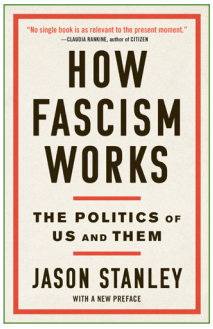
White supremacists are in the streets:

What are we to do?



A review of *How fascism works: The politics of us and them* by Jason Stanley in the aftermath of the "March for Australia"

Reviewed by David Denborough

David Denborough (dd) works at Dulwich Centre as a narrative practitioner with individuals, groups and communities who have experienced hardships, and also coordinates the Master of Narrative Therapy and Community Work program at The University of Melbourne.
daviddenborough@dulwichcentre.com.au

ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3041-3135

Abstract

In the aftermath of the far-right "March for Australia", David Denborough reviews Jason Stanley's (2020) book *How Fascism Works: The politics of us and them*. Penguin. 256pp. ISBN 9780525511854

Key words: fascism; far-right; racism; protest; Jason Stanley; review; narrative therapy; narrative practice

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Author pronouns: All pronouns welcome

31 August 2025: Today, across Australia, marches have taken place organised by groups associated with the far right. They marched against immigration and to "stand up to people who hate our country". No foreign flags were allowed but "families were welcome with children". In Melbourne, the most well-known Australian Nazi claimed "his men" had led the march. Some of them, dressed in black, used Australian flag poles to attack a security guard who was protecting a Jewish man. And after the march, the same men viciously bashed Aboriginal women and men at Camp Sovereignty.[1] Here in Adelaide, there was not similar violence, but it was still profoundly disturbing. This was a moment in time when far-right ideology sought to pass itself off as mainstream. We have seen what this can cause in the USA and elsewhere. Now the phenomenon is well and truly here in the city I call home.

White supremacist groups are growing in number in many places, and apparently the leading Australian Nazis are seen as role models to fascists in other countries.[2] My guess is this is in part because of the way these local Nazi groups are successfully reaching out and recruiting people who are struggling, particularly young white men.[3] Nazi organisers empathise with their struggles and provide an explanation for their experiences of hardship. These racist explanations link personal despair to a wider cause: "The reason for the cost-of-living crisis and the housing crisis is immigration". Once personal struggle is linked to these explanations, they provide an avenue for people to join with others. They provide a place for them to train. They create community (a community joined against others). They create forums for action to try to bring about what they see as a preferred future, not only for themselves but for "their people". This provides a sense of "us", a sense of purpose, and a sense of pride.

As I stand watching thousands of Australian flags being held aloft in Rundle Park and then marching down North Terrace, I can sense how people who are participating are feeling empowered by this event. Joyful even. At the same time as I'm holding back tears, it's clear that today is a turning point, and that I need to join with others and take action. There are so many different forms of action that may be required of us in coming months and years, and some of these are eloquently encapsulated by historian Timothy Snyder in his small (2025) book *On Tyranny: Twenty lessons from the twentieth century*. But in this piece, I want to explore possibilities for action for counsellors and community workers more specifically.

Unlike far-right groups, counsellors and community workers do not "recruit" people who are struggling. As the Just Therapy Team of Aotearoa described, we are instead the "receivers of stories of social suffering" (Waldegrave et al., 2003). The Just Therapy Team believes this role is a precious one. In fact, they would say it is "sacred". I associate with secular traditions, but I totally agree that receiving stories of social suffering is an honourable role that also brings considerable responsibilities.

As the far right are marching in our streets, are there additional responsibilities for those of us who are receivers of stories of social suffering? Perhaps there are responsibilities for us to learn from those who are studying far-right groups and those who have studied fascism. Here in Australia, I find the work of Kaz Ross extremely helpful (see Ahmad & Ross, 2025; Kelly, 2025; Ross, 2020). And I have also turned to the book *How Fascism Works: The politics of us and them*. It's by Jason Stanley who is a professor of philosophy and whose Jewish parents lived through the horrors of antisemitism in Western and Eastern Europe. Perhaps we can begin to share resources that we are finding helpful in our respective contexts.

Gender

In his first chapter, Jason Stanley described how a nostalgia for patriarchy is a central organising principle of fascism, and how certain ideals for gender roles define and motivate this political movement. I guess this shouldn't come as a surprise. The current iteration of a "crisis in masculinity", which evokes the need for a return to "traditional masculinity", is in many ways so similar to what was occurring here in the early 1990s. The first *Comment* newssheet published by Dulwich Centre in 1994 was in response to a book from the anti-feminist men's rights movement of the time, *The Myth of Male Power* (Farrell, 1993). In today's march there is a new twist in relation to how patriarchal understandings of gender are fuelling fascism. Some men are wearing t-shirts threatening violence against trans folks. They are, I think, claiming to defend "womanhood". Of course, queer folk are always preferred targets of Nazis.

Racism

While gender is one of the driving organising principles of this march, it's not the main one. This event is clearly mostly about race. There are even signs proclaiming

"White unity at every opportunity". Jason Stanley explained how fascist ideology draws on history in particular ways to create a false vision of a glorious past: "The fascist mythic past exists to aid in *changing the present"* (2020, p. 12). As I watch Australian flags held aloft, it's vividly apparent that racist ideology has plenty of material to work with on this land. Racism justified and enabled genocidal violence against the First Peoples of this land and was the reason why one of the very first acts of the Australian Parliament was the *Immigration Restriction Act 1901* (which came to be known as the White Australia Policy).

Racism has at times been an overwhelming force in this land. Recognition of this makes the achievement of Indigenous resurgence here in Tarntanya (Adelaide) and across the continent all the more remarkable. On the same lands that the march took place, Dr Alitya Rigney described how:

> For the first time since the 19th Century, children in Adelaide are learning Kaurna from birth. Our language, the language of this land, is now well and truly awake.[4]

Acknowledging the pervasive power of colonial racism also backlights the real achievements and joys of multicultural Australia.

This is not the first time this land has had to deal with resurgences of racism. In 1997, racism was surging against Aboriginal people and migrants, and Pauline Hanson (an Australian politician) was its main spokesperson. At that time, as we were seeking ways to talk about the issues and gather together different actions that people were taking, we produced another *Comment* titled "Racism: How can white Australians respond?" (Dulwich Centre, 1997). It feels a bit similar now. Perhaps we can share any initiatives we know of in our respective contexts that are responding to rising racism.[5]

Disparity in wealth and making connections

It also seems relevant to turn our attention to the social conditions that are contributing to the rise of the far right, in particular the growing disparity between rich and poor. Walking through any Australian city these days, it is obvious that the number of folks sleeping rough has increased dramatically, in particular the number of women sleeping on the streets (Pawson et al., 2024). What is much less obvious is that the wealthy are getting so much richer.[6] How can we bring attention to this growing disparity and its consequences in the lives of the people we meet with?

As I mentioned earlier, far-right groups acknowledge suffering – make collective meaning out of it – and use this to recruit people to division and racism. They offer (racist) explanations of despair or marginalisation and funnel it into opposition to others and into hatred. They then enable people to join with others and take action about what they say are the causes of their misery.

As counsellors and people working in social service realms, how are we to respond to social suffering?

- Can we create contexts for those who come to us with stories of suffering to find acknowledgment and explanations that are factual and not based on racism, white supremacy or bigotry?
- Can we create contexts for people to join with others to play some part in redressing and changing the broader factors that are contributing to their suffering?
- Can we create contexts for people to make meaningful contributions to the lives of others – contributions in which they can take pride?

These are some of the principles of collective narrative practice, and I would treasure the chance to collaborate with others who are trying to put them into action at this time of growing inequity in our country.

History

In learning from Jason Stanley about the ways that the far right promulgates divisive mythic versions of the past, this present moment is also challenging me to consider more carefully how I engage with and represent the past. I think of First Nations folks who are honestly grappling with the truth of our histories – including truths within our own family histories – and offering non-Indigenous folks ways forward. I was recently moved by a podcast series entitled *The Descendants* (Allam, 2025; Hannan et al., 2025). Within it, Naaguja Elder Theona Councillor said: "We are not a nation of weaklings. We can handle the truth" (in Allam et al., 2025). I also think of Aunty Barbara Wingard's *Walking History Journey.*[7] Here, narrative practices are used to share double-storied accounts of history in ways that welcome everyone into these stories no matter who you are.

Throughout Aunty Barb's walk, there seems an equal dedication to truth, grace and inclusivity.

As narrative practitioners, when we are working with the stories of people's lives, we are in some ways social historians and cultural workers. We make links across time and across generations. A skill of dignity in the present might be linked to a grandmother's pride, which in turn might be linked to life during World War II or the Depression.

As nostalgic or mythic versions of history are being weaponised, how can we rededicate ourselves to truthful and inclusive versions of history? If this is a question you are interested in, please join me in grappling with it.

Responding to hate

While watching the march from the sidelines, I found myself often thinking of Jewish friends who have already seen synagogues torched in Australia this year, and Muslim friends who have been assaulted in public. I was also thinking of colleagues whose family members have been killed by extremists. Narrative therapist Hina Islam, who lives in Canada, lost members of her family through an anti-Muslim attack by a far-right extremist who was influenced by Australian Nazis. She has subsequently supported a youth coalition in London, Ontario, to transform the site of hate into a site of memory and honouring (see Sathiaseelan, 2025). Alongside her narrative counselling work, Hina is now exploring ways to support young people of all backgrounds to engage in critical thinking (see Heath, 2012, 2024). Hina's work makes me think about what sort of memorials, rituals, songs[8] and critical thinking could be relevant for our counselling and community work here in Australia where hate crimes are also taking place.

My mind flashes also to the work of Chilean feminist activist and narrative therapist Yasna Mancilla Monsalve and her community's responses to lesbian hate crime (Mancilla Monsalve, 2024), and the narrative letter-writing campaign that Belial B'Zarr and Frankie Hanman-Siegersma (2025) initiated in response to anti-trans and anti-drag hate in Melbourne. Narrative practitioners are already responding to hate in skilful ways. While I hope further responses are not needed, I think we need to be prepared. Perhaps we can create some sort of multifaith and multicultural network ready to instantly support colleagues should the need arise. Perhaps we could reach out to those of Camp Sovereignty in the aftermath of the attack there.[9]

Refusing to normalise the once unthinkable

Finally, let me turn to the parts of Jason Stanley's book that I find most moving, when he weaves in the story of his grandmother. He describes how Ilse Stanley ventured into the Sachsenhausen concentration camp, "dressed as a Nazi social worker[10], rescuing from death hundreds of Jews confined there, one by one" (Stanley, 2020, p. 124). Chillingly, during those times in the late 1930s, she struggled to convince her neighbours of the seriousness of the situation. Her grandson implores us to remember this:

> Those who have lived through transitions from democracy to fascism regularly emphasise from personal experience and with great alarm: the tendency of populations to normalise the once unthinkable. (Stanley, 2020, p. 124)

Nazis are now publicly marching on our streets and headlining rallies. This was once unthinkable.

After witnessing the march, we drove across town to see our young Indian friend at the Ganesh Festival. It was delightful to be there. But this year, unlike the previous two festivals I have attended, there were many, many empty seats. Leaders from immigrant communities across Australia encouraged their folks not to go into cities today. The older Indians told my friend they would not allow him to take the bus home tonight. They will drop him home. People are frightened.

This is Australia in 2025.

I write these words to reach out to any of you who might be keen to collaborate. If you are interested in any of the initiatives I have written about here, please reach out to Dulwich Centre Foundation as we seek to explore these realms further.

And I will send this review to Jason Stanley to thank him for his book and for introducing us, via his writing, to his grandmother Ilse Stanley.

Notes

[1] Camp Sovereignty was established by Indigenous activists in 2006 in a place that holds significance for First Nations people, having served as a burial site for people from many different First Nations.

[2] This was explained by Kaz Ross in a recent interview (Kelly, 2025).

[3] I am particularly concerned about reports that far-right groups are specifically targeting, grooming and recruiting young autistic people (see Lovett, 2019; Welch et al., 2023) and simultaneously heartened by the work of Autism Against Fascism (2022).

[4] For more about how the Kaurna language has been re-awoken, see Zuckerman (2017). Dr Alitya Rigney's words are from this video.

[5] One week after the violence, a free concert was held at Camp Sovereignty with the theme "An attach one one of us is an attack on all of us, so we come together". Scenes and sounds of reclamation can be viewed here: https://www.instagram.com/nitv_au/reel/DOX1q5VAW6x/

[6] The wealthiest 200 Australians hold wealth totalling $625 billion, which is the equivalent to nearly a quarter of the total income produced annually in the whole of Australia (Richardson & Stilwell, 2024). The discrepancy between rich and poor has grown substantially in recent times. One in 10 adult Australians are millionaires (due largely to property holdings) (Börger, 2025; Courty, 2025), and yet, 3.3 million people (13.4%) live in poverty (Davidson et al., 2022). Many people are struggling to pay rent and keep up with the cost of living.

[7] This walking history journey can be accessed on line at https://vimeopro.com/user5404188/aunty-barb-history-journey An app version can be downloaded from the Apple App Store (search "Aunty Barb Walk") or Google Play (search "Dulwich Centre Walking Tour").

[8] If anyone would like to collaborate on songwriting projects as response to the rise of fascism, please get in touch.

[9] We have subsequently written and hand-delivered a series of messages to Camp Sovereignty.

[10] Reading about Nazi social workers is a confronting reminder of the need for a broader reckoning with social workers' complicity in injustice (see Briskman, 2003; Ioakimidis & Wyllie, 2023; Kunstreich, 2003).

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