardian* (15 September 2022), available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/sep/15/far-right-sweden-intolerance-liberalism-election-results>.

over the triumph by uttering ‘*Helg Seger!*’² While this term literally means ‘weekend victory!’ in Swedish, it is a dog whistle associated with ‘*Hell Seger*’, the Swedish far right’s translation of the Nazi motto ‘*Sieg Heil!*’ (‘hail victory’). Fallenkvist’s neo-Nazi allegory, on the eve of a ‘concerted’ right-wing victory, highlights the affective dimension of the phenomenon of far-right normalisation. This can be seen in two interdependent dynamics. First is the tension between SD’s radically exclusionary beliefs and their attempts to appeal to the political mainstream.³ Second, Fallenkvist’s elation was mirrored by enjoyment-filled expressions from SD’s right-wing allies – Liberals, Moderates, and Christian Democrats – who had previously disavowed SD for its far-right discourses and neo-Nazi past.⁴ Sweden’s historical championing of liberal values domestically and internationally serves as a perplexing analytical springboard for understanding the normalisation of the far right, particularly in the context of enjoyment.

By analysing enjoyment in the moment of ‘victory’, I problematise the global phenomenon of far-right normalisation and reveal the role of centre-right and right-wing subjects (hereafter: ‘mainstream right wing’) and discourses in its success. These intense expressions can be understood under Derek Hook’s⁵ Lacanian approach to the analysis of *enjoyment* (or *jouissance*) as a political factor. *Jouissance*⁶ is ‘an enjoyment intermingled with suffering; it is a type of painful arousal poised on the verge of the traumatic.’⁷ It reveals the repressed or sublimated elements within mainstream right-wing politics and their role in the (in)securitisation of subjects. This process becomes apparent when contradictions to centre-right symbolic commitments arise, manifesting as intense, transgressive emotions. *Jouissance* is not reduced to any single emotion but rather is a complex mode of intensity partially ‘photographed’ in their interplay and aimed at the ‘threatening’ *Other*. This ‘Other’ does not refer solely to ‘other persons’ but also represents the ‘big Other’, the manifestation of symbolic authority that demands our compliance – experienced in, e.g., discourses of national identity or in the figure of the state.⁸

Lacanian scholars focus on the role of emotions in politics, emphasising that the analysis of *jouissance* is crucial for understanding how ideological interpellation acts as a bulwark against the threatening ‘Other’, providing a sociocultural bond that maintains social cohesion.⁹ This bulwark is composed of illusory yet compelling and stabilising fantasies of self-continuity that organise the experience of *jouissance* – i.e. fantasies of *ontological security*. By examining emotionally charged contradictions, enjoyment reveals how the subject’s engagement with reactionary fantasies is co-constituted with the anxiety-inducing process of reforming its identity against the Other. Enjoyment is captured in brief moments or ‘festivals of excess’, like the right-wing victory celebrations, and its analysis provides a unique glimpse into the interplay between the global ‘retreat’ of the liberal democratic order and the normalisation of the far right.

Considering the vital role of *jouissance* in far-right normalisation, this article poses the research questions: What can the experience and manifestations of enjoyment (*jouissance*) reveal about the reconfiguration of right-wing politics? and how does this *jouissance*-infused process contribute to normalising the far right in liberal societies? These questions are explored through the lens of ontological security, a fantasy that partially stabilises subjective coherence and manifests in civilisational discourses.

²SVT Nyheter, ‘SD-profilen i natt: “Helg seger”’, SVT Nyheter (12 September 2022), available at: <https://www.svt.se/nyheter/inrikes/sd-profilen-i-natt-hel-g-seger>.

³E.g. disavowing Fallenkvist’s outburst as ‘mere drunkenness’; SVT Nyheter, ‘SD-profilen i natt.’

⁴Gabriella Elgenius and Jens Rydgren, ‘Frames of nostalgia and belonging: The resurgence of ethno-nationalism in Sweden’, *European Societies*, 21:4 (2019), pp. 583–602.

⁵Derek Hook, ‘What is “enjoyment as a political factor”?’; *Political Psychology*, 38:4 (2017), pp. 605–20.

⁶‘*Jouissance*’ will be interchangeably used with ‘enjoyment’ throughout this article.

⁷Hook, ‘What is “enjoyment as a political factor”?’; p. 607.

⁸Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Editions du Seuil, Paris, 2006), p. 378.

⁹Christopher S. Browning, ‘Brexit populism and fantasies of fulfilment’, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 32:3 (2019), pp. 222–44.

This article is structured as follows. In the first part, I provide an overview of how the literature on emotions and ontological security studies (OSS) relates to the concept of enjoyment and propose my contributions to the field of OSS. Second, I examine the overarching concepts of ‘far right’ and ‘normalisation’ to guide the theoretical discussions. Third, I explore the relationship between ontological security and *jouissance*, which composes the analytical framework. Fourth, I examine Sweden’s political context and key actors through this framework, bridging the theoretical discussions with the empirical exploration of *jouissance*.

I follow these parts by operationalising the ‘analytics of enjoyment’ in three modes of *jouissance*. First, I analyse the fantasy of Swedish exceptionalism as the symbolic site structuring and producing the experience of enjoyment and its imperilment. Second, based on this ‘structuring fantasy’, I explore the threatening modes of enjoyment of cultural and racial (i.e. ethnocultural) Others. Subsequently, I examine the ‘imperilled’ modes of enjoyment of the ‘righteous’ Swedes. The latter two modes of *jouissance* are illustrated through tweets by prominent Swedish political figures. I conclude by reflecting on the relationship between *jouissance*, ontological security, and far-right normalisation.

Emotions in far-right politics

While the relationship between *jouissance*, far-right politics, and ontological security studies (OSS) is prominent, the normalisation of the far right has been explored within the broader field of the politics of emotion,¹⁰ within which OSS is epistemologically embedded.¹¹

For instance, Wodak¹² focuses on how the far right’s mobilisation of moral emotions like nostalgia, anger, resentment, and shame is instrumental in its normalisation insofar as they allow us to ‘make sense’ of a crisis-saturated context.¹³ These emotions are categorised as either ‘other-condemning’ (e.g. anger) or ‘self-conscious’ (e.g. shame, guilt), which together shape our identities and belonging against the ‘malign’ Other. The far-right targeting of the Other through negative ‘sticky associations’ like ‘refugee’ as ‘invader’¹⁴ is also covered by the literature on nostalgia. For Homolar and Scholz,¹⁵ nostalgia plays a more complex role than resentment or anger since it operates simultaneously as joyful (linked to a blissful past) and painful (linked to the *loss* of joy). Nostalgia is a key emotional mechanism in the normalisation of the far right, involving ‘picking and freezing’ convenient moments of lost ‘bliss’ and repackaging them as identity-forming fantasies of unity and fulfilment.¹⁶

The role of joy in the operation and ‘mainstreaming’ of the far right is also examined by Zulianello,¹⁷ who argues that celebrations and camaraderie in ‘inner circles’ are experienced as righteous rewards for emotionally investing in ‘the cause’, i.e. performing ‘diligently’ in mainstream milieus despite societal repercussions. Furthermore, Luger¹⁸ explores spaces, lifestyles, and

¹⁰Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2014); Brent Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations: Self-Identity and the IR State* (London: Routledge, 2008).

¹¹See Catarina Kinnvall and Jennifer Mitzen, ‘Anxiety, fear, and ontological security in world politics: Thinking with and beyond Giddens’, *International Theory*, 12:2 (2020), pp. 240–56.

¹²Ruth Wodak, *The Politics of Fear: The Shameless Normalization of Far-Right Discourse*, 2nd ed. (Los Angeles: Sage, 2020).

¹³See also Michał Krzyżanowski, Ruth Wodak, Hannah Bradby, et al., ‘Discourses and practices of the “new normal”: Towards an interdisciplinary research agenda on crisis and the normalization of anti- and post-democratic action’, *Journal of Language and Politics*, 22:4 (2023), pp. 415–37.

¹⁴Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, pp. 8–11.

¹⁵Alexandra Homolar and Ronny Scholz, ‘The power of Trump-speak: Populist crisis narratives and ontological security’, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 32:3 (2019), pp. 344–64.

¹⁶See also Bahar Rumelili, ‘Breaking with Europe’s pasts: Memory, reconciliation, and ontological (in)security’, *European Security*, 27:3 (2018), pp. 280–95.

¹⁷Mattia Zulianello, ‘The league of Matteo Salvini: Fostering and exporting a modern mass-party grounded on “phygital” activism’, *Politics and Governance*, 9:4 (2021), pp. 228–39.

¹⁸Jason Luger, ‘Celebrations, exaltations and alpha lands: Everyday geographies of the far-right’, *Political Geography*, 96 (2022), 102604.

moments of political celebration concerning MAGA politics in the USA, arguing that apparently benign collective celebratory patriotism can turn into milieus of radical exclusion and supremacy contributing to the ‘the fascist creep’. Celebration-turned-exclusion can be attested in the reactionary affect behind the Swedish right-wing bloc’s ‘patriotic’ celebrations, which oscillated from and *entangled* the Liberal party’s rapturous welcoming of the results¹⁹ to the elation surrounding Fallenkvist’s ‘*Helg Seger!*’ incident.

The mainstreaming of the far right has also been examined through the concept of *ressentiment*. For Capelos and Demertzis, *ressentiment* is a complex affective transvaluation that perpetuates the victimhood of the aggrieved subject, where feelings of impotence towards an unattainable object-of-desire turn into moral superiority over the now-unwanted and unworthy object.²⁰ *Ressentiment* has a ‘bitter affective core’, prominently manifesting ‘among the passive, the humiliated and the weak of society’ who experience intense powerlessness and victimhood.²¹ *Ressentiment* is considered the ‘affective undercurrent of grievance politics’,²² which emerges in the blending of negative emotions like shame and powerlessness that result from the perceived degradation of social and intergenerational status.

While *ressentiment* and other theories on emotions provide insights into far-right dynamics, Lacanian concepts like *jouissance* and the object-cause of desire uniquely explain how ideologies shape identities through enjoyment-producing fantasies of ontological (in)security. For instance, *ressentiment* is primarily a ‘bitter’ affective register, while *jouissance* (re)frames it as inextricable from the interplay between elation, joy, and celebration. While *jouissance* shares the emphasis on the affective register of reactionary politics, it is not bound to it – it can also be found in emancipatory or progressive iterations. Furthermore, *ressentiment* is framed as a state that the subject ‘falls in’ or ‘resists’,²³ situating it as crucial yet extrinsic to the subject. In contrast, *jouissance* is an inseparable component of our subjectivity – i.e. while *ressentiment* can *happen to* the subject, *jouissance* and the anxiety it is driven by represents the moment of subjectivity itself.²⁴ Considering the contributions and limitations of the politics of emotion literature on far-right normalisation and enjoyment, I discuss how ontological security literature addresses this relationship.

Enjoyment in ontological security studies

Ontological security constitutes a fundamental yet ultimately illusory stabilising fantasy which structures the experience of enjoyment. Robert Laing²⁵ and Anthony Giddens,²⁶ followed by first-generation OSS scholars like Mitzen,²⁷ Steele,²⁸ and Kinnvall,²⁹ conceptualise ontological security as a psychic state corresponding to the ‘security of being’ of the modern subject. It entails the

¹⁹ Alex Voronov, ‘Liberalerna har redan förlorat’, *Sydsvenskan* (12 September 2022), available at: <https://www.sydsvenskan.se/2022-09-12/liberalerna-har-redan-forlorat>.

²⁰ Tereza Capelos and Nicolas Demertzis, ‘Sour grapes: Ressentiment as the affective response of grievance politics’, *Innovation: The European Journal of Social Science Research*, 35:1 (2022), pp. 107–29 (pp. 107–8).

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ See Peter Burgess, ‘For want or not: Lacan’s conception of anxiety’, in Emmy Eklundh, Andreja Zevnik, and Emmanuel-Pierre Guittet (eds), *Politics of Anxiety* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), pp. 17–36.

²⁵ Robert David Laing, *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1965).

²⁶ Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Cambridge: Polity, 1991).

²⁷ Jennifer Mitzen, ‘Ontological security in world politics: State identity and the security dilemma’, *European Journal of International Relations*, 12:3 (2006), pp. 341–70.

²⁸ Steele, *Ontological Security*.

²⁹ Catarina Kinnvall, ‘Globalization and religious nationalism: Self, identity, and the search for ontological security’, *Political Psychology*, 25:5 (2004), pp. 741–67.

need of a subject who is 'centred ... cognitively and emotionally invested'³⁰ to experience a stable, continuous world and identity via rituals and practices. The Lacanian turn in OSS problematises Giddens's primacy of agency and failure to incorporate the role of the unconscious.³¹ Instead of understanding ontological security as a security of *being*, the Lacanian approach recasts this fantasy as a security of *becoming*.³² Here, the desiring subject is seen as perpetually caught in an insatiable quest to attain a stable identity and to recapture lost wholeness. Ontological security generates elements of *insecurity* that threaten the subject's prospects of stability and fulfilment of its desires. Obstacles to attainment, embodied in threatening Others, are paradoxically experienced as *jouissance* since they drive the subject towards its satisfaction.³³ This ontological-securing dynamic was evident in Moderate MP Jan Ericson's commendation of the securitising alliance between the Swedish far right and centre right as one of efficiency, trust, and *togetherness*, in stark contrast to a 'left' that is to be reviled.³⁴

The role of enjoyment as a political factor has been highlighted and explored by Lacanian OSS scholars. For instance, post-colonial OSS has explored the roles of fantasy and enjoyment in the co-constituted formation of the identities of post-colonial and imperial subjects. For Vieira, post-colonial ontological security refers to the articulation of 'anxiety-driven affective traces'³⁵ to these societies' colonial pasts. These traces mark the ambivalent nature of the post-colonial subject, who is stuck 'unstably in-between the West and the non-West'.³⁶ The promise of 'fullness' or ontological security is constituted by (and conditions) the enjoyment of belonging, which drives the post-colonial subject to identify and even mimic the 'modern' Western colonial structure that signifies their lack.

Kinnvall³⁷ examines the emotional appeal of populist discourses in post-colonial imaginaries, focusing on the object of the imaginary other (e.g. refugees, immigrants). She discusses the process of nation-building concerning the melancholia of Empire, in which the 'primordial' *jouissance* that constituted it has been lost. The impossibility of satisfying melancholic enjoyment marks its experience, signifying a 'thief' of enjoyment that prevents fulfilment. Bilgic and Pilcher³⁸ examine the post-colonial subject in terms of anxious 'status-seeking' – quests for a 'whole' identity within social hierarchies. In this pursuit, enjoyment is generated by narratives of temporary 'illusory fullness'. Status is seen as an 'anchor for wholeness',³⁹ a remedy to the anxiety of the post-colonial subject. The prospect of subjective 'completeness' generates temporary yet ultimately illusory enjoyment, which produces the anxiety that drives the subject towards the 'anchoring' status-seeking in 'racialised, gendered, and classed hierarchies'.⁴⁰

Lacanian ontological security also addresses *jouissance* in the context of nation-building, nostalgia, and power. Vulović and Ejodus⁴¹ explore the role of the 'object-cause of desire' in ontological

³⁰ John Cash, 'Psychoanalysis, cultures of anarchy, and ontological insecurity', *International Theory*, 12:2 (2020), pp. 306–21 (p. 316).

³¹ Kinnvall and Mitzen, 'Anxiety, fear, and ontological security in world politics'.

³² Catarina Kinnvall, 'Feeling ontologically (in)secure: States, traumas and the governing of gendered space', *Cooperation and Conflict*, 52:1 (2017), pp. 90–108.

³³ Todd McGowan, 'The bedlam of the lynch mob: Racism and enjoying through the other', in Sheldon George and Derek Hook (eds), *Lacan and Race* (Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2021), pp. 19–34.

³⁴ Jan Ericson [@Ericson_ubbhult] (2022b), see online appendix.

³⁵ Marco A. Vieira, '(Re-)imagining the "self" of ontological security: The case of Brazil's ambivalent postcolonial subjectivity', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 46:2 (2018), pp. 142–64 (p. 144).

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 151.

³⁷ Catarina Kinnvall, 'Ontological insecurities and postcolonial imaginaries: The emotional appeal of populism', *Humanity & Society*, 42:4 (2018), pp. 523–43.

³⁸ Ali Bilgic and Jordan Pilcher, 'Desires, fantasies and hierarchies: Postcolonial status anxiety through ontological security', *Alternatives*, 48:1 (2023), pp. 3–19.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁴¹ Marina Vulović and Filip Ejodus, 'Object-cause of desire and ontological security: Evidence from Serbia's opposition to Kosovo's membership in UNESCO', *International Theory*, 16:1 (2024), pp. 122–51.

security and its relationship with enjoyment, illustrated by Serbia's opposition to Kosovo joining UNESCO. Serbia's 'lost' object-cause of desire, Kosovo, both 'pulls' and causes its desire, which is crucial for recapturing lost enjoyment and creating a 'national' coherent self.⁴² Nostalgic fantasies about the object-cause of desire entail narratives of loss and potential recapture, and *jouissance* is the currency through which these narratives are experienced.⁴³ Similarly, Eberle⁴⁴ argues that *jouissance* and its potential theft are fundamental for constituting ontologically secure national subjectivities. However, merely depicting 'the thief' as a threat lacks affective efficiency. Rather, the interplay between desire and *jouissance* is crucial for analysing fantasies, since the theft of enjoyment is signified not only in material loss but as a *threat* to our identity. In Sweden, mainstream and far-right leaders have co-capitalised on this identity-dislocating 'threat'. The Sweden Democrats' leader, Jimmie Åkesson, associates the material 'burden' of immigration⁴⁵ with imaginaries of civilisational collapse,⁴⁶ which has been replicated by Moderate MP Jan Ericson in condemning the 'predictable' threat of Islamic parties to Swedish politics.⁴⁷

In addressing Brexit, Browning⁴⁸ highlights the investment in hopes of fulfilment and the populist fantasies feeding such hopes. Brexit's reactionary promise of fulfilment is 'emotionally seductive and politically mobilising',⁴⁹ a key strategy of ontological (in)security manipulation. Fantasies are compelling as they 'harness signifiers [of ontological security that subjects] enjoy identifying with'.⁵⁰ In populist politics, fantasies are 'seductive' only if they can mobilise the *jouissance* embedded in signifiers of self-identity like 'control', 'Empire', and 'pride'. This enjoyment is also experienced transgressively through othering – positioning immigrants, 'elites', or the European Union (EU) as enjoying at the expense of 'the people'.

Outlining *jouissance* at the forefront of ontological security studies

While contemporary ontological security literature is invaluable for elucidating the role of *jouissance* in normalising the far right, this article bridges several theoretical, methodological, and empirical shortcomings. First, while the *normalisation* of the far right has been widely studied, its relation with enjoyment remains underexplored, particularly from an OSS perspective. Literature on the far right has tangentially addressed this link, either by exploring the relationship between far-right politics and enjoyment⁵¹ or by connecting far-right discourses and ontological security.⁵² Second, OSS studies on *jouissance* focus mainly on grievance, anger, and fear, leaving the celebratory 'moment of victory' empirically underexplored, particularly in the context of far-right normalisation. Finally, Lacanian OSS literature has examined the nation as a subject constructed through fantasies of political belonging, e.g. post-colonial and post-imperial. Alternative formulations of national subjectivity, such as Sweden's quest for exceptionalism, despite being neither post-imperial nor post-colonial, remain marginal. Sweden's case can provide insights into how enjoyment shapes the affective experience of a liberal, 'generous', 'peace-seeking' nation.

⁴²Ibid., p. 126.

⁴³Ibid., p. 130.

⁴⁴Jakub Eberle, 'Narrative, desire, ontological security, transgression: Fantasy as a factor in international politics', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 22:1 (2019), pp. 243–68.

⁴⁵Jimmie Åkesson [@jimmieakesson] (2021), see online appendix.

⁴⁶Jimmie Åkesson [@jimmieakesson] (2014), see online appendix.

⁴⁷Jan Ericson [@Ericson_ubbhult] (2022a), see online appendix.

⁴⁸Browning, 'Brexit populism and fantasies of fulfilment'.

⁴⁹Ibid., p. 4.

⁵⁰Ibid., p. 14.

⁵¹Christoffer Kølvråa, 'Psychoanalyzing Europe? Political enjoyment and European identity', *Political Psychology*, 39:6 (2018), pp. 1405–18.

⁵²Jelena Subotić, 'Political memory, ontological security, and Holocaust remembrance in post-communist Europe', *European Security*, 27:3 (2018), pp. 296–313.

This article foregrounds *jouissance* theoretically and methodologically. It systematically examines the role and modes of enjoyment in producing subjectivities, complementing Hook⁵³ by framing these in the context of far-right normalisation via the lens of ontological security. I analyse three coordinates of ‘modes of *jouissance*’ and their interplay: fantasies organising enjoyment (e.g. Swedish exceptionalism), the threatening enjoyment of ethnocultural and politically antagonistic Others, and the imperilled enjoyment of the ‘real Swedes.’ The analysis is empirically grounded in ‘moments of victory’, emphasising celebratory, self-righteous, and exultant dimensions over fear, anger, and grievance, framing ontological security as a *jouissance*-structuring *libidinal fantasy*. To complement the state- and nation-centric OSS literature, I analyse the discourses of Swedish mainstream right-wing subjects, focusing on how they negotiate their roles amidst far-right normalisation. This analysis is situated within the global backlash against liberalism, illustrated through the fantasy of Swedish exceptionalism.

Conceptualising the far right and its normalisation

While the far right is a difficult-to-define term, I operationalise it by merging the approaches of Miller-Idriss,⁵⁴ Kinnvall and Nesbitt-Larking,⁵⁵ and Mudde.⁵⁶ The far right encompasses political ideologies characterised by the interplay of radical discourses and performances of nativism, nostalgia, authoritarianism, masculinism, exclusionary populism, and (ultra)nationalism aimed at reshaping society. Scholars like Castelli Gattinara⁵⁷ further problematise its definition by highlighting differences between ‘strands’ like radical right, neo-fascism, and right-wing populism; their milieus, such as formal parties, militias, and social movements, and their spatial iterations, e.g. national, local, online. I tackle this definitional issue via Norocel’s notion of ‘the far-right continuum’, which criticises the fixity of organisational categories and discourses, proposing the far right as a fluid continuum reuniting parties, agendas, social movements, paramilitary organisations, and ‘loosely organised networks and subcultures.’⁵⁸

Understanding the far right as a continuum reveals its organisational, discursive, emotional, and spatial components as co-constituted and multifaceted. SD exemplifies this by adopting frontstage ‘respectability’ to position themselves ‘centrally’ in politics while using ‘backstage’ practices⁵⁹ to mobilise exclusionary rhetoric in the media. For instance, the far-right conspiracy theory of ‘the Great Replacement’ featured in a 2010 SD campaign video, and while banned from national broadcasters, it gained 1.2 million views on YouTube by September 2024, influencing public debates in mainstream and radical milieus.⁶⁰ This ambivalence allows SD to perform as both a ‘respected’ national party and a decentralised network of far-right grievances linked to extremist movements, highlighting the suitability of the far-right continuum as an analytical concept.

⁵³ Hook, ‘What is “enjoyment as a political factor”?’

⁵⁴ Cynthia Miller-Idriss, *The Extreme Gone Mainstream: Commercialization and Far Right Youth Culture in Germany* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018).

⁵⁵ Catarina Kinnvall and Paul W. Nesbitt-Larking, *The Political Psychology of Globalization: Muslims in the West* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁵⁶ Cas Mudde, ‘The populist radical right: A pathological normalcy’, in Cas Mudde (ed.), *The Populist Radical Right: A Reader* (Abingdon: Taylor & Francis, 2017), pp. 424–38.

⁵⁷ Pietro Castelli Gattinara, ‘The study of the far right and its three E’s: Why scholarship must go beyond Eurocentrism, Electoralism and Externalism’, *French Politics*, 18:3 (2020), pp. 314–33.

⁵⁸ Ov Cristian Norocel, ‘Gendering the far-right continuum in Europe’, in Katherine Kondor and Mark Littler (eds), *The Routledge Handbook of Far-Right Extremism in Europe* (London: Routledge Taylor & Francis, 2024), pp. 288–99 (p. 289).

⁵⁹ See Wodak, *The Politics of Fear*, pp. 56–62.

⁶⁰ Mattias Ekman, ‘The great replacement: Strategic mainstreaming of far-right conspiracy claims’, *Convergence*, 28 (2022), pp. 1127–43.

What is ‘normalisation’?

The normalisation of the far right is a global phenomenon understood by Wodak,⁶¹ Mudde,⁶² and Krzyżanowski⁶³ as the permeation of far-right discourses and subjects into the political mainstream and society. In Sweden, this is seen in the interplay of contiguous processes: SD’s relentless electoral progress;⁶⁴ the adoption of rhetoric by mainstream political actors;⁶⁵ the incorporation of far-right agendas into policy proposals like the Gestapo-like ‘Snitch Law’;⁶⁶ media pandering and platforming;⁶⁷ performative ‘moderation’ of far-right politicians;⁶⁸ and increased camaraderie between the mainstream right wing and far-right actors.⁶⁹ This advancement occurs through the far right shedding performative ‘radicalness’ to self-legitimise, via public institutions providing platforms for acceptability, and through the interpellation of far-right ideology as an ontological security mechanism amid ‘permanent crises’.⁷⁰

SD has a complex relation to democracy, recasting its *defence* around the ‘righteous’ (i.e. supremacist) discourse of ‘popular sovereignty’ and against its liberal iteration – a capitalism-driven system and discourse combining free elections, the rule of law, separation of powers, individual rights, and political pluralism.⁷¹ On the one hand, far-right parties engage democratic institutions via tactics like ‘calculated ambivalence’⁷² or ‘double-speak’⁷³ – statements with hidden, contradictory meanings aimed at appealing broadly while avoiding scrutiny. Parties like SD mobilise ambivalence in tandem with democratic safeguards, like ‘freedom of expression’ and legitimacy gained through elections. On the other, SD positions itself as the ‘true’ defender of Swedish democracy and its ‘real’ values, articulated around the principles of the ‘will of the majority’, welfare chauvinism, and ‘national sovereignty’.⁷⁴ This involves a reductive, illiberal (re)configuration of ‘democracy’ where social rights and duties are articulated around protecting the sovereignty of ‘real’ Swedes.⁷⁵ Crucially, SD’s democratic self-imaginary entails antagonising the ‘betraying’, ‘weak’, and otherwise-inefficient liberal counterparts and ‘their’ democratic model.⁷⁶

⁶¹Wodak, *The Politics of Fear*, pp. 56–8.

⁶²Mudde, ‘The populist radical right’.

⁶³Michał Krzyżanowski, ‘Discursive shifts and the normalisation of racism: Imaginaries of immigration, moral panics and the discourse of contemporary right-wing populism’, *Social Semiotics*, 30:4 (2020), pp. 503–27.

⁶⁴Anders Widfeldt, ‘The far right in Sweden’, in Katherine Kondor and Mark Littler (eds), *The Routledge Handbook of Far-Right Extremism in Europe* (London: Routledge, 2023), pp. 189–201.

⁶⁵Hugo Ekström, Michał Krzyżanowski, and David Johnson, ‘Saying “criminality”, meaning “immigration”? Proxy discourses and public implicatures in the normalisation of the politics of exclusion’, *Critical Discourse Studies* (2023), pp. 1–27, available at: {<https://doi.org/10.1080/17405904.2023.2282506>}.

⁶⁶Ashifa Kassam, ‘Sweden’s “Snitch Law” immigration plan prompts alarm across society’, *The Guardian* (11 August 2024), available at: {<https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/aug/11/sweden-snitch-law-immigration-plan-prompts-alarm-across-society>}.

⁶⁷Pasko Kisić-Merino and Catarina Kinnvall, ‘Governing emotions: Hybrid media, ontological insecurity and the normalisation of far-right fantasies’, *Alternatives*, 48:1 (2023), pp. 54–73.

⁶⁸Anders Hellström and Tom Nilsson, ‘“We are the good guys”: Ideological positioning of the nationalist party Sverigedemokraterna in contemporary Swedish politics’, *Ethnicities*, 10:1 (2010), pp. 55–76.

⁶⁹Anders Ravik Jupskås, ‘The 2022 Swedish general elections: How the moderates came to embrace the Sweden democrats’, *C-REX—Center for Research on Extremism / University of Oslo* (2022), available at: {<https://www.sv.uio.no/c-rex/english/news-and-events/right-now/2022/the-2022-swedish-general-elections-how-the-moderat.html>}.

⁷⁰Krzyżanowski et al., ‘Discourses and practices of the “new normal”’.

⁷¹Richard S. Katz, *Democracy and Elections* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 46–8.

⁷²Wodak, *The Politics of Fear*, p. 35.

⁷³Judith Sijstermans and Adrian Favero, ‘Walking the tightrope: Populist radical right parties’ framing of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ migrants in Belgium and Switzerland’, *Politics of the Low Countries*, 4:2 (2022), pp. 187–212.

⁷⁴Hellström and Nilsson, ‘“We are the good guys”’; Ov Cristian Norocel, ‘Populist radical right protectors of the *folkhem*: Welfare chauvinism in Sweden’, *Critical Social Policy*, 36:3 (2016), pp. 371–90.

⁷⁵Hellström and Nilsson, ‘“We are the good guys”’.

⁷⁶Elgenius and Rydgren, ‘Frames of nostalgia and belonging’.

Liberal democracy becomes a tool for sanitisation and legitimisation⁷⁷ and is often reduced to ‘electocracy’, where the far right adopts superficial ‘respectability’ performances to cater to liberal sensibilities. Simultaneously, they obscure attacks against liberal democracy by targeting its *traits* (e.g. cultural tolerance, gender equality) and ‘representatives’ (e.g. progressives, socialists). At the core of this veiled vilification lies the ultranationalism and nativism that characterises the far right in Sweden, highlighting its contradictions with liberal democracy: its Europhobia, anti-globalism, and belief in Swedish and White supremacy.⁷⁸ Democracy is a tool for the far right as its tenets can be perverted around the metonym of ‘*the people*’,⁷⁹ e.g. symbolically enshrined in SD’s prefix of ‘Sweden’ before ‘Democrats’. Thus, ‘democracy’ becomes an empty signifier normalising exclusion and supremacy, and a tool for recapturing lost *jouissance*.

The normalisation of the far right extends beyond electoral success and ‘tactical arrangements’, involving complex emotional, rhetorical, policy, and performative processes enacted by the ‘political mainstream’.⁸⁰ This includes mainstreaming conspiracy theories and ‘civil’ policy negotiations, leading to the assimilation of far-right discourses and rhetoric as ‘commonsense’ by liberal subjects.⁸¹ This mainstreaming can be attested, for instance, in how Jimmie Åkesson⁸² and former Christian Democrat (KD) MEP Sara Skyttedal⁸³ mobilise xenophobic discourses as ‘popular concerns’ about immigration and Islam via technocratic frames of ‘efficiency’ and ‘law and order’. Krzyżanowski et al. describe ‘normalisation’ as ‘discourses and practices of “manufacturing” normality’ linked to crises that legitimise anti-democratic leaders and scapegoats threatening *Others*.⁸⁴ Thus, the normalisation of the far right is tied to the emotional governance of crises and the unconscious formation of identity, belonging, and ontological securitisation. This manifests society-wide in increased tolerance or even support for xenophobic, exclusionary, and supremacist discourses of ‘Europeanness’.⁸⁵ This ‘new normal’⁸⁶ is increasingly entwined with the *jouissance*-infused experience of ‘permanent crises’ that the far right discursively and emotionally exploits, which can be grasped in affectively intense moments like ‘victory’.

Despite its rise as a political force at the national and European level,⁸⁷ the far right rarely wins national-level majorities. This underscores the need to analyse their normalisation in moments of ‘victory’ beyond party politics, not least by exploring the unconscious undercurrents of political identity formation. This process involves examining the affective and socio-symbolic structure that frames and is revealed *through* moments of victory – i.e. how mainstream politicians enjoy victory *alongside* the far right. Political victories, as ‘festivals of excess’, expose contradictions between our *affective investments* (e.g. the elation of ‘Swedish wholeness’) and *symbolic semblance* (e.g. belief in plurality), revealing our anxieties. The anxiety-charged excesses of victory offer a temporal fulfilment of the social order’s promise of ‘wholeness’. ‘Partial enjoyments’-in-victory reveal the tension between semblance and affective investment of mainstream

⁷⁷ See Simon Oja and Brigitte Mral, ‘The Sweden democrats came in from the cold’, in Ruth Wodak, Majid KhosraviNik, and Brigitte Mral (eds), *Right-Wing Populism in Europe: Politics and Discourse* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp. 277–92.

⁷⁸ Elisabeth Niklasson and Herdis Hølleland, ‘The Scandinavian far-right and the new politicisation of heritage’, *Journal of Social Archaeology*, 18:2 (2018), pp. 121–48.

⁷⁹ Wodak, *The Politics of Fear*, p. 33.

⁸⁰ Krzyżanowski et al., ‘Discourses and practices of the “new normal”’; Wodak, *The Politics of Fear*, pp. 94–96.

⁸¹ Wodak, *The Politics of Fear*.

⁸² Jimmie Åkesson [@jimmieakesson] (2021), see online appendix.

⁸³ Sara Skyttedal [@skyttedal] (2020), see online appendix.

⁸⁴ Krzyżanowski et al., ‘Discourses and practices of the “new normal”’, p. 416.

⁸⁵ Pawel Zerka, *Welcome to Barbieland: European Sentiment in the Year of Wars and Elections*, report (European Council on Foreign Relations, 2024), available at: <https://ecfr.eu/publication/welcome-to-barbieland-european-sentiment-in-the-year-of-wars-and-elections/>.

⁸⁶ Krzyżanowski et al., ‘Discourses and practices of the “new normal”’.

⁸⁷ Hans Kundnani, ‘Europe takes a Trumpian turn’, *Foreign Affairs* (10 September 2024), available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/europe/europe-takes-trumpian-turn>.

right-wing subjects, conveying (i) how they negotiate their identities via status-bestowing far-right fantasies and (ii) how the far right is normalised as a necessary yet outwardly disavowed provider of ontological security. Thus, the normalisation of the far right signifies the retreat of democratic values, ‘filling the gap’ left by liberalism. In the ‘crisis-ridden’ Swedish context, this interplay reveals contradictions between social democracy, liberalism, and far-right ideologies beyond electoral dynamics, contesting notions of belonging and identity experienced as *jouissance*.

Examining far-right normalisation through enjoyment and ontological security

Glynos⁸⁸ and Žižek⁸⁹ argue that enjoyment is how ideology is experienced and sustained in power. Given its political quality, *jouissance* is simultaneously tied to and transcends the Lacanian *Symbolic Order* – the realm of culture, language, and law. Enjoyment also connects to the psychic orders of the *Imaginary* and the *Real*. The former concerns identity-forming fantasies that structure *how* we enjoy. The latter encompasses what eludes signification and symbolisation, the ‘visceral’ and traumatic dimension of *jouissance*.⁹⁰ As illustrated by the ‘*Helg Seger*’ incident, enjoyment is associated with libidinal, illicit, and *disavowed* emotions that counter prevailing norms of ‘acceptability’ yet are paradoxically encouraged by the Symbolic Order as society’s affective ‘binders.’⁹¹

Rogers and Zevnik⁹² argue that excessive moments and emotions converge into libidinal rewards within subject-affirming fantasies despite their transgressiveness to the social order – i.e. rewards linked to the ‘desire for excessive enjoyment.’⁹³ The transgressive moment where *jouissance* is ‘photographed’ reveals the libidinal dimension in ideology and its organisation through fantasy. For instance, the right-wing bloc’s ‘victory’ not only concerned electoral results and an administrative shift but was instead experienced as a wider repudiation of the centre-left Other embedded in a phantasmatic, retrotopian ‘reclamation’ over the long-betrayed kernel of Swedishness.⁹⁴ Glynos and Stavrakakis⁹⁵ similarly tie the libidinal dimension to unconscious symbolic subordination and fantasies that shape subjectivity through othering – e.g. to a ‘new Sweden.’ These libidinal rewards operate through fantasies, providing meaning to our relationship with the Symbolic and binding ‘subjects to the conditions of their symbolic subordination.’⁹⁶ For McGowan,⁹⁷ the depiction of the (ethnocultural) Other as an obstacle to ‘our’ *jouissance* is, paradoxically, the driver for racist and exclusionary enjoyment or the anxiety that mobilises desire to placate it. Hence, enjoyment can also be experienced in *sustaining* the social order, e.g. in contempt of Others who ‘illicitly’ enjoy in our/my stead.

Analytically, Hook⁹⁸ operationalises enjoyment by examining the contradictions in the subject’s ‘rational’ and morally defensible beliefs and knowledge, as evidenced by outbursts or ‘slips of the tongue.’ These expressions expose the inconsistencies in logical and ethical frameworks, performances, and norms that subjects claim as constitutive of their identities. Different modes of *jouissance* emerge in these contradictions, analysable through fantasies of ownership and belong-

⁸⁸ Jason Glynos, ‘The grip of ideology: A Lacanian approach to the theory of ideology’, *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 6:2 (2001), pp. 191–214.

⁸⁹ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 2nd ed. (London: Verso, 2009).

⁹⁰ Hook, ‘What is “enjoyment as a political factor”?’.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 607.

⁹² Juliet B. Rogers and Andreja Zevnik, ‘The symptoms of the political unconscious: Introduction to the special issue’, *Political Psychology*, 38:4 (2017), pp. 581–9.

⁹³ Andreja Zevnik, ‘Capitalism’, in Christina Soto van der Plas, Edgar Miguel, Juárez-Salazar, Carlos Gómez Camarena, and David Pavón-Cuellar (eds), *The Marx through Lacan Vocabulary* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2022), pp. 31–44 (p. 33).

⁹⁴ Cf. Hellström and Nilsson, ‘“We are the good guys”’.

⁹⁵ Jason Glynos and Yannis Stavrakakis, ‘Lacan and political subjectivity: Fantasy and enjoyment in psychoanalysis and political theory’, *Subjectivity*, 24:1 (2008), pp. 256–74.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 268.

⁹⁷ McGowan, ‘The bedlam of the lynch mob’.

⁹⁸ Hook, ‘What is “enjoyment as a political factor”?’.

ing, as well as via affective commitments to their sociocultural signifiers like egalitarianism or 'freedom'.⁹⁹ These modes of *jouissance* highlight how the Other is produced and associated with the role of 'threat' to enjoyment. Thus, enjoyment is a social-bonding intensity that shapes our experience of ideology and signifies its co-constitution with the threat posed *towards* our enjoyment and *by* the Other's *jouissance*.

The loss of *jouissance* implies the sense of 'prior' ownership over enjoyment, now longed for, i.e. 'lost' in time. *Jouissance* is deeply connected to *nostalgia* as an ontological-securing mechanism, for instance, evidenced in SD's retrotopian formulations of 'togetherness' and 'harmony' as incompatible with multiculturalism and resting on mythical concoctions of long-lost 'wholesome' Swedishness.¹⁰⁰ While nostalgia merges dimensions of temporality, subjectivity, and memory,¹⁰¹ I focus on its connection to Lacanian psychoanalysis. Hook argues that nostalgia operates as a historical screening device, preserving 'select elements of the past while enabling a structured forgetting of others'¹⁰² to protect the ego with a fantasy of belonging. Nostalgia helps to manage the anxiety caused by the loss of the object-cause of desire, 'freezing' or calcifying linear temporality to comfort the 'grieving' nostalgic with the hallucination of the fixed object. Nostalgia is hence the 'attempt to ward off the movement of time'¹⁰³ by 'returning' to the solacing yet historically blindsided moment of 'ownership' of *jouissance* and the object-cause – the moment re-enacted in/by 'victory'.

The position of the longed-for object-cause of desire as perennially threatened signifies its anxiety-inducing quality and political productiveness as 'some-thing' to be recaptured (e.g. by 'righteous' patriots) and/or that has failed to be captured. For Glynos,¹⁰⁴ this painful quest for sustaining desire through fantasy – insofar as it relies on sustaining *lack* rather than quenching it – is what the subject experiences as *jouissance*. The object-cause of desire incarnates this paradox by signifying both the promise of wholeness and the impossibility of its recapture. This unattainability triggers anxiety since the object-cause is what 'sets our desire in motion', and we crave *desire* to persist.¹⁰⁵ Burgess¹⁰⁶ situates anxiety in ill-fated attempts to make sense of our world through fantasy. These failures mark anxiety as an identity-altering affect resulting from encounters with real threats to our ontological security. Thus, anxiety is *experienced as* the painful enjoyment that *sustains* desire through fantasies structured by its lost object-cause. For instance, 'Swedishness' constitutes an ungraspable object-cause of desire, mobilising both right-wing and far-right discourses to quench the anxiety produced by its unattainability. This object-cause is painfully reminded through calcified, nostalgic narratives of a 'thriving', 'modern', and 'united' nation and crystallised in subtly exclusionary signifiers like *folkhem*.¹⁰⁷

Having examined the concept of enjoyment, I explore its relation with ontological security as a fantasy that promises to recapture the object-cause, thereby protecting us from the anxiety-inducing and *jouissance*-revealing encounter with the Real.

Ontological security as enjoyment-framing fantasy

Ontological security is intimately related to enjoyment since the former structures the shape of the latter, and the latter outlines the affective experience of the former. In this framework, the subject is fundamentally *split*, forming its identity by being recognised (and thus, *desired*) by the Other,

⁹⁹ See Browning, 'Brexit populism and fantasies of fulfilment'.

¹⁰⁰ Elgenius and Rydgren, 'Frames of nostalgia and belonging'.

¹⁰¹ Derek Hook, 'Screened history: Nostalgia as defensive formation', *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, 18:3 (2012), pp. 225–39.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 237.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 229.

¹⁰⁴ Glynos, 'The grip of ideology'.

¹⁰⁵ Vulović and Ejodus, 'Object-cause of desire and ontological security', p. 128.

¹⁰⁶ Burgess, 'For want or not: Lacan's conception of anxiety'.

¹⁰⁷ Elgenius and Rydgren, 'Frames of nostalgia and belonging'; Norocel, 'Populist radical right protectors of the *folkhem*'.

a process represented in the moment of entrance into the symbolic order – i.e. ‘the moment of becoming a subject proper’.¹⁰⁸ In entering the social order, the subject renounces its pre-linguistic ‘wholeness’, losing its primordial *jouissance*,¹⁰⁹ which becomes sequestered and withheld by the authoritative manifestation of the Symbolic, the big Other. This split generates lack, thus producing *desire* located in an object-cause aimed at mending this void. This split prevents the subject from attaining a fixed identity, since desire cannot be satisfied. Instead, the subject is in the process of perennial ‘becoming’, attempting to fill in the constitutive lack that produces representational fantasies of a coherent identity. Thus, ontological security is a fantasy of impossible-to-stabilise subjectivity, incessantly oscillating between desire and lack.

Ontological security fantasies are crucial political artefacts since they tell us how to desire and enjoy ideology, while enjoyment constitutes the affective experience of political belonging. However powerful, fantasies need the Symbolic Order as a bulwark against their limitations since the brittleness of the phantasmatic ‘ideal identity’ of the subject drives it ‘back’ to the Symbolic Order.¹¹⁰ This immersion into the Symbolic Order and compliance with the *jouissance*-withholding big Other frame the libidinal dimension of ontological security, marking it as a perverse fantasy of coherence and belonging relying on *perpetuating* the threatening Other. I thus categorise ontological security as both *libidinal*, since it structures desire-sustaining *jouissance*, and *perverse*,¹¹¹ as it assumes the position of the Other by withholding the promise of recapturing lost enjoyment through its punitive inversion – i.e. by effectuating lack and anxiety through ontological *insecurity*. This dynamic is illustrated by the Swedish far right’s mobilisation of dystopian anxieties embedded in present-day maladies as perpetual features of liberal modernity while promising (and withholding) the recapture of long-lost Swedish exceptionalism: togetherness, harmony, and a ‘righteous’ sense of supremacy.¹¹²

This conceptualisation underscores the importance of fantasy as the structure of enjoyment and of *jouissance* as the experience of sustaining desire past anxiety. Within this framework, ontological security and *insecurity* are paradoxically co-constituted. Topologically, it resembles a Möbius strip,¹¹³ simultaneously a dyad and a dichotomy unable to provide ultimate wholeness. Fulfilling the fantasy of ontological security would obliterate lack, and thus desire, depriving it of its stabilising ordinance and surrendering the subject to anxiety caused by the ‘lack of lack’. Therefore, ontological security sustains desire through ontological *insecurity*, which maintains lack – a painful tension experienced as *jouissance*.

Having discussed how *jouissance* is framed via ontological security to elucidate far-right normalisation, I will now ground this framework in Sweden’s case. Given Sweden’s widespread associations with ‘progressive’ values, this case offers a perplexing glimpse into far-right normalisation amid the global ‘retreat’ of liberal democracy.

The Swedish political context

Sweden’s proportional representation system allows smaller parties to enter parliament if they surpass the 4 per cent threshold.¹¹⁴ Traditionally, the Social Democrats and Moderates have organ-

¹⁰⁸ Lucas Pohl and Erik Swyngedouw, ‘Enjoying climate change: Jouissance as a political factor’, *Political Geography*, 101 (2023), 102820 (p. 3).

¹⁰⁹ Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995).

¹¹⁰ Kisić-Merino and Kinnvall, ‘Governing emotions’.

¹¹¹ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar XI of Jacques Lacan: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1998), pp. 181–2; Lacan, *Écrits*, p. 697.

¹¹² Cf. Carl-Ulrik Schierup and Aleksandra Ålund, ‘The end of Swedish exceptionalism? Citizenship, neoliberalism and the politics of exclusion’, *Race & Class*, 53:1 (2011), pp. 45–64.

¹¹³ Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*, pp. 123–4; Lacan, *The Seminar XI*, p. 156.

¹¹⁴ Annika Fredén, ‘Hur Rösterna Räknas: Om valsystemet’, in Tommy Möller (ed.), *En Författning i Tiden: Regeringsformen under 50 År* (Stockholm: Medströms Bokförlag, 2024), pp. 93–112.

ised government formation through centre-left and centre-right coalitions, respectively. However, SD's ascendance since 2010 has made them a pivotal force in Swedish politics. Alongside the Moderates, the right-wing coalition's other parties – the Liberals and Christian Democrats (KD) – have varied parliamentary support histories. The Liberals, once centrist, shifted rightwards in the early 2000s, aligning with the 2022 right-wing coalition reliant on the far right. Meanwhile, KD has consistently supported right-wing coalitions. Despite widespread disagreements, centre-left and centre-right coalitions shared a common interest in defending democracy against SD until 2022.¹¹⁵ This historical exclusion conceals a complex relationship between Swedish liberalism, social democracy, and the far right that transcends party politics.

Historical imaginaries and nation branding

The Social Democratic party's historical dominance is linked to values of progressiveness, solidarity, welfare generosity, and openness, which characterise the semblance of modern Sweden. However, its role in normalising the far right complicates this clean-cut antagonism. Decreased electoral support since the late 1990s shifted the party's economic and social stances towards the centre and centre right, including platforms like austerity and hostility towards immigration. This blurred left–right distinction allowed the far right to capitalise on former Social Democratic strongholds, like unions and the working class.¹¹⁶ Social Democratic governments have also led welfare policies and discourses based on their historical values, which have been adopted by far-right exclusionary politics, including natalism and *folkhem*.

The origins of natalist policies in Sweden under Social Democratic rule are linked to social engineering and eugenics, involving the sterilisation and isolation of Others deemed lesser or 'unproductive' for the welfare state.¹¹⁷ The early Social Democratic welfare state favoured the 'healthy and fit',¹¹⁸ framing the nation as an organism prioritising 'productive people' without a place for 'parasites'.¹¹⁹ This eugenicist framework resonates with far-right conspiracy theories increasingly normalised by liberals, including 'White genocide' and the 'Great Replacement', which require pro-natalist policies to counter 'threatening', non-Nordic ethnic diversification.¹²⁰ Furthermore, Finnsdottir and Hallgrimsdottir argue that the rise of the far right in Nordic 'welfare paradises' stems from the 'interplay of gender with ethnonationalist politics' in Social Democratic models.¹²¹ These models and policies produced a 'zero-sum social good', excluding the ethnocultural and 'unproductive' Other, framing them as a threat to the social contract.¹²² Despite reforms, this exclusionary Social Democratic welfare framework contained the seeds for the far right's rise and normalisation.

Another critical narrative linking social democracy and the far right is that of *folkhem*. Following Norocel,¹²³ Kisić-Merino and Kinnvall describe *folkhem* as 'the [Swedish] people's home',¹²⁴ an ideology of material and communitarian satisfaction for 'the people'. Its nostalgic appeal centres on

¹¹⁵Nicholas Aylott and Niklas Bolin, 'A new right: The Swedish parliamentary election of September 2022', *West European Politics*, 46:5 (2023), pp. 1049–62.

¹¹⁶Jens Rydgren and Sara van der Meiden, 'The radical right and the end of Swedish exceptionalism', *European Political Science*, 18:3 (2019), pp. 439–55.

¹¹⁷Rannveig Kaldager Hart and Cathrine Holst, 'What about fertility? The unintentional pro-natalism of a Nordic country', *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society* (2024), jxad033; Leo Lucassen, 'A brave new world: The left, social engineering, and eugenics in twentieth-century Europe', *International Review of Social History*, 55:2 (2010), pp. 265–96, available at: {<https://doi.org/10.1093/sp/jxad033>}.

¹¹⁸Lucassen, 'A brave new world', p. 272.

¹¹⁹Ibid., p. 273.

¹²⁰Ibid., p. 274.

¹²¹Maria Finnsdottir and Helga Kristin Hallgrimsdottir, 'Welfare state chauvinists? Gender, citizenship, and anti-democratic politics in the welfare state paradise', *Frontiers in Sociology*, 3 (2019), pp. 1–12 (p. 2), available at: {<https://doi.org/10.3389/fsoc.2018.00046>}.

¹²²Ibid.

¹²³Norocel, 'Populist radical right protectors of the *folkhem*'.

¹²⁴Kisić-Merino and Kinnvall, 'Governing emotions', p. 66.

the origins of the Social Democratic welfare system, signifying the material needs of ‘the people’ at the frontstage of the Swedish civilisational project. *Folkhem*, and the ‘rightful’ *belonging* to it, stems from the scientific-supremacist platform developed by early Social Democratic eugenicists and social engineers, who advocated for ‘dispassionate’, evidence-based policymaking for ‘societal betterment’.¹²⁵ In Lacanian terms, *folkhem* serves as an object-cause of desire, embodying the ‘primordial’ lost *jouissance* that right-wing and far-right actors seek to recapture.

The dark past of Swedish social democracy challenges the clear-cut contradictions between the country’s liberal and far-right traditions. This issue resonates throughout Europe, where erstwhile Social Democratic parties like Labour (UK), *Socialdemokratiet* (Denmark), and SPÖ (Austria) have adopted right-wing rhetoric and policies. Despite this, Sweden has been successfully branded with liberal values like solidarity, gender equality, and multiculturalism. This self-categorisation aligns with the concept of ‘nation branding’, which involves crafting a country’s image across political, economic, and cultural dimensions to convey a reputable semblance domestically and abroad.¹²⁶ Historically, Sweden has been marketed as a peace- and security-seeking agent of the global ‘common good’ and a ‘moral superpower’.¹²⁷ This progressive framing (self-)legitimises Sweden as a source of ontological security, relying on and reinforcing its reputation as a peace-seeking brand. Nation branding integrates emotions to specific spaces, beliefs, and values into broader ontological security frameworks fed by nostalgic narratives. Thus, nation branding shapes identities internationally, domestically, and personally, binding *self*-perceptions to presentations *towards* others.¹²⁸

Nation branding feeds into far-right normalisation by commodifying belonging and operationalising nostalgia, leading to politically mobilising anxiety if challenged.¹²⁹ Nation branding is a fantasy of categorical closure, defining and exporting the brand ‘Sweden’ through positive ‘liberal’ associations. Mandelbaum argues that this fantasy excludes the ethnocultural Other that ‘threatens’ the brand’s exceptionality: ‘[nation branding] sustains the im/possibility for full belonging through the temporal *jouissance* of exceptionality’.¹³⁰ Browning¹³¹ contends that the Nordic ‘good state’ brand remains a powerful phantasmatic ideal for the Swedish subject, which is tied to self-esteem and status, forming a ‘Nordic-binding’ discourse of ontological security. In Sweden, social democratic ‘values’ coalesce into a securitising and *jouissance*-rewarding brand, masking the historically murky relationship between liberalism, social democracy, and the far right as well as occluding the centrality of the latter’s beliefs at the core of the liberal civilisational project.

An illustration of the dark mirror to Sweden’s ‘progressive’ brand is the country’s history and normalisation of far-right discourses, experienced in the discourse of SD and, increasingly, the mainstream right wing. While this article focuses on these parties, their far-right discourses are rooted in Sweden’s history of White supremacy.¹³² This includes authoritarian groups like the Nordic Resistance Movement and the Soldiers of Odin, as well as parties like Alternative for Sweden, which share ideological and organisational histories with SD.¹³³ Examining SD and

¹²⁵Lucassen, ‘A brave new world’.

¹²⁶Wayne Stephen Coetzee, Sebastian Larsson, and Joakim Berndtsson, ‘Branding “progressive” security: The case of Sweden’, *Cooperation and Conflict*, 59:1 (2024), pp. 86–106.

¹²⁷Ibid.

¹²⁸Andrew R. Hom and Brent J. Steele, ‘Anxiety, time, and ontological security’s third-image potential’, *International Theory*, 12:2 (2020), pp. 322–36; also see R. S. Zaharna, ‘Reassessing “whose story wins.” The trajectory of identity resilience in narrative contests’, *International Journal of Communication*, 10 (2016), pp. 4407–38.

¹²⁹Christopher S. Browning, ‘Fantasy, distinction, shame: The stickiness of the Nordic “good state” brand’, in Antoine de Bengy Puyvallée and Kristian Bjørkdahl (eds), *Do-Gooders at the End of Aid: Scandinavian Humanitarianism in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), pp. 14–37.

¹³⁰Moran Mandelbaum, ‘Interpellation and the politics of belonging: A psychoanalytical framework’, *International Studies Quarterly*, 67:3 (2023), sqad055 (p. 8).

¹³¹Browning, ‘Fantasy, distinction, shame’.

¹³²Kinnvall, Catarina, and Pasko Kisić-Merino, ‘Deglobalization and the Political Psychology of White Supremacy’, *Theory & Psychology*, 33:2 (2023), pp. 227–48, available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/09593543221138535>.

¹³³Elgenius and Rydgren, ‘Frames of nostalgia and belonging’.

the mainstream right wing highlights the contradictions that situate *jouissance* in the fantasy of Swedish exceptionalism and contextualise its experience through the ‘malign’ Other.

Blåsippans väg: The whitewashing of the Sweden Democrats

SD, founded in 1988 via the merger of neo-Nazi groups,¹³⁴ have attempted to whitewash their history and rhetoric, yet their reactionary ideological tenets remain. SD’s discourse centres on ethnonationalism, prioritising the political, socio-economic, and cultural ‘inherited essence’ of ‘real Swedes’ over other cultures.¹³⁵ This ‘heritage’ embodies the tension between an idealised past, an anxiety-inducing present, and a feared future. SD claims anti-Swedish forces threaten the return to an idyllic state of ‘socio-economic wellbeing and ethnic homogeneity’.¹³⁶ The Swedish ‘inherited essence’ is crystallised, for instance, in SD’s repurposing of the Social Democratic figure of *folkhem* as an object-cause of desire binding past (in its loss), present (in its absence), and future (in potential recapture) - framing the nostalgia of *folkhem* as the enjoyment of ‘Swedishness’.

Hellström and Nilsson¹³⁷ argue that SD initially mirrored its neo-Nazi predecessors with transgressive public performances. To access the electoral milieu, SD gradually adopted more palatable, ‘professional’ representations,¹³⁸ symbolised by changing the party logo in 2006 from a torch to the blue flower *blåsippan* (hepatica). Robsham¹³⁹ notes this rebranding included the campaign song ‘*Blåsippans väg*’ (‘The Path of the Hepatica’), symbolising SD’s ‘heroic resistance’ as an underdog ‘showing the way’. Since the 2000s, SD has permeated the political mainstream, mobilising supremacist rhetoric, discourses, and performances *into* these spaces and *through* enabling centre-right actors.¹⁴⁰

The mainstream right wing: Between disavowal and enabling

SD has significantly impacted Swedish politics by embedding itself within the liberal democratic system. In 2022, it became the second-largest party and de-facto ‘king-maker’ in the Riksdag, with 20.5% of the vote.¹⁴¹ This raises two questions about the ontological (in)security of Sweden’s mainstream right wing: first, the distressing prospect (Real) of irrelevance. SD’s rise signified the need for a formal alliance to defeat the centre left, as the mainstream right wing alone lacked a simple majority for government formation. Second, the potential identity crisis of the mainstream right wing under SD’s influence. SD’s popular appeal eluded the mainstream right wing, which struggled to adapt, mimic, or capitalise on its discourse, as evidenced by their seat losses in the Riksdag.

For instance, Jupskås’s analysis of the Moderates shows that before 2022, they adopted ontological-securing strategies: (i) developing culture-focused ‘othering’ narratives mimicking far-right discourses,¹⁴² and (ii) aligning rhetorically with SD by sanitising their radical content.¹⁴³ These normalisation strategies are also evident in Jan Ericson’s (Moderate MP) tweet celebrating the

¹³⁴Elgenius and Rydgren, ‘Frames of nostalgia and belonging’.

¹³⁵Niklasson and Hølleland, ‘The Scandinavian far-right and the new politicisation of heritage’.

¹³⁶Samuel Merrill, ‘Sweden then vs. Sweden now: The memetic normalisation of far-right nostalgia’, *First Monday*, 25:6 (2020), pp.1–29, available at: {<https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v25i6.10552>}.

¹³⁷Hellström and Nilsson, “‘We are the good guys’”.

¹³⁸Widfeldt, ‘The far right in Sweden’.

¹³⁹Maria Robsahm, *Sverigedemokraterna och nazismen: En faktagenomgång* (Stockholm: Vaktel förlag, 2020).

¹⁴⁰Ekström, Krzyżanowski, and Johnson, ‘Saying “criminality”, meaning “immigration”?’; Widfeldt, ‘The far right in Sweden’.

¹⁴¹Valmyndigheten, ‘2022 Swedish election results’, *Valmyndigheten* (2023), available at: {<https://val.se/serviceankar/otherlanguages/englishengelska/electionresults/electionresults2022.4.14c1f613181ed0043d5583f.html>}.

¹⁴²Jupskås, ‘The 2022 Swedish general elections’.

¹⁴³See also Anders Ravik Jupskås, ‘Sweden: The difficult adaptation of the moderates to the silent counter-revolution’, in Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser and Tim Bale (eds), *Riding the Populist Wave: Europe’s Mainstream Right in Crisis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), pp. 246–68.

alliance with SD against the centre left¹⁴⁴ and the Moderates' shift from moral to technocratic criticism of SD.¹⁴⁵ Another example is Liberal MP Carl Hamilton opposing calls for the resignation of SD's Richard Jomshof, Chairman of the Justice Committee, after his Islamophobic tweets,¹⁴⁶ while also claiming Islamophobia tends to be more tolerated than antisemitism by his political party.¹⁴⁷

The mainstream right wing symbolically enacts disavowal, (de)legitimising hegemonic contestations within the liberal order. Simultaneously, despite its transgressive core, SD's sanitised rhetoric amid a 'national exceptionalism' crisis binds the *jouissance* of belonging to Sweden/Swedishness to perceived threats. Next, I deploy Hook's analytics of enjoyment¹⁴⁸ to elucidate the normalisation of the far-right by analysing the fantasy that organises *jouissance*, Swedish exceptionalism.

Structuring enjoyment: Swedish exceptionalism as nostalgic fantasy

Swedish exceptionalism¹⁴⁹ is a fantasy that conveys Sweden as uniquely progressive in sociocultural values, traditions, and performances. This 'brand' signifies the nation as 'exceptional' and deserving of admiration. It encompasses various ontological dimensions, values, and affects, such as foreign policy, environmentalism, gender equality, neutrality, and egalitarianism. These elements oscillate between inclusionary (e.g. of refugees) and exclusionary stances (e.g. of foreign criticism/interventionism). This articulation materialises in ontological-securitising discourses of nostalgia-infused belonging like *folkhem*. Contemporary examples include a generous welfare state, egalitarian and multicultural policymaking,¹⁵⁰ safeguarding freedom and self-determination,¹⁵¹ and the mainstreaming of feminist discourses.¹⁵²

Sweden's progressive brand has long been recognised globally as a liberal exemplar of freedom, tolerance, and solidarity. Simultaneously, its polity has incubated and tolerated anathematic far-right discourses growing *alongside* rather than despite liberalism and social democracy.¹⁵³ The Swedish polity's irresolute state can be understood as one of ontological *insecurity*, where competing discourses and nostalgic recalibrations destabilise the ruling social order. Despite these differences, Swedish exceptionalism entails the radical exclusion of both antagonistic politics and the Other's threatening enjoyment.¹⁵⁴ Paradoxically, this 'sanitising' fantasy weakens the ideological hold of 'mainstream' political discourses over key signifiers like freedom, order, and solidarity.

The resulting decentring of Swedish identity manifests in its 'exemplary' reputation as democratic, non-interventionist, pro-welfare, and 'caring' – a self-image promoted by its own government.¹⁵⁵ Sweden is seen as a moral bastion in Europe for social-democratic and liberal

¹⁴⁴Jan Ericson [@Ericson_ubbhult] (2022b), see online appendix.

¹⁴⁵Jupskås, 'The 2022 Swedish general elections'.

¹⁴⁶Matilda Nyberg, 'Experten befarar ökad polarisering – "skadan är redan skedd"', *SVT Nyheter* (17 August 2023), available at: {<https://www.svt.se/nyheter/inrikes/muslimska-reaktioner-efter-carl-b-hamiltons-uttalande>}.

¹⁴⁷Julia Wide and Vilma Gudmundsson, 'Hamilton (L) ber om ursäkt efter kritiserat uttalande', *SVT Nyheter* (16 August 2023), available at: {<https://www.svt.se/nyheter/inrikes/kritiken-efter-hamiltons-uttalande>}.

¹⁴⁸Hook, 'What is "enjoyment as a political factor"?'.

¹⁴⁹Schierup and Ålund, 'The end of Swedish exceptionalism?'

¹⁵⁰Henrik Emilsson, 'Continuity or change? The refugee crisis and the end of Swedish exceptionalism', *Malmö Institute for Studies of Migration, Diversity and Welfare (MIM)*, MIM Working Papers Series, 18 (2018), p. 3.

¹⁵¹Katarina Giritli Nygren and Anna Olofsson, 'Swedish exceptionalism, herd immunity and the welfare state: A media analysis of struggles over the nature and legitimacy of the COVID-19 pandemic strategy in Sweden', *Current Sociology*, 69:4 (2021), pp. 529–46.

¹⁵²Mikela Lundahl Hero, 'Public intimacy and "white feminism": On the vain trust in Scandinavian equality', in Erika Alm, Linda Berg, Mikaela Lundahl Hero, et al. (eds), *Pluralistic Struggles in Gender, Sexuality and Coloniality: Challenging Swedish Exceptionalism* (Cham: Springer, 2021), pp. 19–47.

¹⁵³Elgenius and Rydgren, 'Frames of nostalgia and belonging'.

¹⁵⁴Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political* (London: Routledge, 2005).

¹⁵⁵Regeringen och Regeringskansliet, 'Swedish development assistance is effective and generous', *Regeringskansliet* (Regeringen och Regeringskansliet, 2023), available at: {<https://www.government.se/government-policy/multilateral-cooperation/swedish-development-assistance-is-effective-and-generous/>}.

values, a ‘shining’ success story of the EU liberal model.¹⁵⁶ This ‘liberal exemplar’ dimension of Swedish identity coexists with its far-right past and present, representing a ‘wholesome’, ethnically homogeneous Swedish past supported and desired by far-right advocates abroad.¹⁵⁷

Swedish exceptionalism is a future-oriented nostalgic (yet hollow) fantasy acting as a normalisation crucible buttressed by far-right advancement and mainstream right-wing retreat and submission. Rumelili argues that domestic-level surges in far-right support in Europe are a nostalgic defence against a prolonged state of ontological insecurity created by clashes between ‘state-level memory politics [i.e., official narratives] and individual experiences about the past.’¹⁵⁸ Moreover, far-right discourses are often and surreptitiously presented as ‘anti-nostalgic’ in their emphasis on the *future* of the nation, effectively occluding the repackaging of idyllic pasts as futuristic promises of wholeness.¹⁵⁹ Transposed to Sweden, this pits an increasingly delegitimised Symbolic authority (mainstream parties) against the oft-occluded nostalgia framed by ‘authentic’ SD discourses promising ontological security.

Homolar and Scholz frame nostalgia as a dyad defending against ontological insecurity, requiring both the joy of remembering the ‘exceptional past’ and the sadness of its *loss*.¹⁶⁰ Swedish exceptionalism’s hollowness allows for a nostalgic reclamation via far-right discursive tinkering of ‘time’ and ‘belonging’. ‘Reclaiming’ the past involves reassembling its comforting fragments into a promise of return, co-constituted with narratives of aspirational futures and an ontologically securitising present. Thus, Swedish exceptionalism is a nostalgic national branding exercise that obscures the intricate relation between liberalism and the far right, and the formation of identities around this fantasy of ‘clean-cut’ antagonism. The normalisation of the far-right is a fissure in this ontological security fantasy, revealing its political implications in moments of transgressive enjoyment. Paradoxically, Swedish exceptionalism is a fantasy that forces an encounter with the *desire* for ontological security and, thus, with the anxiety of its prospective unfulfilment, which is experienced as the *jouissance* of ‘reclamation’.

Swedish exceptionalism has been gradually dislocated by external (e.g. financial, health, and migratory ‘crises’) and internal (e.g. far-right) discourses, revealing two co-constituted issues. First, this dislocation exposes the limitations of the liberal iteration of this fantasy as a conveyor of ontological security. This is evident in the Swedish government’s defensiveness in adapting Covid-19 strategies according to EU recommendations¹⁶¹ and in the expansion of White feminism as a policy-backed benchmark for ‘equality’ and ‘progressiveness’ which occludes non-White, working-class women’s struggles.¹⁶² Second, Swedish exceptionalism is an empty signifier, a battleground for reactionary discourses vying for its symbolic recalibration to cope with the failure of the modern liberal order. The fantasy of Swedish exceptionalism is thus reformulated by the dislocating retreat of the liberal project met by the far-right’s stabilising ‘reclamation’. This ontological (in)security condition triggers societal anxiety, experienced as the enjoyment of closing down categories of belonging against the Other who threatens ‘our’ exceptionality.

The threat of/to enjoyment in Twitter/X: Lessons from Sweden

Exploring how the rules of enjoyment are formed and operate in the symbolic site – the fantasy of Swedish exceptionalism – unfolds the two latter analytical dimensions of Hook’s methodology.¹⁶³

¹⁵⁶Schierup and Ålund, ‘The end of Swedish exceptionalism?’

¹⁵⁷Åkerlund, Mathilda, ‘The Sweden Paradox: US Far-Right Fantasies of a Dystopian Utopia’, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 49:19 (2023), pp. 4789–4808, available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2023.2208293>.

¹⁵⁸Rumelili, ‘Breaking with Europe’s pasts’, p. 291.

¹⁵⁹Francesca Melhuish, ‘Euroscepticism, anti-nostalgic nostalgia and the past perfect post-Brexit future’, *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, 60:6 (2022), pp. 1758–76.

¹⁶⁰Homolar and Scholz, ‘The power of Trump-speak’.

¹⁶¹Sandra Simonsen, ‘Swedish exceptionalism and the Sars-CoV2 pandemic crisis: Representations of crisis and national identity in the public sphere’, *Risk, Hazards & Crisis in Public Policy*, 13:3 (2022), pp. 277–95.

¹⁶²Lundahl Hero, ‘Public intimacy and “white feminism”’.

¹⁶³Hook, ‘What is “enjoyment as a political factor”?’

the threatening modes of enjoyment of Others and the modes of enjoyment that the mainstream right wing perceive as imperilled. The nostalgic fantasy of Swedish exceptionalism conditions how these modes of *jouissance* are experienced in the discourses of the mainstream right wing, in what I label the ‘New Swedish Right’. The analysis of these modes via tweets showcases how the libidinal dimension of the discourses of the New Swedish Right are formed in the ‘moment of victory’ and how they intervene in the normalisation of the far right.

The selected tweet sample was derived from analysing every original tweet and reply from five highly followed accounts of prominent politicians from the ‘mainstream’ coalition members (Liberals, Moderates, and Christian Democrats) and four from SD between 10 and 16 September 2022 (see online appendix).¹⁶⁴ I analytically define this period as the ‘moment of victory’.¹⁶⁵ Using Hook’s framework, I manually analysed the *jouissance*-revealing interplay of emotions in the tweet sample embedded in symbolic ‘contradictions’, including sadism, gloating, elation, and self-righteousness. I focused on tweets from the ‘mainstream’ coalition members that best illustrated enjoyment’s interplay with ontological security and the process of far-right normalisation. In short, the manifestations of *jouissance* in the illustrative tweet sample were analysed according to the background on far-right normalisation and ontological security, and deriving from the phantasmatic coordinate of Swedish exceptionalism.

Analysing these modes requires understanding how the ‘defence’ of *jouissance* against the threatening Other is enjoyed by the right-wing subject. The features and conveyance of the threats to *jouissance* condition the enjoyment of its ‘defence’, shaping the subject’s identity. This ‘defence’ is complex, as the fantasy of Swedish exceptionalism is contested by discourses vying to claim ‘*who*’ constitutes a threat, ‘*what*’ is the imperilled object-cause of desire, and *how* enjoyment can be experienced and sequestered. These fluctuating dimensions of threat reveal how the far right becomes *de*-securitised and ‘naturalised’ into the liberal Symbolic Order at the cost of the latter’s imperilment. The identity-reforming enjoyment experienced by mainstream right-wing subjects showcases the perverse affective structure sustaining the possibility of far-right normalisation. Thus, the experience of and contestation to ‘threat’ in contexts like the ‘moment of victory’ reveal how far-right politics become normalised alongside the painful negotiation between the mainstream right wing’s *identity* and *status*.

The *jouissance*-revealing moment of victory constitutes an enlightening analytical lens to explore the mainstream right wing’s role in normalising the far-right. This *moment* transcends a single instance like ‘election day’. It constitutes a broader and fluid continuum pulling together narratives and emotions symbolically *anchored* in the instance that embodies the potential re-enactment of ‘ownership’ over *jouissance* – i.e. nostalgia-satisfying ontological security. ‘Victory’ encapsulates the experience of enjoyment of the right-wing coalition, who broadly targeted the centre-left ‘establishment’, excluding criticism against right-wing liberals (which SD nominally targets) and the far right (whose traits the mainstream right wing denies or ignores), highlighting the self-contradiction where *jouissance* can be analysed.

The threatening modes of enjoyment of (ethnocultural) Others

The context of the election frames the threat of the Other’s *jouissance* in two co-constituted dimensions: internally, it signifies the political ‘establishment’ – i.e. the centre-left bloc – and its media allies as possessors of a *jouissance* that threatens the nation or exceptionality of Swedishness. Externally, this threatening enjoyment is situated in the ‘thieves’ (e.g. immigrants, feminists, the EU), the *un*-Swedish, ethnocultural Other endorsed by the political establishment.

¹⁶⁴One exception was influencer/podcaster Omar Makram [@OmarMakramSE], due to a specific interaction with Liberal MP, Robert Hannah, on 12 September 2022.

¹⁶⁵One exception was a tweet by Jan Ericson [@Ericson_ubbhult] on 4 July 2022 (2022b), which provided broader analytical context to the camaraderie between Moderates and SD. See online appendix.

A narrative trifold signifying this threatening mode of enjoyment is that of (un)freedom, (dis)unity, and (un)safety. In her elated celebration of the preliminary results, KD's leader, Ebba Busch,¹⁶⁶ pointed to how, thanks to the 'Swedish people', *everyone* will (now) be able to be 'safe and free' to shape their lives in a (new) Sweden that the right-wing bloc will fight for. This attempt at capturing the floating signifier of Swedish exceptionalism decries an 'establishment' performance of Swedishness marked by *unfreedom* and *unsafety*, a social-liberal concoction in which *jouissance* manifests as punitive: restricting/controlling 'liberties' and availing policies, discourses, and *peoples* that – in the name of the enjoyment of multiculturalism – harm 'the Swedish'. The contradictory categorisation of the 'free Swedish people' reveals the *jouissance* manifested in Busch's elation – an enjoyed signifier of an illusory sense of cohesive Swedishness. KD's devolvement into far-right thinking is inextricably linked to the victory achieved with SD, whose nativist discourse negates universal belongingness, threatening the freedom and safety of subjects suspect of un-Swedishness and the guarantors of those belief systems (i.e. the centre left). Thus, while superficially innocuous, KD's 'safety for all' and 'freedom for all' discourses perversely reaffirm the exclusionary imperatives of SD in situating the *Other* as the threat signifying belongingness to the community of 'all Swedes'.

This 'threat' towards the subject's *freedom* can also be addressed in a tweet by Liberal parliamentarian Romina Pourmokhtari¹⁶⁷ in the aftermath of victory, in which she signifies her centre-left political rivals as manipulative and uncivil due to the 'threatening' ways in which they convey their agendas. Here, the establishment's threatening mode of *jouissance* resides in the interplay between dominance, incivility, and manipulateness as obstacles to a fulfilling polity. The enjoyment in gloated self-righteousness paradoxically emphasises post-political 'civility', which contradicts Pourmokhtari's silent treatment of her party's alliance with SD. Here, 'proper' Swedish *forms* signify a freedom that has been 'lost' to the centre-left establishment while simultaneously occluding the nativist, anti-democratic, and racist (i.e. uncivil) content of SD. This contradiction reveals the traumatic Real of achieving status through submitting to SD's discourse – i.e. betraying a manifest identity as liberals – which is masked by self-righteous rhetoric of 'civility'.

Another narrative signifying the threatening enjoyment of ethnocultural others is that of cultural replacement. In the context of victory, this threatening *jouissance* was located in the 'permissiveness' of the centre-left government and the electoral advancement of the Islamic party *Nyans* ('Nuance'). On the eve of the results, the Liberal Party MP, Robert Hannah,¹⁶⁸ sent a tweet embellished with heart-eyed emojis: '*I love bacon!*'. This was a reply to an Islamophobic tweet by the podcaster/influencer Omar Makram, who mocked *Nyans* by 'announcing' that he would convert back to Islam and stop burning the Quran, but he 'would not give up bacon'¹⁶⁹. Hannah's derisory, sadistic¹⁷⁰ support of Makram's mockery towards the belonging of ethnocultural Others highlights an anxiety manifested as the ontological (in)security of a changing Swedish social, ethnocultural, and political landscape. The contradiction is that of Hannah's purported sacrosanct belief in tolerance and multiculturalism, which is salient in his active support for LGBTQ+ causes. While indirectly gloating at Islam by piling on *Nyans* and 'chumming' with Makram, he dismisses the reformed identity of the political structure to which he (now) belongs – that of SD –; one that is actively pro-'traditional families', i.e. anti-LGBTQ+.¹⁷¹ In this context, Hannah is elated in his portrayal of Liberals as 'defenders' of LGBTQ+ rights, dismissing criticisms pointed at their alliance

¹⁶⁶ Ebba Busch [@BuschEbba] (2022), see online appendix.

¹⁶⁷ Romina Pourmokhtari [@RPourmokhtari] (2022), see online appendix.

¹⁶⁸ Robert Hannah [@RobertHannah85] (2022a), see online appendix.

¹⁶⁹ Omar Makram [@OmarMakramSE] (2022), see online appendix.

¹⁷⁰ *Sadism* is the pursuit and unveiling of the *Other's anxiety*, rather than suffering. It is aimed at 'elicit[ing] from the other an expression of their Real desire as subjects' and thus, of the lack that 'render[s] the other visible in [their] shameful impotence'. Slavoj Žižek, 'Kant with (or against) Sade', in Elizabeth Wright and Edmond Wright (eds), *The Žižek Reader* (Oxford: Wiley, 1999), pp. 283–301 (p. 294); in Matthew Sharpe, 'Even better than the real thing: Sadism and real(ity) t.v.', *Scan: Journal of Media Arts Culture*, 4:3 (2007), pp. 1–9 (p. 4).

¹⁷¹ See Anders Widfeldt, 'The radical right in the Nordic countries', in Jens Rydgren (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Radical Right* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 545–64.

with SD while gloating against these: ‘Liberals proudly wave the flag at our election vigil regardless of how much the left [...] are upset about it!’¹⁷²

The bonds between the Moderates and SD also emerge when addressing the threatening mode of *jouissance* of ‘replacing the Swedes.’ Moderate parliamentarian Jan Ericson¹⁷³ underscored the Social Democrats’ paradoxical downfall resulting from their ‘unreasonable migration policy’, which strengthened *Nyans* and weakened the governing party. This schadenfreude-infused comment – complemented by a condescending ‘they should reflect on this’ – touches on the ‘permissiveness’, unsafety, and unfreedom brought by the Social Democrats, who enabled *Nyans* to enjoy at the expense of Sweden, thus imperilling their own existence and the fulfilment of the ‘real’ Swedish polity.

The narratives of this mode of *jouissance* in the process of far-right normalisation highlight the tension residing in the discursive (re)appropriation of the fantasy of Swedish exceptionalism. The threatening modes of enjoyment of cultural Others embody the two-pronged process of contestation-appropriation, in which the ‘decayed’ centre-left iteration of Swedishness necessitates replacement, an ontological security ‘imperative’ that legitimises the exclusionary shape of right-wing enjoyment. Paradoxically, this ‘decayed’ order enables and legitimises the mainstream right wing’s sanitisation of the far right and its enjoyment. SD’s advancement is framed as an inevitable, normalised, or even necessary by-product of the civilisational betrayal brought forth by the interplay between the centre-left establishment and the ethnocultural Other.

The imperilled modes of enjoyment of the new Swedish right

The threatening modes of enjoyment of cultural Others are co-constituted with the *jouissance* deemed to be imperilled, ‘about to be stolen’ – i.e. the anxiety of replacement requires a phantasmatic object-cause to be *replaced* (i.e. Swedishness). The imperilled modes of enjoyment of the new Swedish right are signified by their theft by the Other, which transcends a specific moment in history or one ‘people’. This theft ontologically (in)securitises the fantasy where primordial enjoyment ‘awaits us’.

Two interwoven narratives of belonging highlight the dimensional interplay of enjoyment, its imperilment by cultural Others, and its relation to the normalisation of the far right: (i) ‘speaking truth to power’ and (ii) patriotism. The emotion and notion of struggle through righteous ‘stubbornness’ and ‘speaking truth to power’ as imperilled enjoyment is manifested in the role that discourses that vie for the ‘political centre’ – specifically, that of the Centre Party (*Centerpartiet*) – play in the context of victory. The Liberal party’s MP Johan Pehrson posted a tweet replying to Centerpartiet MP Ulrika Liljeberg, which solely contains a ‘selfie’ of Pehrson during a gym session, framed by a phrase in the mirror: ‘I am a stubborn bastard.’¹⁷⁴ Liljeberg’s tweet – conveying her busy work schedule and her ‘nervous’ attention to the election results – is contrasted by Pehrson’s defiance and masculinist bravado. Pehrson’s ‘macho’ contrast with the more concerned or cautious approach of Liljeberg signifies the Liberal’s relentlessness and ‘bravery’ in the elections as the imperilled form of *jouissance* that a ‘weak’ and ‘feminine’ centre-left ‘enjoying-Other’ disavows.

This gender-based virtue signalling of a ‘real’ way of ‘winning in politics’¹⁷⁵ can also be appreciated in Hanif Bali’s (former Moderate MP) tweet concerning Centerpartiet’s leader Annie Lööf’s dealing with the results.¹⁷⁶ Bali’s tweet – ‘When is Annie’s YouTube reaction video to her latest press clips coming out?’ (author’s translation) – is flanked by two tabloid frontpages showing Lööf crying in front of her supporters and captioned as ‘she cannot handle the loss’ and ‘we need a new

¹⁷²Robert Hannah [@RobertHannah85] (2022b), author’s translation. See online appendix.

¹⁷³Jan Ericson [@Ericson_ubbhult] (2022a), see online appendix.

¹⁷⁴Johan Pehrson [@JohanPehrson] (2022), author’s translation. See online appendix.

¹⁷⁵Cf. Uygur Baspehlivan, ‘Cucktales: Race, sex, and enjoyment in the reactionary memescape’, *International Political Sociology*, 18:3 (2024), olae026.

¹⁷⁶Hanif Bali [@hanifbali] (2022), see online appendix.

party leader'. Bali's self-righteous framing not only sadistically gloats and mocks Lööf's electoral loss, public display of emotion, and 'banal' practices (i.e. using YouTube to reach her supporters) but also signifies the legitimisation of a wider chastising of a feminine, politically correct practice of politics in the political 'centre'. This chastising signifies the dimension of imperilled enjoyment corresponding to the exceptionalism of Sweden – i.e. of waging politics like war, face to face, regardless of civility. While, superficially, Bali's tension with Centerpartiet concerns their 'betrayal' (of allying with the centre left), this imperilled enjoyment – the 'macho bravado' – frames a masculinist, de-feminising political ethics, revealing the contradiction from which it emerges. This masculinist political performativity is rather characteristic of far-right discourses and contradicts the Liberals' and Moderates' principles of tolerance, liberal openness to debates, and gender-based egalitarianism. In advancing performative cruelty to defend an imperilled mode of enjoyment, the discourses of Liberals and Moderates normalise the far right.

The second narrative that embeds the imperilment of *jouissance* is that of the 'defence of the nation' or patriotism as signifiers of a sense of coherent self – i.e. the imperilled signifiers that the 'real Swedes' enjoy identifying with. On the eve of victory, MEP Sara Skyttedal (former KD) pointed towards the 'betrayal' of the nation perpetrated by the Social Democrats in their long-standing allowance (read: submission) to the EU concerning the regulation of labour laws around minimum wages – i.e. obstacles for the fulfilment of KD's vision of Sweden in the international order.¹⁷⁷ In the context of the defeat of the Social Democrats, Skyttedal signified the 'dimensions' of the imperilled enjoyment of patriotism in 'betrayal' and 'pride'. Her *schadenfreude* and gloating are framed by the Social Democrats' conveyance as submissive to the increasingly 'social(ist) EU' – both entities which Skyttedal frames as un-patriotic, un-Swedish, un-democratic, and 'losers'. Skyttedal's Twitter account's banner in 2023 – 'MAKE EU LAGOM AGAIN' – exposed the fantasy of structuring international power based on KD's interpretation of *lagom* (i.e. wise and moderate) Swedish exceptionalism. Antagonising and materialising the 'un-Swedish' in the left-wing bloc and the EU represent a contradiction of KD's explicit aims towards promoting a pluralist democracy and the strengthening of European solidarity. Skyttedal's performance and her *jouissance*-infused gloating contribute to the normalisation of the far right by feeding into a nostalgic fantasy of Sweden increasingly shaped by SD. In it, KD has become mimetic and performative of SD's vision towards the phantasmatic production of 'their' exclusionary 'new Swedish right' Symbolic Order.

Discussion: Threat, (dis)avowal, and normalisation in 'victory'

Mainstream right-wing subjects reflect the anxiety-inducing tension between identity and status brought forth by *jouissance*. By pandering to and enabling the far right, they trade their identity (e.g. as liberals, pluralists) to sustain their status as relevant, *desired* by the Other. Their rhetoric increasingly mirrors the far right, conveying threats to the social order and facilitating the acceptability of far-right discourses by *de*-securitising them. Yet this trade-off and its accompanying *jouissance* expose the constitutive lack of the mainstream right-wing subject. The harrowing 'exposure' to the Real of an incoherent identity threatens their *jouissance*-rewarding status as authentic political interlocutors, especially during crises. In these contexts, mainstream right-wing actors can only guarantee ontological security by betraying their identity, paradoxically highlighting their inadequacy as legitimate emotional governors. Thus, their enabling of the far right manifests not only in rhetorical mimicry but also in their failure to contest the signifiers that structure social order. This sublimation of anxious inadequacy is evident in how they negotiate, perform, and enjoy 'new' identities (e.g. 'hard-line', 'anti-woke') by contesting Swedishness against the 'progressive Other'.

Analysing the tweets in the 'moment of victory' provides insights into the increasingly frictionless identity negotiations between the mainstream right wing and the 'legitimising' status

¹⁷⁷Sara Skyttedal [@skyttedal] (2022), see online appendix.

bestowed by SD's fantasies. This tension centred on the anxiety and desire over Swedishness and its exceptionalism, co-signifying the *jouissance*-threatening Other. Dissatisfaction with the ruling centre-left stems from historical defeats, socio-economic stagnation, and the perceived collapse of exceptionalism. In the mainstream right-wing fantasy of Sweden's downfall and salvation, these causes are discursively and emotionally co-constituted with far-right anxieties. Victory against the 'betraying' *Other* oscillates between ontological security and *insecurity*, offering momentary *jouissance*-satisfying reprieve yet revealing the Real of the mainstream right wing's fickle identity.

The interplay between the three analysed coordinates of enjoyment underscores how the sublimation of far-right discourses, performances, and rhetoric into identity-(re)forming frameworks accelerates far-right normalisation in Sweden. Rather than disavowal, the analysed tweets denote an *absence* of SD, *denial* of their far-right features, and/or the *promise* of their containment. The status-seeking camaraderie between far-right and liberal politicians also highlights the norm-forming, socio-symbolic dimension of enjoyment beyond its transgressive nature – a collective process of emotional governance reframing 'normality'. 'Make Sweden Great Again!',¹⁷⁸ 'Make EU lagom again!', 'Helg Seger!', 'I love bacon!', 'I am a stubborn bastard': the *jouissance* found in the 'moment of victory' both avails and unveils the Potemkin abstraction of the far right, signifying its 'necessary' incorporation into the 'mainstream' to confront the ontologically securitising threat of replacing Sweden, Swedishness, and its exceptionalism. The ontological securitisation of the 'New Swedish Right' mirrors the dislocation of Swedish exceptionalism, evidenced in oscillating inclusionary and exclusionary modes of enjoyment mirroring the far right. Its normalisation follows this *jouissance*-infused tension, revealing the features of far-right entrenchment within the liberal order.

Analysing enjoyment reveals an intriguing dimension of far-right normalisation, complexifying the fluid 'trade-off' between mainstream right-wing identity and status. The mainstream right wing's emotions directed *against* the centre-left and *towards* the far-right function as an affective 'buffer'. This conceals the ethnocultural Other as their true target and source of *jouissance*, marking their identity shift as submissive to the far right while painfully evidencing their symbolic commitment to the liberal order by 'acceptably' targeting the centre left. The transgressive, 'un-buffered' *jouissance* against the ethnocultural Other is 'relegated' *to* and partially experienced *through* the far right. SD acts both as the anchor of legitimacy for lost enjoyment and as the 'disavowed' antagonist, allowing the mainstream right wing to concoct an illusory, temporarily satisfying identity against it. The phantasmatic 'centre-left buffer' signifies belonging to the liberal order, defending against the *jouissance* of sustaining a desire for recognition or status that relies on pursuing identity-undermining, exclusionary 'exceptionalism'.

The co-constituted process of normalising the far right and (dis)avowing its enjoyment showcases the tense reconfiguration of mainstream right-wing identity and its constitutive fantasies. In this coping process, the mainstream right-wing subject submits to the far right's authority while performatively disavowing it, 'jousting' for the object-cause of desire, 'Swedishness'. This performative antagonism becomes 'consumed' and legitimised as a coherent mainstream right-wing identity and is manifest in the 'moment of victory', where the promise of *jouissance* unravels. The emotions embodying enjoyment obscure its cause – political irrelevance – and reveal its transgressive repurposing in performative cruelty against Others, normalising the occlusion of the brutalities of power, injustice, and inequality in liberal democracies. For the 'New Swedish Right', *Blåsippans väg* has become the *right way*.

Supplementary material. The supplementary material for this article can be found at <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210524000895>.

¹⁷⁸Björn Söder (SD) [@bjornsoder] (2022), see online appendix.

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Pasko Kisić-Merino is a PhD researcher at the Department of Political Science, Karlstad University, Sweden. He holds degrees in Political Science and Global Studies, and is the former editorial manager for the journal *Political Psychology*. His previous work includes research on the psycho-political features of far-right movements and actors, as well as on social media massification and radicalisation processes. His current research uses a Lacanian ontological security approach to address the relationship between far-right normalisation, identity formation, the (re)shaping of the modern (neo)liberal order, social media technologies, and the consequences of the entertainment culture in contemporary politics. He has previously published (with Catarina Kinnvall), 'Deglobalization and the political psychology of white supremacy', in *Theory & Psychology* (2023), and 'Governing emotions: Hybrid media, ontological insecurity, and the normalisation of far-right fantasies,' in *Alternatives* (2023).