Researching the far right: towards an ethics of talking 'about'

Chapter 32 in *The ethics of researching the far right: Critical approaches and reflections*, edited by Antonia Vaughan, Joan Braune, Meghan Tinsley and Aurelien Mondon.

This is a pre-print copy.

The far right, under its many names and guises, has become a hugely popular area of research within political science and other disciplines (Gattinara, 2020; Carter, 2018). Despite such sustained interest, and scant evidence to suggest that it is waning, this attention has certainly not been matched by levels of engagement with the specific ethical implications of researching the far right. With the way that academia can contribute to the political dynamics for which it offers interpretations, there is an urgent need to deal with these questions and reflect on our practices at every stage of the research process.

Such considerations take on particular significance in the context of the far right today. Over recent years, we have seen its growing mainstreaming (Brown, Mondon and Winter, 2021; Wodak, 2020), where not only have some far-right parties enjoyed greater electoral success (Akkerman, de Lange and Rooduijn, 2016) but where more pervasively, far-right discourse has become normalised in mainstream circles (Krzyżanowski, 2020). It is not simply far-right groups that are responsible for such shifts but those at the heart of what is considered 'mainstream', whether that be prominent politicians vying for the most exclusionary immigration policy, media outlets platforming far-right actors, or other popular figures such as authors, sportspeople and celebrities defending exclusionary positions. Academia too is implicated in these processes, with different levels of consciousness and reflection in this regard. Here, the focus is not on those who have actively stoked far-right ideas, but rather the everyday ways that academia may be involved in mainstreaming.

To do so, this piece focuses on developing an ethics of talking 'about' the far right, whereby the way that we discuss and disseminate our findings forms a key area of reflection in the field. First, the chapter outlines the importance of taking a principled and explicitly political approach as a baseline for building this ethical position. Next, it provides an overview of the ethical questions we may ask ourselves when studying the far right, taking into consideration the before, during and after components of reflexivity. With particular attention to this final element, the lens of mainstreaming offers a way for us to visualise the role that academia may play when talking 'about' the far right, using the case of the populist hype to evidence some of the dangers that come from limited reflection on this topic. By engaging with these questions, it is hoped that we can start to build towards a more

comprehensive ethics of talking 'about' the far right within academia. Throughout this chapter, I make use of the pronoun 'we' in order to convey that this is a joint endeavour in which we all must be invested, so it is an invitation to take these principles forward together.

Political commitment as a necessity

Fundamental to this call is an understanding of our own role as academics within the research process. It is clear within the field of political science that the legacies of positivism and the pursuit of 'objective' and 'neutral' enquiry are still often held as the benchmarks for 'rigorous' and 'reliable' research. These questions have taken on recent significance within far-right studies, when the Centre for the Analysis of the Radical Right (CARR) announced its commitment to neutrality after an article published on its site attracted condemnation for claiming that anti-fascists had 'become what they oppose'. While the director doubled down, some CARR fellows denounced the position and resigned from the organisation, reinforcing their own commitment to opposing the far right. This principled stand from many Early Career Researchers illustrates the kind of conscious engagement with these questions that is much-needed in this area.

If we are to reflect seriously on the responsibility that we have as researchers, we must reject not only the plausibility of neutrality but its desirability too. Taking inspiration from more radical traditions, such as critical, anti-racist, feminist and decolonial scholarship, we can challenge the premise and value of these supposed standards of 'rigour'. Many scholars have offered fervent critiques of the claim to objectivity and neutrality, for instance in upholding white supremacy, privileging Western thought and placing white men's experiences as universal (e.g., Meer, 2019, pp.501–2; Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva, 2008; Smith, 1999, p.56; Mills, 1999, pp.17-8, Harding, 1988, p.7), yet these harmful benchmarks of validity still prevail in many circles. Here, instead of trying to appease such unattainable, and indeed undesirable, requirements for 'scientific' research, we must stand firm and unashamed in our political stance. In the face of injustice, political commitment is a necessity, whereby research should strive to help combat sites of exclusion and inequality (Wodak and Meyer, 2009; van Dijk, 2009, p.63). Indeed, the only ethical position to take in such work is one of sustained opposition, because if research does not seek to challenge these sources of oppression, then what purpose does it serve?

When it comes to the far right and its mainstreaming, detachment should not be regarded as a sign of virtue. As Remi Joseph-Salisbury and Laura Connelly (2021, p.12) underline in relation to racism, 'there is simply too much at stake to engage in pretensions of neutrality'. When faced with issues of exclusion and injustice, a dispassionate and 'value-free' approach is an indicator not of work marked by integrity and credibility, but of complicity with systems of oppression. It is not just a moral issue within research either, as there is marked analytical value in being political; if we are to approach the complexities of such systems effectively, we must absolutely start from an understanding of the inequalities that are embedded within them. Only then can we begin to unpick and understand the dynamics that are at play. As such, supposed objectivity and neutrality equate in practice to no such thing,

nor do they offer adept frameworks for interpreting the world in which we live. Counter to hegemonic claims, therefore, critical scholarship is not singularly marred by biases or analytical failings from which alternatives are free but instead offers a more transparent, sophisticated and ethical approach to research:

> *rather than undermining academic rigour, the explicitly political and partisan nature of anti-racist scholar-activism offers a higher level of integrity and honesty than scholarship that purports to be objective. It makes clear – rather than hides – the assumptions and positions that underpin scholarship.* (ibid., p.13)

Guided by these principles, our approach to studying the far right must be fundamentally shaped by opposition to the harmful effects of mainstreaming, using this commitment to fundamentally drive our research at every stage. Of course, these are complex and multifarious issues with no simple solutions, but the desire to challenge them is what must remain at the heart of what propels such research forward.

Reflexivity at every stage

If we accept therefore that we are not and should not be neutral observers in the field of far-right studies, or indeed other areas, we must necessarily engage with our positionality as researchers. Reflexivity refers to the 'active acknowledgement by the researcher that her/his own actions and decisions will inevitably impact upon the meaning and context of the experience under investigation' (Horsburgh, 2003, p.308). To work reflexively, the analyst must engage in a process of 'continual internal dialogue and self-evaluation of [their] positionality' (Berger 2015, p.220). This entails asking and answering the following questions candidly when approaching a research project:

1) *What am I coming to the research with?*
   This question addresses the *before* phase of a project, taking into account prior influences, characteristics and motivations which may influence the approach that is taken from the outset.

2) *How does this affect the way in which I conduct my research?*
   This consideration centres on the *during* phase of a project, reflecting on how the answer to the first question may continuously impact the way that research is carried out, how it proceeds and how analysis is interpreted.

3) *What am I leaving the field with?*
   This final question deals with the *after* phase of research, evaluating the potential impact a project may have, how it might be received and what it could be used for. It encourages consideration of the lasting effects of our work beyond the simple publication of findings.

All three questions are of course intimately linked, each relying on the previous to inform the approach to the next. They are all integral to critically engaged research and so form the foundation from which an ethical approach can be built. This chapter is particularly concerned with the third question, not because it takes precedence over the others but because it has

received so little attention and we actually have significant power over how we choose to approach such issues. If we look at this through the lens of mainstreaming in particular, we can attempt to actively embed our responsibility to countering the far right in how we go about communicating our research and shaping the legacy of our findings.

Talking 'with' and 'about' the far right

As indicated, the lens of mainstreaming proves useful in understanding the impact of the decisions we make when communicating research, particularly pointing to the discursive implications of our choices. Building on our prior definition (Brown, Mondon and Winter, 2021, p.9), mainstreaming can be understood in the following way:

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

It is thereby a dynamic and complex process, with many contributing factors and intersecting components. Research on mainstreaming to date has largely centred around the actions of the far right itself in carving out its own electoral success (Akkerman, de Lange and Rooduijn, 2016); a number of fascinating studies point to the way that far-right parties (for instance, the Front/Rassemblement National under Marine Le Pen) have sought to modify and soften their positions to appear more 'mainstream' (Paxton and Peace, 2021; Peker, 2021; Hutchins and Halikiopoulou, 2020; Almeida, 2017; Dézé, 2015; Shields, 2014; Mișcoiu, 2012). While certainly an important facet, comparatively less attention has been paid to the mainstream and its role in normalising far-right discourse. Some work has explored mainstream party strategies in response to the supposed threat of 'niche' parties (Abou-Chadi, 2016; Meguid, 2005), yet still the far right is often placed in the driving seat, almost painted as forcing the mainstream into positions that would otherwise be unnatural to it. One of the prominent forms of imagery within political science research that has been used to symbolise the relationship between the far right and mainstream is the notion of 'contagion' (e.g., Meijers, 2017; Rooduijn, de Lange and van der Brug, 2014; van Spanje, 2010). With the power of metaphors to frame political issues (Boeynaems et al., 2017; Bougher, 2012; Mio, 1997), the implication of 'contagion' is that mainstream parties or actors are almost infected by the far right, placing the latter in a position of power while the former may be considered innocent victims of a societal force over which they have no control. By overemphasising the far right's influence therefore, the mainstream's powerful role is sometimes minimised and obscured.

In order to redress that imbalance, a holistic approach to mainstreaming must necessarily account for and centralise the role of the mainstream itself, i.e., putting the mainstream in mainstreaming (Brown, 2022). Of course, this is complicated by the fact that the mainstream is notoriously hard to define, but I propose the following as a way to conceptualise it:

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

Crucially, this accounts for the way that what or who is considered mainstream may change over time, place and context. What is key in terms of mainstream actors is that they benefit from reputational and material advantage, with perceptions of respectability lending greater credence to their claims, and heightened access to discursive platforms and resources accelerating their capacity to set the agenda. Jana Goyvaerts' (2021) work on the intersections between different sectors (politics, media and academia) underscores how the mainstream too may be composed of various groups which overlap in different ways. Notably, with academia's role in knowledge production (Andersen, 2003, p.3), our work on the far right does not sit outside of mainstreaming processes so we must pay attention to what we are contributing to this discussion.

To characterise the way that mainstream discourse may function in this process, including academic work, I identify two interrelated components: talking 'with' and 'about' the far right. Talking 'with' refers to shared discourses between the mainstream and far right, encompassing any similarities between them, both in terms of content and style. This encourages us to avoid exceptionalising the far right and its discourses, instead identifying how exclusionary positions can also be found at the heart of the mainstream. Of course, this does not mean downplaying the deeply harmful politics of far-right groups in any way but rather emphasising that the mainstream too is responsible for furthering inequality and has great power to do so. It should be noted at this stage that there is no expectation that these ideas necessarily originate within the far right or are forced upon the mainstream as a response to the far right; indeed, the mainstream possesses significant agency to act of its own volition. The second component, talking 'about', denotes the way in which mainstream actors discursively construct the far right, either explicitly through direct references or implicitly through more subtle allusions. It thereby seeks to understand how the subject position of the far right is constructed by various actors, with its implications not only for the far right itself but the image of the mainstream too. For instance, mainstream politicians may attempt to draw closer or distance themselves from the far right in certain instances by talking 'about' in different ways. In so doing, they may shift the perceived relative positioning between the two. Crucially for this piece and in other contexts, talking 'with' and 'about' are interdependent and symbiotic. The way that we talk 'about' the far right can actually talk 'with' it in some ways, by legitimising its position and core discourses. These issues are pertinent in academia as it is clear that our research constitutes a form of talking 'about' and is therefore subject to the same potential implications.

Academia, talking 'about' and populist hype

Clearly, academia's role in conveying and mediating people's understanding of political events means that we have a responsibility to talk 'about' in a way that does not talk 'with'. Some within the profession have actively and quite explicitly chosen to talk 'with', but more pervasively, there are less obvious ways that our decisions can feed into particular narratives and contribute towards greater mainstreaming. As previously discussed, the idea of contagion and the way that mainstream parties are commonly portrayed as responding to the far right

rather than acting of their own accord already has harmful implications for how we understand the power dynamics in these situations. The field of far-right studies therefore has a need to engage with these questions and the process of mainstreaming within our reflexive practices.

To examine and illustrate some of the issues associated with talking 'about', this section explores the role of the 'populist hype' (Glynos and Mondon, 2019) in talking 'with' the far right to some extent. Studies underscore how populism has come to be associated significantly with far-right politics and how its application as a concept and signifier has created some problematic associations (Galanopoulos and Venizelos, 2022; Hunger and Paxton, 2022; Mondon, 2022a; Thornborrow, Ekstrom and Patrona, 2021). Of course, there are ways to engage with it carefully in the field, drawing on precise definitions (Katsambekis, 2022), but a broader lack of reflection can serve to reinforce certain perceptions of the far right. In particular, this section highlights how it can legitimise the idea that the far right is guided by public opinion, euphemise racist politics and reinforce the mainstream as the solution. By addressing the specific problems that the populist hype poses, we can understand the broader importance of developing and implementing an ethics of talking 'about' in our work.

First, by choosing to label far-right politics as 'populist' above other descriptors, credence is given to the idea that the far right is a people-led or people-inspired phenomenon in pursuit of a genuinely anti-elitist agenda. While of course far-right politics can attract a broad base of support (Halikiopoulou and Vlandas, 2020), the populist signifier facilitates its framing as a movement rising from the bottom-up, particularly (white) working-class communities, and thereby deflects attention from the elitist politicians that often lead such parties (Mondon, 2022b). Despite the evidenced limitations of characterising far-right voters as predominantly from white working-class communities (Mondon and Winter, 2019; Bhambra, 2017), the way in which 'populism' has been picked up in the media too, for example, has led to an uncritical acceptance of this as a confirmed association (Brown and Mondon, 2021, p.284). This way of talking 'about' far-right support has therefore further entrenched some of its claims in terms of representation, by legitimising its position as something arising from the concerns of 'the people'. Our use of 'populist' to describe the far right must therefore be carefully qualified and contextualised to avoid simplistic associations.

Linked to this, populism can act as a euphemisation for the far right if not applied with caution, as while it is generally portrayed negatively (Goyvaerts, 2021; Goyvaerts and De Cleen, 2020), it acts as a less stigmatising qualifier than 'racist' or 'far right', for instance. This has seen far-right politicians such as Marine Le Pen, Matteo Salvini and Steve Bannon openly embrace the term (Brown and Mondon, 2021, p.287) through emphasising how it links them to 'the people'. In his last speech to the European Parliament, Nigel Farage (BBC, 2020) claimed a historic battle was afoot between globalism and populism, stating: 'You may loathe populism, but I tell you a funny thing, it's becoming very popular. And it has great benefits.' Thus, the signifier's phonetic resonance with 'popular' and ideological association with the people-vs-elite antagonism allow far-right actors to lay claim to it and add their own inflection onto what it means. It is hard to imagine a scenario where an actor would talk about the 'great

benefits' of racism (at least explicitly); even the extreme right Britain First (BF) had a webpage dedicated to the claim that they were 'not racist' (Lentin, 2020, p.55). Thus, even if 'populist' is generally employed in a pejorative manner, its more positive inflection leaves it open to reinterpretation and manipulation. With the links between politics, media and academia (Goyvaerts, 2021), it is important for us to reflect on whether 'populist' is the most accurate term to use in the case we are describing. Using it ourselves without clear contextualisation and a careful delineation of its meaning can lend further to this reframing and the far right's desired image.

The final point that arises from the populist signifier is its reinforcement of the 'mainstream'. With the effects described in the two previous paragraphs, it may seem somewhat counterintuitive to suggest that the use of 'populism' also serves to reinforce the status quo, but the two phenomena are linked. As populism in its reified form is often associated with a bottom-up revolt, it is commonly portrayed as dangerous, illiberal and irrational, in contrast to the 'moderate and sensible' mainstream. Both Bice Maiguashca (2019) and Emmy Eklundh (2020) put forward fascinating arguments about how understandings of populism shape the perceived solutions to it. Maiguashca (2019, p.783) argues that its blanket use to describe radical politics has had detrimental effects for progressive causes by framing the solution as 're-energising and relegitimising [...] the "centre ground" of politics.' Eklundh (2020, p.119) underscores how populism's framing as low and unrefined is marked by a commitment to rationality 'which has in the past produced a highly unequal and often violent reality for excluded groups, such as women, non-Europeans, or young people.' What both accounts emphasise is that populism has been portrayed as the source of danger, but that this has drawn attention away and detracted from the exclusionary politics characterising far-right groups. In creating a frontier between anti-populist and populist, between good and bad, between rational and irrational politics, any progressive alternatives which do not rely on 'the centre' are similarly cast aside. With the central claim here in relation to mainstreaming, that the mainstream has been influential in normalising far-right politics and that there has been little scrutiny of this phenomenon, such perceptions clearly reinforce rather than challenge dominant narratives. Thus, the effects identified here in relation to the populist hype indicate that our decisions when talking 'about' are certainly not free from consequence and can feed into the dynamics that we are studying.

An ethics of talking 'about'

This discussion speaks more broadly to the responsibility we have in consciously reflecting on these issues. Our modes of talking 'about' must not serve to legitimise the far right, further facilitate its mainstreaming or talk 'with' it in any way. It is not simply about which words we do or do not use, but how we conceptualise them, how we question common-sense categories, how we communicate our reflexive and methodological processes, how we choose to present our data, and whether we directly quote far-right actors or not. The decisions that we make when talking 'about' are numerous and complex, with no easy answers, but we must work together to build better practices going forward. As a starting

point, I propose that when we start to answer the third question in our reflexive process, we engage with the concept of mainstreaming; we think about the power dynamics and interactions involved in the normalisation of far-right politics and consider the messages that we are adding to those debates. We can ask ourselves:

- Is this the most appropriate way to conceptualise this form of politics?
- Where am I suggesting that power lies?
- Which other groups are involved and who/what am I framing as the solution?
- Am I accounting for key factors which speak to its wider relevance and implications?
- Who is affected by this politics and am I taking into account the impact?
- How does my framing relate to the desired image of the far right and/or mainstream in this scenario?

These questions are by no means exhaustive, of course, but by discussing these issues, we can start to reflect more carefully on our position. A key point is to welcome critique on these issues and accept where improvements can be made. Certainly, this is not a purely individual issue, as the demands of the neoliberal university do not encourage such careful reflection. The pressure to publish, generate impact and build a public profile often run counter to this aim, particularly when job prospects in this increasingly casualised sector are tied so closely to these measures (Goyvaerts et al., forthcoming). However, by working collectively towards an ethics of talking 'about', with an active and sustained rejection of talking 'with', we can hope to build effective strategies moving forward.

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