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ESSAY

From the Margins to the Mainstream

A Personal Reflection on Three Decades of Studying and Teaching Far-Right Politics

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I started working on what were then commonly called "extreme right" parties in the early 1990s, doing a comparative study of the ideologies of three small "national democratic" parties in Western Europe for my MA thesis (Mudde 1995). I mostly read German-language works in the contemporary history (*Zeitgeschichte*) tradition, as English-language (political science) literature was still very rare at that stage. In fact, to find political science literature on the topic, I had to reach out to foreign scholars, as there was only one other scholar of the far right in the Netherlands, an anthropologist who mainly published in Dutch.

It was an odd time to study the far right academically. While the far right was completely marginal in the country, and in most of the world, public interest was very high in the Netherlands. At the same time, within academia in general, and political science in particular, the study of the far right was seen as secondary at best. Fast forward four decades and the far right is among the most vibrant political forces across the globe and the study of the far right has exploded across academic disciplines (often, however, under different labels, most notably "populism"). Hundreds of PhD students and thousands of MA and undergraduate students are working on the topic and there are even some, admittedly few, academic jobs that specifically look for expertise on the far right. In other words, much has changed, both in terms of the relevance of the far right and its study.

In this essay, I want to reflect on this transformation with a particular focus on some of the questions that inform this special issue. Most of the essay is a personal reflection on the study of the far right, from someone who has contributed to both the literature and the infrastructure—notably the European Consortium of Political Research (ECPR) Standing Group on Extremism and Democracy and the related Routledge Studies in Extremism and Democracy. My main aim is to provide new(er) scholars in the field with a (personal) historical account of the study and teaching of the far right,

predominantly in the Global North. I also hope to help colleagues navigate some of the issues that confront students of the far right—from presentism to social pressure—without pretending to provide solutions: First of all, because I have been, and probably still am, part of some of these problems (notably Eurocentrism). Second, because I have many more privileges than the vast majority of my colleagues—from sociodemographic ones (white, straight, male) to professional ones (tenured, international reputation, close to retirement). And third, because most of these issues are contextual and therefore defy universal solutions. Still, hopefully at least some readers will find solace in knowing that they are not the only ones struggling with what can only be described as a taxing field of study.

This essay is divided into four sections. In the first two sections, I will reflect on my personal experience of studying and teaching the far right. In the third section, I address the issue of Eurocentrism in the study of the far right—a problem to which I have contributed myself (see, for instance, Mudde 2017). In the final section, I tackle the issue of presentism and relate it to the transformation of the far right in the twenty-first century. Finally, I conclude this essay with some suggestions.

Studying the Far Right

In his famous 1988 article, the late Klaus von Beyme identified three "waves" of "right-wing extremism" in postwar Western Europe. As I have argued before (Mudde 2016), the development of the postwar far right coincided with changes in its academic study. In the first wave, roughly from 1945 to 1955, the far right was primarily a remnant of the past, commonly referred to as "neofascism." The limited scholarship was dominated by historians, who mainly looked for ideological and personal connections between historical fascism and neofascism. The second wave, roughly from 1955 to 1980, saw the influx of mainstream social science concepts and theories (particularly from US scholars), focusing predominantly on the support base of the "radical right." In the third wave, from 1980 to 2000, English-language political science became increasingly dominant, as did a focus on electoral and party politics in Western Europe. Although the fourth wave of the far right—defined mainly by mainstreaming and normalization—started at the turn of the century (Mudde 2019), scholarship has so far been relatively slow to catch up with its developments.

In the last twenty-five years, in terms of scholarship on the far right, we have gone from scarcity to abundance. In the early 1990s, much political science research was qualitative by necessity—there were few electorally successful or politically relevant far-right parties and most national surveys had too few far-right supporters for (cross-national) quantitative studies. These practical problems were often "solved" by either artificially increasing the pool of far-right parties (by conceptual stretching) or the pool of their supporters (by combining cross-national or cross-temporal datasets). There is no need for such suboptimal solutions today. As the far right has increased and mainstreamed its support across the globe, there are plenty of parties and supporters

to study. Moreover, with the ascendence of social media, quantitative scholars have a treasure trove of new data to analyze. And the mainstreaming of the far right has also mainstreamed the study of the far right, which has grown exponentially since, most notably, the victories of Brexit and Donald Trump in 2016.

But the mainstreaming of the far right has caused a power shift too, which has inevitably affected its study. In the 1990s, I was rarely criticized for my scholarship. In fact, if I was, it was mainly by people on the radical left, who rejected my self-proclaimed "neutral" position—a critique I have become much more receptive to over the years. Although I was already a relatively prominent voice in the media, and outspoken in my opposition to the far right, this did not really affect my access to far-right parties and politicians (positively or negatively).[1] I believe this was in part because I was, and remain, a fervent supporter of free speech and was, at that time, one of the few people to explicitly defend the right to free speech for the far right in the media.

Today, as the far right is much more mainstreamed, and has a growing number of "neutral" or even supportive scholars to work with, my access to far-right actors has diminished significantly. And this is an important reminder for junior (and senior) scholars whose research depends on fieldwork: an outspoken and prominent public profile can restrict access to the very sources that your research depends on. To be clear, this is a trade-off that scholars must make for themselves. But it is important to be aware of the academic risks of moving beyond the "neutral" position that many in academia, media, and politics *demand* of academics.

In the 1990s, right-wing parties and politicians were classified as "extreme right" and even "fascist" without much more evidence than a critical position on immigration or one cherry-picked (or misinterpreted) statement. This would lead to little opposition from within academia or society, which was, in general, not very interested in conceptual and definitional issues. There were some important exceptions, however. Most notably, in 1999, the Austrian far-right leader Jörg Haider took the prominent local political scientist Anton Pelinka to court, accusing him of "defamation" in an interview Pelinka gave on Italian TV. Although Pelinka's initial conviction was overturned on appeal, the case had a chilling effect on scholars in Austria and beyond (Dedaic and Nelson 2001; Noll 2001). Legal action against scholars by far-right actors has increased in recent years, although actual court cases remain rare and (final) convictions even rarer. That said, each case sends a warning to other scholars, and it would be naive to assume that this has not led to caution at best and self-censorship at worst.

The situation is particularly challenging in far right–governed countries and states. In Poland, for example, the far-right government dominated by Law and Justice (PiS) has passed legislation that effectively mandates how the Holocaust can be studied. This has already led to local courts ordering historians to apologize for statements in

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1   This is in contrast to the fact that, at that time, my brother was still a prominent far-right activist in the Netherlands, which closed at least as many doors as it opened within the broader movement.

books on the Holocaust, although some convictions were overturned on appeal (Wójcik 2021). The situation is even more dire in India, where the Modi government has been involved in a concerted effort to "Saffronize" the country, that is, to make official history more in line with its far-right Hindutva ideology, which includes the close monitoring of research and teaching (see Jaffrelot 2021, 400–404).

Nonlegal threats have increased and changed as well. When writing op-eds in grad school, I would occasionally get a handwritten letter at my university address, almost always written by an old man who would, in a more or less disparaging tone, tell me that I was wrong, ignorant, stupid, and/or a communist. With the ascendence of the Internet, and in particular social media, these "letters to the editor" have multiplied, becoming more often anonymous, and more threatening. Although I have received my fair share of (anonymous) threats, my privileges and physical distance—living in the US but mainly speaking and writing about Europe—have largely protected me from the worst. Sadly, in today's world, researching the far right, let alone speaking openly about it in the media or on social media, opens one up to a world of abuse, particularly if you are a (younger) woman or a person of color. And this intimidation can literally hit very close to home—for instance, several female scholars in the Netherlands were harassed and intimidated at home.

But the biggest change has taken place within academia. While there have always been scholars with open sympathy for the far right, nativism and particularly Islamophobia have become more prominent within academia in the wake of the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and the mainstreaming of far-right ideas and parties (Mondon and Winter 2020). Today, some key far-right beliefs are openly propagated by established academics, including some within the broader field of right-wing studies—probably the most notable examples are white identity politics in the book *Whiteshift* by Eric Kaufmann (2018) and populism in *Values, Voice and Virtue* by Matthew Goodwin (2023). Even worse, some scholars (like Pierre-André Taguieff in France and Kaufmann in the UK) play an active role in the push for (state) repression of the scholarship of the far right, and other fields and topics, under the vague guise of opposing "gender ideology," "Islamo-gauchisme," or "wokeness" (Louati 2021; Zia-Ebrahimi 2023)—all terms with a strong far-right connection. It has created a schizophrenic world in which we mostly still write from an (implicit) assumption of a liberal democratic consensus while describing in detail how this consensus is actually disappearing in the real world (if it ever truly existed).

Teaching the Far Right

The first time I taught a course on the far right was as a graduate student at Leiden University in, if memory serves me correctly, 1996. Since then, I have been teaching a course on "Far-Right Politics in Western Democracies" almost annually at universities across the globe, including in Belgium, Hungary, Japan, and the US. The far right has always been a popular topic among graduate and undergraduate students. As with the

broader public, it is mainly a normative issue for my students, who often have a hard time seeing it also as an academic topic to be studied more impartially.

Originally, my course was almost exclusively focused on far-right parties in (Western) Europe—a consequence of my training as a scholar of Western European political parties. After several years, I moved away from a country- and party-centric structure and moved to a more comparative and theoretical approach that also included nonparty aspects, such as social movements, music, and violence. In part this reflected a broader, albeit slow, movement within the field (see Castelli Gattinara 2020). Upon moving to the US, in 2008, I slowly expanded the coverage of the US far right, which now encompasses roughly one-third of my course and is constantly updated. I also increasingly refer to the situation in other regions in class—notably Brazil, India, and Israel—although the course remains too Eurocentric (see below).

I have always taught my course against the legal and normative context of liberal democracy, which the far right threatens ideologically and politically. Within Europe, with few exceptions, students were aware of and concerned about the far-right threat, often exaggerating it, but in the US they initially had no conception of either the movement or its (potential) threat to US democracy. I used to talk my European students off the ledge by explaining that, while the far right constituted a threat in some countries, the "political mainstream" was still solidly constituted by (self-proclaimed) liberal democrats. This strategy completely backfired in the US, where the first time I taught the course most students ended with the idea that the far right was an irrelevant political phenomenon of the past.

The most significant change in my teaching has come from the political environment. Although I had occasionally encountered a student who was not concerned about the far right, or even expressed support for some of its core ideas, my teaching assumed that all students shared a preference for liberal democracy and considered the far right at least a potential problem or threat. Interestingly, most of my students shared this assumption too and usually spoke from this perspective in class discussions. Moreover, I was used to teaching in a political environment, including the university administration, that shared this normative framework.

This was challenged for the first time when I moved, in 2002, to Antwerp, a city where at that time roughly one in three people voted for the far-right Flemish Bloc, later rebranded as Flemish Interest (Vlaams Belang, VB). Unsurprisingly, I had several VB supporters in my class, including some active in its student and youth organizations. Although supporting the biggest party in the city, they never identified as VB supporters in class or defended the far right or VB in class discussions. Several admitted their sympathy or activism to me in private and some even wrote MA theses with me. Although the knowledge of having VB supporters in my class made me more aware of some of the unsubstantiated "received wisdoms" that the field held—for instance, it was common in the literature to describe parties as antisemitic or racist without providing clear or convincing examples—I never felt uncomfortable in class. Actually, I believe that their presence made my teaching, and scholarship, better by making

sure I had academic evidence for my qualifications and statements and that I was not, unconsciously, relying on received wisdom.

This has changed in recent years. I currently teach at a public university in a GOP-controlled US state, where many of my students come from relatively conservative families, including supporters of Trump.[2] Consequently, several students come into the course supporting the GOP and Trump or, at least, seeing them as mainstream conservatives. The difference from teaching far-right students in Antwerp, however, is that the political and university context in Georgia is fundamentally different. The local Republican Party, which is in full control of Georgia politics, is staunchly pro-Trump and many prominent members are among the most outspoken Trump supporters (e.g., US House of Representatives members Marjorie Tayler Greene and Andrew Clyde, both incidentally graduates of my university). It is in this hostile context that I sometimes teach students who are active in far-right organizations like Turning Point USA, infamous for its Professor Watchlist project that targets progressive faculty at US universities (disproportionately minorities and women).

Has this changed the way that I teach my course? I would like to say no, but I doubt that is entirely true. At the very least, I am much more cautious about the political bias of the nonacademic sources I use in my course, particularly media sources. And although I have not fundamentally changed the content of the course, I do feel that I am more accommodating to far-right students than I used to be (and sometimes than I would like to be)—then again, so are most of my students, who rarely challenge each other in the classroom. To be clear, I have never been explicitly censured or reported for my teaching, by either students or administrators, but I have felt less comfortable and supported at my university in recent years. Although this has not fundamentally changed my views on liberal democracy and the far right, or made me less open about them to my students, it has made me less eager to teach the course and, at times, more concerned about negative consequences.

Eurocentrism

There is no doubt that the study of the far right is very Eurocentric (Castelli Gattinara 2020; Leidig 2020), meaning not only that European scholars and scholarship on Europe are central to the field, but also that their experiences and perspectives dominate scholarship, even by non-European scholars and in studies of the non-European far right. Much of this has to do with broader Eurocentrism in academia in general and the social sciences in particular (Alvares 2011; Joseph, Reddy, and Searle-Chatterjee 1990). But there is clearly more, as the study of populism, for example, is less Eurocentric

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2   In fact, in recent years my course has become a sort of "self-help" course for some students, who hope to understand why their parent or parents have fallen into the QAnon rabbit hole.

than that of the far right—which is not to say that it is not Eurocentric at all (see Finchelstein 2019).

I think there are at least two explanations for the specific Eurocentrism of far-right studies (Mudde 2016). First, the field emerged largely out of the study of (historical) fascism. Second, at least in the third wave, it was heavily dominated by political science, which focuses disproportionately on electoral and party politics. Because of these two interrelated explanations, much of the foundations of the field come from the study of far-right parties in Western Europe—which was itself heavily influenced by earlier (behavioralist) scholarship in North America. Although the study of far-right politics has since moved well beyond the geographical constraints of Western Europe, the field remains "firmly Euro-American in character" (Alvares 2011, 73), as much of this new research has uncritically adopted the assumptions and methodologies of Euro-American scholarship.[3]

Even as the study of the far right has become less party-centric, focusing increasingly on political violence and social media, Eurocentrism remains present. Still, slowly but steadily, there is a push to break out of it, as can be seen from initiatives like the Manchester University Press Global Studies of the Far Right book series (edited by Eviane Leidig, William Allchorn, and Ariel Alejandro Goldstein) and the related Center for Research on Extremism Global Perspectives on the Far Right webinar series (organized by Eviane Leidig), as well as a growing number of critical publications (Castelli Gattinara 2020; Pinheiro-Machado and Vargas-Maia 2023a, 2023b). This revision is not only important for more accurately analyzing new waves of far-right politics outside of Europe but also for better understanding the far right in Europe itself.

As is often the case with critiques of hegemonic positions, such critiques of far-right studies are presented as more original and radical than they truly are. For instance, although the five "singularities of the Global South" mentioned by Rosana Pinheiro-Machado and Tatiana Vargas-Maia (2023a) might be more pronounced in that region than in the Global North, none is truly "singular" to that region. Theoretically, neither economic anxiety nor nativism is restricted to "white men" and each can be, and has been, applied to nonwhite countries and groups (on India, for instance, see Jaffrelot 2021). Similarly, the legacy of dictatorships and strongmen has been explicitly addressed in works on Eastern and Southern Europe (Art 2006; Kitschelt and McGann 1995), while religion has always been central to studies of the Eastern European and US far right (Barkun 1994; Kaplan 1997; Minkenberg 2018; Ramet 1996). And, finally, feminist social movements have also been identified by scholars as important sources of resistance to far-right actors and policies (Petö and Grzebalska 2018). In fact, at a metatheoretical level, one could argue that Eastern Europe, and even Southern Europe,

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3   This observation refers exclusively to the (limited) English-language literature I am familiar with. The situation might be different for research published in Portuguese and Spanish.

are more part of the colonized periphery of the "Global South" than they are of the colonizing center of the "Global North."

All of this is neither to deny or minimize Eurocentrism within the field nor to discourage initiatives to make the field truly global in terms of not just geographical scope of study but also theoretical framework. This is even more important with the recent shift in far-right propaganda and targeting, from ethnic others to ideological others—that is, from Islam to "woke" and from "immigration" to "gender ideology." Recent work on the (far-) right's fight against "gender ideology" in Latin America (Moraes Teixeira and Bulgarelli 2023; Payne, Zulver, and Escoffier 2023) can only strengthen the important ongoing scholarship on the topic in Europe (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017; Kováts 2017; Petö and Grzebalska 2018). It can also, perhaps, move scholarship on the far right beyond its central focus on nativism (something, again, which is very much part of my own work).

Presentism

Since the election of Donald Trump in 2016, the field has seen an influx of hundreds of new scholars, from graduate students to established full professors. This has made presentism—the myopic focus on current ideas, attitudes, and experiences—a major risk, leading to ahistorical analyses and reinventing of the wheel over and over again. Presentism has a lot of different causes but is mostly a consequence of unawareness rather than malice, and of the pressure to oversell the originality of one's work to get it published. Scholars either think the present is so different from the past that we can learn little from history or they are simply unaware of the older literature. This is perhaps most striking in some of the contemporary work under the (unqualified) heading of "populism"—it does not just ignore a long tradition of populism research from the twentieth century but also the bulk of scholarship on the third wave of the far right, which did not yet use the term populism.

And yet, most pre-2016 studies on the "radical right" or "right-wing extremism" are probably more relevant to research on contemporary populism than is most general work on populism. For instance, many of the contemporary academic and public debates in the wake of Brexit and Trump, such as support versus protest, or economic anxiety versus cultural backlash (see Mudde 2019), have been fought and studied in Western Europe since the 1990s. In fact, one of the most convincing explanations of support for far-right attitudes and politicians today, so-called social status anxiety, was already introduced in the study of the "radical right" in the US by Seymour Martin Lipset (1955) seventy years ago—a fact that, sadly, some recent studies fail to acknowledge.

At the same time, too much of the academic and public debate is too rigidly steeped in the literature of the third wave. Simply stated, it still considers the far right as political outsiders, who only recently achieved electoral success and political relevance, primarily based on protest voting. But the essence of the fourth wave of the far right is the mainstreaming and normalization—in terms of actors, ideas, and issues—of at least

the *radical* right, meaning that part of the right that is formally democratic but rejects some key liberal protections like minority rights or separation of powers (Mudde 2019). In other words, the relationship between the "political mainstream" and the far right in general, and the radical right in particular, has changed fundamentally, which has crucial conceptual, empirical, and theoretical consequences.

First and foremost, leaving aside the theoretical and normative problems with the concept of "mainstream" (Moffitt 2022; Mondon and Winter 2020), empirically the "political mainstream" is no longer exclusively liberal democratic in many countries. In fact, in a growing number of countries, it is either partly (e.g., in Brazil and the US) or predominantly (e.g., in Hungary, India, and Italy) far right. Consequently, the traditional "challenger paradigm" of the third wave, in which the "far right" challenges the "political mainstream," now makes little sense in these countries—or, at the very least, it requires a fundamental revision. Similarly, the dominant "economic anxiety versus cultural backlash" debate misses a crucial alternative explanation dominant in many electoral studies of "mainstream" parties: "pocketbook voting" (Lewis-Beck 1985). With far-right parties in government specifically targeting subsets of the electorate with state subsidies, at least part of their support is likely because of specific policies rather than ideology or protest (Orenstein and Bugarič 2022).

Second, the mainstreaming of populist radical right actors and ideas has opened up space for *extreme* right actors and ideas—meaning those that are not just antiliberal but antidemocratic too (Mudde 2019). In both Hungary and Poland, the radical right "mainstream" party has faced a (partly) extreme right challenger, at least for some time— Jobbik (before its moderation) and Confederation, respectively. Moreover, populist radical right parties have grown more extreme in terms of actions and ideas. In Hungary, the governing Fidesz has not just destroyed liberal democracy but democracy as such. In Brazil and the US, large parts of the "right-wing" camp reject the results of the last presidential election and openly support a failed coup attempt. I would argue that this is a logical consequence of the mainstreaming of radical right actors and ideas, which has shifted the boundary of acceptability so much to the far right that openly antisemitic, antidemocratic, and racist ideas no longer seem (and no longer are) disconnected from the political "mainstream."

Conclusion

Though obvious to many, it is important to state explicitly that the success of the far right did not start with Trump or with social media. At least since the 1990s, populist radical right parties have been gaining electoral successes and their ideas have slowly but steadily influenced other parties and society as a whole (Mudde 2007). At the same time, the far right today is not the far right of my youth (let alone of the youth of my parents). Not only is it much more successful overall, electorally and politically, it has become relevant in more countries and regions, has partly created new enemies (e.g., Islam and "gender ideology"), and has found new ways to mobilize supporters

and propagate ideas (e.g., social media). Most importantly, it operates in a much more sympathetic cultural and political environment, with enablers and supporters in the elites of all key sectors, from academia to the media and from economics to politics (Bale and Rovira Kaltwasser 2021; Mondon and Winter 2020). Although the study of the far right is one of the most vibrant fields of academia today, it struggles to keep up with these developments.

When I started studying the far right, three decades ago, I had little choice but to read "mainstream" political science literature, as there was not yet enough academic literature on far-right politics available (not even in languages other than English). Today, scholars are no longer able to keep up with everything written on far-right politics because of its sheer, and rapidly expanding, volume, particularly if closely related literatures on topics like "populism" are included. And because of the ever-growing academic infrastructure of the subfield—there are more and more academic journals and book series that cater exclusively or mainly to far-right studies—scholars can have a successful academic career while reading and publishing mainly, if not exclusively, within the field of far-right studies.

To be clear, there is important intellectual value in creating an academic infrastructure for the study of "the far right." Like most important political phenomena, far-right politics is complex in its causes, consequences, and forms. To understand the phenomenon in all its complexity, an inter- or multidisciplinary approach is needed, which is facilitated by initiatives like the UC Berkeley Center for Right-Wing Studies (CRWS), the Center for Research on Extremism (C-REX) at the University of Oslo, the Polarization and Extremism Research and Innovation Lab (PERIL) at American University, and the summer schools organized by the ECPR Standing Group on Extremism and Democracy.[4] At the same time, from an academic career perspective, multidisciplinary initiatives always run the risk of being undervalued by the traditional disciplines, which still dominate the structure of most universities, including hiring decisions.

Yet, as far-right actors and ideas have become mainstreamed in many countries, across several continents, the need to integrate the study of the far right into the "mainstream" study of politics (or social media and social movements) has become even more obvious and urgent (see also Castelli Gattinara 2020). Of course, scholars should be aware and critical of the numerous biases of "mainstream" academia, including Eurocentrism and presentism, which were discussed in this essay. Moreover, "mainstream" academia prioritizes and rewards just a narrow range of research topics and methods, while the study of far-right politics is in dire need of a broader rather than a narrower research focus and methodology. As Pietro Castelli Gattinara (2020, 326) has powerfully argued, "It is only by infusing the field with insights from broader social and political science

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4   I want to thank Pietro Castelli Gattinara for reminding me of this important aspect. For full disclosure, I must also acknowledge that I have been involved, in some (minor) capacity, in all four initiatives.

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paradigms, by adding knowledge from other contexts beyond Europe, and by exploring new methods and data, that we can acknowledge and theorize ongoing developments within this specific breed of politics."

But as scholars challenge and build upon the work of previous generations, they should not forget to reflect, more explicitly and collectively, on the consequences, for the field in general and their personal situation in particular, of the mainstreaming of far-right actors and ideas. Compared to thirty years ago, the stakes of the study of far-right politics are much higher, both for democracy and for scholars. And although I do not envy the new generation of young scholars, who work in an academic and political world that is, in many (but not all!) ways, less accommodating and supportive than the one I made most of my career in, I do feel encouraged, empowered, and inspired by their conviction and zeal.

Acknowledgments

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