

Anthropology of the far right

What if we like the 'unlikeable' others?

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Fig. 1. 'Not new programmes but new people!' Quote by Romanian fascist leader Corneliu Zelea Codreanu. This quote is frequently cited by Italian and Polish far-right activists.

Due to the rise of what have often been described as far-right 'sentiments' and 'politics', we have seen a large number of conference panels, special issues and edited volumes over the past few years, all attempting to answer the question: how do we study far-right activists and their supporters? This question has often been accompanied by the claim that anthropologists have hitherto shied away from contributing to the discussion on emerging right-wing phenomena – from right-wing populist parties to extreme right subcultures – and that insufficient attention has been paid to the various methodological and ethical questions that necessarily accompany research on this theme.

Conversely, people who *do* study the individuals and communities on the far-right side of the political spectrum are persistently asked the same kinds of questions, no matter what kinds of arguments they are putting forward. These questions are usually a variation of: 'But how do you talk to *them*?' and 'How did you *manage* to get access?' In my own case, the next question is usually 'How can you study *them* as a woman?' The notion of 'them' in such questions conveys an absolute, repulsive otherness which no one would purportedly wish to engage with.

Such questions would perhaps seem less surprising if asked by a political scientist, whose perspective on the far right is usually a distant one, or a historian whose subjects are most likely long dead. When asked by an anthropologist or a sociologist, however, such queries seem to suggest that the subject of the far right has – or has been granted perhaps – a peculiar status within social scientific scholarship. First, the suggestion of difficulty in talking to 'them' implies that any anthropologist would find far-right interlocutors so repugnant and condemnable that this would simply preclude any fieldwork encounter. In other words, far-right milieus are positioned in a very different way from, say, left-wing militants, whom anthropologists are more likely to sympathize with, even though many of them also tend to be radical. Second, such presumptions seem to ignore the fact that 'obtaining access' and 'learning to talk' are issues of immense importance and are a crucial and highly consequential element of *any* fieldwork, whether it be carried out among the 'deplorable' or the 'admirable'.

This short intervention has been inspired by two years of research into the far right, and more precisely, by both the subjects of my study and the audience with whom I have been communicating my initial findings. My work centres on various forms of civic activism pursued by Italian, Polish and Hungarian far-right youth, as well as the international networks that the organizations and individuals I study have established as a means to enhance their activism. 'Ordinary', 'socially established' citizens – students, professionals, small entrepreneurs – constitute the core of the far-right communities I am researching, even though they of course strive to appeal to wider social strata.

Although my research is far from complete, I would like to share some reflections which may on the one hand shed light on the growing presence of various far-right extremisms and on the other, may show the ways in which the study of the far right reflects broader problems which anthropology and anthropologists have been addressing in recent years. I thus describe three main tools of 'exoticization' and 'othering' which I deem to be co-responsible for the peculiar status of the subject of the far right.



In arguing for more courage in conducting the studies we are trained to do – instead of spending a lot of time on debating 'how', 'why' and 'if' we should conduct them – I also refer to the contributions of kindred disciplines to the study of the far right, showing the ways in which they illuminate the task of anthropology and anthropologists.¹

Labelling

I use the term 'far right' as a sort of umbrella term for the different phenomena that recent publications have addressed, and I leave aside the various arguments (including those highlighting specific legal and socio-historical contexts) behind the adoption or rejection of specific terms. What interests me most here is the way in which yet another kind of naming or labelling has become central to the discussion on the far right, and especially to scholarly methodological interventions.

By this, I do not refer to different variations on the terms 'right' or 'fascist', but the long list of adjectives which are used to describe the milieus I study, including 'deplorable', 'unlikeable', 'unpleasant', 'uncomfortable' and other synonymous expressions. These and similar descriptors frequently appear in the aforementioned queries regarding how anthropologists can study the far right, with the sub-question being: 'How do we study the people we don't like?' or 'How do we engage with unlikeable groups?'

I do not know of any anthropology textbook that would imply one needs to like the people one studies. After all, there is no necessary link between 'liking' and attempting to understand, or even between liking and developing a rapport with the people studied. Nonetheless, anthropology is dominated by an 'unwritten acceptance ... that *dislike* is an outcome of misunderstanding or ethnocentrism' (van Wyk 2013: 69; my emphasis).

While agreeing with Ilana van Wyk's persuasive argument that a 'properly acknowledged and interrogated dislike can be a productive tool' (ibid.), I focus here on another aspect of the 'non-liking' issue: I consider it erroneous to imply that an anthropologist *cannot* develop a friendly relationship with some of the far-right activists she or he studies, despite disagreeing with them. I purposely write *some*, as I am aware that 'far-right activist' denotes a variety of actors, encountered and interacted with in a variety of contexts and situations.

If we approach fieldwork encounters as holistic, it is impossible to reduce the people studied to their 'unlikeable beliefs' and 'unlikeable deeds'. To say we engage with people holding 'unlikeable beliefs',² rather than with 'people we don't like', is not only a much fairer description of the approach an anthropologist should advocate, but allows for greater opportunity to present the individuals studied in their full complexity. Far-right activists express racist views, distribute aggressive propaganda and organize homophobic campaigns. The very same people

I would like to thank Patrick Wielowiejski, James Sevitt and David Petrucci for very insightful comments, and to Douglas Holmes for numerous inspiring discussions.

1. This is not to say that I do not recognize the emergent scholarly works by anthropologists such as Juraj Buzalka, Douglas Holmes, Maddalena Gretel Cammelli, Margit Feischmidt, Paul Mepschen, Nitzan Shoshan, Kristof Szombati, Cathrine Thorleifsson and Patrick Wielowiejski. For a short overview, see Holmes (2016).

2. I owe this observation to James Sevitt.

3. <http://news.berkeley.edu/2017/04/28/celebrating-barefoot-anthropology-nancy-scheper-hughes/>.

4. Also akin to the 'place-problem' knot within anthropology ('one goes to India to study hierarchy, one goes to Greece to study pilgrimage', etc.).

5. An image quite widespread. See e.g. Ishaan Tharoor (2016) 'The West's major cities are a bulwark against the tide of right-wing nationalism'. *The Washington Post*, 22 November.

6. This quote has been recently recalled by Signe Howell (2017).

Astuti, R. 2017. Taking people seriously. *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 7(1): 105-122.

Blee, K. 1993. Evidence, empathy, and ethics: Lessons from oral histories of the Klan. *Journal of American History* 80(2): 596-606.

Butler, J. 2001. What is critique? An essay on Foucault's virtue. <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0806/butler/en>.

Fassin, D. 2017. The endurance of critique. *Anthropological Theory* 17(1): 4-29.

Harding, S. 1991. Representing fundamentalism: The problem of the repugnant cultural other. *Social Research* 58(2): 373-393.

Hochschild, A.R. 2016. *Strangers in their own land: Anger and mourning on the American right*. New York: The New Press.

Holmes, D. 1993. Illicit discourse. In G. Marcus (ed.) *Perilous states: Conversations on culture, politics, and nation*. Chicago: Late Editions 1. — 2016. Fascism 2. *Anthropology Today* 32(2): 1-3.

Howell, S. 2017. Two or three things I love about ethnography. *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 7(1): 15-20.

Malinowski, B. 1922. *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. London: Routledge.

may also be devoted nurses, passionate hikers and excellent pizza makers. And as we know, these other aspects of their lives are not 'side information', but actually enable the ethnographer to better *understand* their positions.

Most fundamentally, perhaps, this simple recognition can help us to recognize that the real difficulty we are facing might not be studying the 'unlikeable' per se, but dealing with the realization that we have come to like some of the research participants, despite detesting their political views, or have developed a rapport that goes beyond a mere fieldwork encounter. It is a simple realization of the *human* aspect of such an anthropological endeavour (an aspect seemingly unexpected by some of the critics of research on the far right), a realization that simultaneously brings to the forefront the question of trust, betrayal, hospitality, gratefulness and manifold – that is to say multidirectional – responsibilities.

Recalling her research on various difficult subjects, Nancy Scheper-Hughes mentions her encounter with the leader of a kidney trafficking system and states the gratefulness she feels towards him: 'We might have our biases, but we try to see each individual who works with us as a gift'. And she reminds us: 'Anthropology is a vocation based not necessarily on love, but rather on a deep curiosity that is open to many surprises'.³

A person who would likely subscribe to this viewpoint is Milton Mayer, whose book, *They thought they were free: The Germans 1933-1955* (1955), has just been – certainly not coincidentally – reprinted. The author, an American of German Jewish descent, presents the lives of 10 'ordinary Germans', all of whom used to be members of the Nazi party, along with his discussions and interactions with them. Without accepting his interlocutors' statements at face value, he presents them in their different roles, in a web of social relations and in different contexts, past and present.

His year-long acquaintance with them leads Mayer to describe his interlocutors as *friends*. He states: 'I liked them. I couldn't help it'. Yet, the fact that he liked them does not make their beliefs and views (such as questioning the Holocaust) more acceptable, nor does it expiate them. The author's approach likewise does not make their actions or convictions appear less dangerous; quite the contrary. His book is uneven and his moralizing and sweeping generalizations regarding 'Germans' (compared to 'Americans') are unacceptable – and not only from anthropological perspective. But the book's strength lies in the fact that the complex relationship between the researcher and interlocutor is of critical importance, *without* the author pondering over it again and again – a risk anthropology runs, in my view.

Locating

The question of labelling is intrinsically linked to locating: the very term 'extremism' suggests where one might find, or ought to look for, 'extremists'. 'Underground' locations and peripheries of various sorts have long been visited by researchers interested in exploring the margins of society and various right-wing subcultures, from skinheads and football fans to music groups and 'underground' publishers. The definition of 'extreme' is of course a relative one. When talking about my research, I am often asked if I study the Polish Law and Justice Party (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość) or the Italian Northern League (Lega Nord). When I explain that my focus is on grass-roots movements, the question that often follows is an incredulous: 'So, *even more* extreme ones?'

Such a question is very telling, in that it implies that a realm outside mainstream politics must be 'even more' radical; it also limits the impact of the far-right to the electoral realm. At the same time, such a query goes against the

increasingly common observation of the mainstreaming of far-right ideas and how the boundaries of what is conceivable and admissible – both in terms of political discourse and decision-making – have been shifting. Within the social sciences, this observation is often translated into an attempt to understand why 'decent' citizens would support a radical party or vote for a racist, xenophobic option.

No book has attracted more attention on this matter than Arlie Russell Hochschild's *Strangers in their own land: Anger and mourning on the American right* (2016) in which the author undertakes a journey from Berkeley, a hotbed of left-wing activism, to Louisiana, the country's most conservative region. The monograph features her conversations with a variety of people who, perhaps quite unsurprisingly, appear not to be as 'other' as expected. They are not only nice, but profess values and concerns in common with the broader society. The book is a great read and it has received recognition for good reason. But from the perspective of this article, and more generally from an anthropological perspective, what is most interesting and perplexing is the journey the author undertakes – her need to move beyond Berkeley to the 'super South' to *find* right-wing conservatives.

I do not mean here to be one of those annoying commentators who always asks why something else has not been done – in this case, why she did not study a minority of right-wing folks in California – and I recognize her arguments. Unintentionally, however, her approach may reinforce the tendency to link certain (unlikeable!) political choices and world views to specific locales,⁴ while at the same time endorsing a naïve idea of cosmopolitan and open-minded cities.⁵ This was further reinforced in a series of interviews with Hochschild in which the interviewers marvelled at her courage and the epic journey she had undertaken (in response, however, she questioned these attitudes and emphasized that her aim had been to bridge the ideological divide).

Our discipline's origins, as the elaboration of our methodology, are closely linked to the idea of a faraway journey, perhaps most famously captured by Bronisław Malinowski's account of his arrival on the Trobriand Islands (1922). We have moved away from this for a reason, and it would certainly be detrimental if accounts of far-right supporters brought images and an imagining of (physical and metaphorical) remoteness and strangeness in through the back door. Anthropology is at its best when it challenges certain taken-for-granted, commonsensical understandings, whether by 'studying up' or 'studying down' (cf. Nader [1969] 1974). An anthropological study of the far right, therefore, needs to help further rethink the idea of the 'margins', broadly understood, by on the one hand rejecting the reproduction of specifically situated images of otherness, and on the other, by rejecting the idea of the margins as inhabited by either 'politically sympathetic oppressed' people (Harding 1991) or by people who hold politically 'unsympathetic views' that we explain away as a result of their marginalization. This leads to my third point, which relates to the agency of the people studied.

Explaining

Once the 'deplorable' are located and the 'unpleasant' research begins, there comes the question of finding the 'underlying cause'. Unemployment or underemployment, relative deprivation, dispossession – all of which feature quite prominently in studies of the far right – are more often than not linked to the all-encompassing concept of neo-liberalism. In Western Europe and in the US, neo-liberalism is said to explain the growing support for the far right in depressed post-industrial areas where jobs and services have long been outsourced or 'stolen' by

Fig. 2. Poster advertising the 'Milano fascist week', a response to the 'Italian fashion week' organized on a regular basis in Milan.

Fig. 3. 'The system wants you Barbie, we want you Bonnie. Fight with us!' A promotional poster for Lotta Studentesca, the youth branch of Forza Nuova.

Mann, M. 2004. *Fascists*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Marcus, G. 1997. The uses of complicity in the changing mise-en-scène of anthropological fieldwork. *Representations* 59: 85-108.

Mayer, M. 1955. *They thought they were free: The Germans 1933-1955*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Nader, L. (1969) 1974. Up the anthropologist – Perspectives gained from studying up. In D. Hymes (ed.) *Reinventing anthropology*, 284-311. New York: Vintage Books.

Ortner, S. 2016. Dark anthropology and its others: Theory since the eighties. *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 6(1): 47-73.

Stolcke, V. 1995. Talking culture: New boundaries, new rhetorics of exclusion in Europe. *Current Anthropology* 36(1): 1-24.

van Wyk, I. 2013. Beyond ethical imperatives in South African anthropology: Morally repugnant and unlikeable subjects. *Anthropology Southern Africa* 36(1-2): 68-79.

Zubrzycki, G. 2018. Review of the management of hate: Nation, affect, and the governance of right-wing extremism in Germany, by Nitzan Shoshan (Princeton University Press, 2016). *Contemporary Sociology* 47(2): 219-220.

economic migrants and among generations who are pessimistic about their own and their children's future. In the countries of the former Eastern bloc, neo-liberal transformation has been synonymous with unfulfilled aspirations, the uprooting of economic migrants and the alienation of disillusioned workers.

The idea of 'victims of neo-liberalism' has become so widespread in discussions on the far right that an emblematic path for the far right's rise has now become established. It is a story of once well-off and open societies, which, as a result of either economic decline or unrealized growth, return to integralist agendas, finding rescue in nationalistic thinking and community-oriented practices. One does not need sophisticated analytical tools to recognize the incompleteness of such accounts and their wishful thinking cum mythical aspects.

We have a vast anthropological scholarship which can help us to recognize that 'we have never been tolerant' and that an understanding of the present-day socio-political landscape means rethinking the sources of both the economic crisis and integralist inspirations, too easily ascribed to various non-liberal agents (see e.g. Stolcke 1995). We do not need a scholarship *specifically* addressing the far right in order to try to explain the present moment.

By arguing against the (exclusive) focus on neo-liberalism, I also intend to highlight the importance of bringing the analysis of the far right beyond a focus on narrowly understood economics or politics. In his seminal work on fascists, the sociologist Michael Mann makes an argument for taking the people he studied seriously (Mann 2004). By this he means: reflecting on the view of the world and society that their ideology conveyed, rather than dismissing it as crazy and vague; taking their values seriously and recognizing that 'most fascists, leaders or led, believed in certain things'; realizing that few of them were 'misfits and marginals'; as well as taking them seriously as perpetrators of evil (ibid.: 3). Only by doing so, in his view, can one get the chance to understand, not excuse or relativize. His approach indicates a focus on aspects which are part of anthropological enquiry par excellence, including various forms of moral reasoning and moral claims. This kind of focus must supplement already existing accounts by showing how certain perceptions of the economy or experiences of the economic (order, decline, crisis) are linked to particular moral narratives and conceptualizations.

But anthropology can also bring this 'taking people seriously' approach a step further, in that anthropology recognizes that there may be discrepancies between what people say and what they do and that these inconsistencies and contradictions should be taken seriously, too (Astuti 2017).

My preoccupation with these aspects is no doubt informed by my own study and, as I have already stated, by the way fellow scholars have reacted to the subject. A key focus of my work is the social assistentialism provided by far-right militants. I take part in food collections, distributing parcels with Christmas gifts, lotteries and sport competitions aimed at gathering funds for school equipment, all of which have a clear target group (*Christian* kids, *Italian* citizens, *Polish* single mothers, etc.). Participating in these allows me to see the ways in which the activists engage with the assisted people and their attempts to combine work, studies and militancy. I likewise observe various forms of 'cultural work' that accompany all these endeavours, as the idea of 'helping our own people (first)' is continuously sustained by conferences, discussions and book promotions focused on 'European identity', Christian social thought and 'immigration threat'.

When discussing my material, I have often been told that what I am describing is a 'scheme', because 'it's all



about the public image' and political 'strategizing'. I am perfectly aware that a preoccupation with self-image and various branding mechanisms are an important element of this story. But it is not the full story.

In 2016, Sherry Ortner prompted fellow anthropologists to put an 'anthropology of the good' in dialogue with 'dark anthropology' (a trend she found to be dominant in recent decades), recognizing that the stories of violence and domination ought to be seen in relation to accounts of (the fight for) justice, care and hope (Ortner 2016). Her inspiring contribution indicates the importance of critically engaging with the 'life' or 'everyday' projects pursued by far-right actors, *without* neglecting the brutal dimensions these projects entail: to show, for instance, that there need not be a contradiction between a respectful, sincere engagement with the poor and xenophobic rhetoric. The question, or the task, then is to combine a focus on strategic choices and interests with an investigation of the varied moral claims that activists make, such as religiously inspired world views, understandings of justice and well-being or conceptions of personhood and society.



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Fig. 4. Invitation to join the March of Independence, a nationalist gathering in Warsaw, 11 November 2013. It reads: 'The new generation is coming!'.

Engaging with these questions is crucial for understanding the wider appeal of the far-right message, for making sense of why the scholarship's new protagonists, 'normal citizens', applaud extreme right-wing ideas or actually join right-wing movements. I thus want to reiterate here the seemingly obvious argument that such an engagement also requires one to present the studied people as fully-fledged individuals, as people who – yes – hold 'unlikeable beliefs' and put them into practice, but who can also be funny, ironic, self-critical and who have varied interests, skills and roles to play.

Providing such accounts is imperative, given that we seem to know quite a lot about radical right-wing ideologies, but very little about the people holding them and given that a study of the far right too easily transforms into a study of 'cases', rather than of individuals with unique stories and backgrounds (cf. Zubrzycki 2018). I believe that one of the reasons why such complex accounts are scarce relates to the accusations, which are levelled at scholars studying the far right, of giving the far right the 'floor', 'audience', 'oxygen'. Presenting activists as 'cases', rather than as (multidimensional, interesting) 'individuals', appears to be a safer option in such a context.

I myself recognize the danger of self-censorship every time I see a Facebook post in which my research participants eloquently point out the inconsistencies in a political opponent's agenda, when they challenge me in discussions and when I recognize that I share with them a variety of readings, references and formative experiences (see Blee 1993 for a similar discussion).

This last observation leads to one more point: if one threat is *othering*, the second one is (*over*)*familiarizing*. The aforementioned comment on the mainstreaming of the far-right agenda as well the observation that – surprise, surprise – some educated, well-off, middle-class people also support an extreme agenda, ought not cause a shift to the opposite pole, that is, a shift from 'total strangers' to 'people like us'. Trying to grasp similar dilemmas, commonalities within life trajectories and even common causes (e.g. neo-liberalism as the common enemy) is important and potentially fruitful only when properly contextualized and analyzed from a distance. This tension between proximity and distance has been a foundational aspect of anthropology and, as George Marcus has shown in his discussion on 'complicity', it has become especially salient in the context of present-day ethnography, carried out in and between multiple sites (Marcus 1997).

It is no coincidence that in order to illustrate the problem of 'complicity as a defining element of multi-sited research' (ibid.: 101) Marcus refers to Douglas Holmes's

study of European far-right leaders. What both Marcus and Holmes demonstrate wonderfully is the fact that the path towards presenting extremists *not* as exotic others, does not lead through a 'people like us' frame, but through recognizing the often troubling 'commonalities of reference, analytic imaginary, and curiosity that fieldworker and subject so productively share – each for different purposes', and hence, through recognizing a sort of conceptual/intellectual rather than a moral affinity and complicity (Marcus 1997: 102; cf. Holmes 1993).

Rethinking the far right, rethinking fieldwork

The fieldwork I have referred to in this article is at best full of doubts and a questioning of whether I will succeed in completing it, and it has been, more often than not, emotionally and psychologically overwhelming. It is so, certainly due to the weight of the hate (message, talk) I am at times exposed to, but it is equally so due to the complexity of the relations I have established and their unavoidable ambiguities. I consider these relations not as a by-product, but as an inherent part of my fieldwork.

Therefore, my claim about 'unlikeables' being possibly 'quite likable' is not supposed to lead to an optimistic 'it's not as difficult as we thought!' On the contrary, it points to other kinds of challenges, while at the same time calling for more anthropological, ethnographically grounded research on the subject. I strongly emphasize 'ethnographically grounded' to counter the increasing tendency for political speeches and tweets to substitute systematically carried out empirical analysis.

Methodologically speaking, we do not need to enquire about approaches that might help us to tackle 'new strangers', but rather to recognize the potential of the tools we already possess. Fieldwork provides us with a unique opportunity to cope with proximity and distance, strangeness and familiarity: 'The field Ethnographer has seriously and soberly to cover the full extent of the phenomena in each aspect of tribal culture studied, making no difference between what is commonplace, or drab, or ordinary and what strikes him as astonishing and out-of-the-way' (Malinowski 1922: 11).⁶ Recording the reality observed in the field in this way is what gives anthropologists the capacity to question, and oftentimes disrupt, the distinction between the 'ordinary' and the 'out-of-the-way'. It is also a means through which anthropology may enter meaningfully into a dialogue with other disciplines.

Ethnographic works of this kind have a chance to contribute not only to a better understanding of the far right, but to the debates within the discipline. In the past few years, anthropologists have interrogated the relationship between anthropology and ethnography and have addressed the increasingly detrimental jargonization of the discipline as well as the (*over*)emphasis on theoretical (or pseudo-theoretical) discussion at the expense of empirical material. These discussions have been warmly welcomed, but their impact has been less obvious: a glance at some recent publications is enough to note the continuing relevance of such critical observations on jargon, theory and the lack or misunderstanding of 'ethnographic' data.

The anthropology of the far right which I have been advocating has the capacity to illuminate what an anthropology 'done well' might involve: putting people at the centre, theorizing from ethnography and restating the distinction between critique and judgement (cf. Butler 2001). As such, the anthropology of the far right may also respond to yet another plea, made recently by Didier Fassin, for a recognition of the unique capacity of anthropology and ethnography to pursue critique, a capacity determined by the simple fact that as anthropologists, we acknowledge both people's social intelligence and our own intellectual autonomy (Fassin 2017: 21). ●