

INTRODUCTION

2

The Curse of Relevance

Challenges Facing Right-Wing Studies

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For at least the past decade, researchers of right-wing ideologies, movements, and media around the world have been met with a familiar refrain from interlocutors outside the field: “Oh! That’s so relevant!” While perhaps a blessing in terms of renewed popular interest (e.g., publication opportunities and, albeit to a lesser extent, funding), many right-wing studies scholars would much rather the topic remain arcane and inconsequential.

“The right” has historically been used as an umbrella concept to make sense of a diverse array of political tendencies around the world, although a globally coherent definition has itself proved elusive. Some scholars have associated the right with closely related concepts such as nativism, populism, authoritarianism, and terrorism, variously qualifying its iterations as radical, far, extreme, or mainstream. The term has also been commonly used to refer to pro-capitalist, inegalitarian, chauvinist, and other political formations more broadly (e.g., “conservatism” in the United States and United Kingdom, and “neoliberalism” in other country contexts).¹ Studying such an

1 For illustrative examples, see Justin Gest, “The White Working-Class Minority: A Counter-Narrative,” *Politics, Groups, and Identities* 4, no. 1 (2016): 126–43; Elisabeth Ivarsflaten, “What Unites Right-Wing Populists in Western Europe? Re-Examining Grievance Mobilization Models in Seven Successful Cases,” *Comparative Political Studies* 41, no. 1 (2008): 3–23; Cas Mudde, *The Far Right Today* (New York: Polity, 2019); Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019); and Jacob Aasland Ravndal and Tore Bjørgo, “Investigating Terrorism from the Extreme Right: A Review of Past and Present Research,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 12, no. 6 (2018): 5–22.

amorphous and difficult-to-define object would be challenging enough. This challenge is exacerbated by our present conjuncture of upheaval and entrenched ideological conflict, in which the academy itself is under attack (often by the very political forces we study). Researchers of the right face tough methodological and practical questions: How might a researcher's own political ideological assumptions shape their analysis (for better or worse)? How might a researcher's own personal identity impact their ability to study a phenomenon that is often premised on excluding, marginalizing, or even eliminating entirely certain social and cultural groups? How ought researchers navigate elusive or outright hostile subjects? How ought researchers protect themselves from threats and other forms of violence imposed by their subjects? As these questions illustrate, the challenges facing scholars of right-wing politics are not merely theoretical and methodological. Researching the right may also involve a heightened vulnerability to physical and psychological harms.

This special issue is designed to engage with some of the many distinct challenges faced by scholars specializing in right-wing politics. Our invited essay contributors—Blu Buchanan, Cas Mudde, Meredith L. Pruden, and Emma Tran—have commendably navigated the complexities of this task by identifying, assessing, and advancing solutions to the difficulties facing those who study and teach “the right.” As guest editors, we also felt it was important that the issue include empirical studies that exemplify these challenges and indicate directions for future research in the field. These research articles offer in-depth examination of, and thoughtful reflection on, important methodological and theoretical dilemmas. Hanson-Green and Karčić examine how the representations used to incite and justify violence against Bosnian Muslims in the 1990s are now being exported and utilized to mobilize far-right extremists worldwide. De Winkel and colleagues reflect on the methodological, epistemological, and legal intricacies involved with conducting data-driven humanities research on the right, based on their experiences studying the online platform Gab. Valayden, Walzer, and Moore advance a theory of *ordinary antidemocratic cultures*, seeking to understand how right-wing politics are shaped through rhetorical acts, drawing from their extensive analysis of January 6 riot participants' arrest sheets. Finally, Leeds stages a dialogue between the works of Stuart Hall and Arlie Hochschild with the aim of developing a conceptual heuristic to effectively integrate recent research on the right.

Below, we offer three provocations for the burgeoning field of right-wing studies. We trace its contours, as we see them, along three dimensions: the field itself, its terminologies, and the various social, cultural, and political standpoints of its individual researchers. We note tensions in each that, we contend, point toward the constitutive drives and problems around which our nascent field is emerging. Our aim is not to resolve these tensions but to raise questions and provide researchers with tools for reflexive and deliberate field building going forward.

The Field: Between Judgment and Understanding

4

The field we are lately calling “right-wing studies” emerged out of a series of intellectual quandaries and political concerns resulting from the rise of fascism, the Second World War, and their aftermaths. In short, it originated in two questions: What makes right-wing authoritarianism popular? And how might we preempt or mitigate its salience and harms? We are imposing this clarity on a field that frankly, until recently, did not act like one. Spanning academic disciplines—history, sociology, psychology, political science, cultural studies, and anthropology, to name a few—as well as journalistic and left-wing or progressive research initiatives, what we “know” about right-wing politics results from myriad, at times contradictory, methods, terminologies, theoretical frameworks, normative positions, and political commitments. This variety complicates any effort to speak in broad terms about the field’s contours or tendencies. Nevertheless, for purposes of this provocation, we suggest that many scholarly and journalistic accounts of right-wing politics tend toward one of two drives: one motivated by judgment, the other by understanding.

We use the terms “judgment” and “understanding” in the sense employed by Hannah Arendt.² The former refers to “thought in the service of political action,”³ while the latter refers to an “unending activity by which, in constant change and variation, we come to terms with and reconcile ourselves to reality, that is, try to be at home in the world.”⁴ Studies of right-wing politics rooted in “judgment” begin from a (sometimes unacknowledged) normative position and tend to comprehend their objects of study as deviant. Studies rooted in “understanding” seek to come to terms with a world in which right-wing politics are comprehensible at all. Studies aligned with the former tend toward externalizing the problem of right-wing politics, rendering its supporters exotic or abnormal. Studies aligned with the latter indicate and reckon with (presuming a non-right-wing “we”) our complicity in the very social and cultural forms that yield right-wing political formations. We are not advocating, here, for one tendency or another but

2 We acknowledge that Arendt did not invent these terms from whole cloth but built on long-standing philosophical debates. We further acknowledge that Arendt’s conceptualization is subject to considerable disagreement and deliberation among philosophers and political theorists. Litigating those debates is beyond the scope of this brief introduction. For a useful work that situates Arendt within an array of philosophers who were also concerned with the challenges of analyzing political formations in the absence of shared or authoritative standards of reason, judgment, and comprehension, see Tracy B. Strong, *Politics without Vision: Thinking without a Banister in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

3 Peter T. Steinberger, “Hannah Arendt on Judgment,” *American Journal of Political Science* 34, no. 3 (1990): 803–821, at 812.

4 Hannah Arendt, “Understanding and Politics (The Difficulties of Understanding),” in *Essays in Understanding: 1930–1954: Formation, Exile, and Totalitarianism*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1994), 307–27, at 308.

simply identifying the tension between them as generative, even perhaps productive, of right-wing studies as a field.

We first encounter this tension in two classic studies aimed at making sense of German National Socialism and its totalitarian mode of governance—both involving and informed by the experiences of Jewish refugee survivors of the Holocaust.

The first, *The Authoritarian Personality*, is a pathbreaking and exhaustive social psychological analysis of “the *potentially fascistic* individual” whose personality structures “render him particularly susceptible to anti-democratic propaganda.”⁵ The study—a collaboration between social psychologists Nevitt Sanford, Else Frenkel-Brunswik, and Daniel Levinson and Frankfurt School philosopher Theodor Adorno—posited that fascist political support could not be explained by ideology or material interests alone. They devised a personality test, known as the “F-scale,” which accounted for several psychosocial dimensions and was designed to determine the degree to which a particular individual might be disposed toward supporting right-wing authoritarian politics and policies. While Adorno and his collaborators opposed biological determinism or fixed conceptions of personalities, positing that inclinations toward fascism were shaped by many social and cultural inputs alongside the personal experiences of an individual, they nevertheless framed high F-scale personalities as pathological and abnormal. “[N]o political-social trend imposes a graver threat to our traditional values and institutions than does fascism,” the authors wrote. “[K]nowledge of the personality forces that favor its acceptance may ultimately prove useful in combatting it.”⁶ *The Authoritarian Personality* is a quintessential example of thought in the service of political action (i.e., judgment). Based on a normative premise, that support for liberal democracy reflects a healthy personality aligned with “traditional values,” the study employs empiricist methods with the goal of predictive modeling that might guide efforts at mitigating the widespread acceptance of right-wing authoritarian politics.

If Adorno and his team searched for the causes of fascist support within the personalities of individuals, Hannah Arendt argued against such causal explanations of fascism in her 1954 *Partisan Review* essay “Understanding and Politics.” “Understanding,” Arendt wrote, “as distinguished from having correct information and scientific knowledge, is a complicated process which never produces unequivocal results.”⁷ Arendt saw totalitarianism as related to a broader crisis of meaning attendant with modernity. She drew a distinction between common sense (which “presupposes a common world into which we all fit”) and logicity (which “claim[s] a reliability altogether independent of the world and the existence of other people”). Nazism, for

5 T. W. Adorno, Else Frenkel-Brunswik, Daniel J. Levinson, and R. Nevitt Sanford, *The Authoritarian Personality* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1950), 1, original emphasis.

6 Adorno et al., 1.

7 Arendt, “Understanding and Politics,” 307.

Arendt, involved the ruthless application of logicity to much older and less novel conceptions of racial superiority and antisemitism, specifically the belief in an iron law of history as driven by racial struggle. She saw “understanding” as a form of investigation and cognition that engaged in the sort of meaning-making and world-building (the process of cultivating intersubjectivity among people) whose absence enabled Nazi totalitarianism to emerge and gain popular support. To be sure, Arendt associated understanding with political action—the “very essence of human freedom,” in which people begin something new, boundless, and unpredictable. But understanding, which Arendt considers “the other side of action,” cultivates a shared common sense among political actors that allows them to “come to terms with what irrevocably happened and be reconciled with what unavoidably exists.”⁸ Asking how and why people engage in right-wing political action, for Arendt, is about making sense of a world in which right-wing beliefs and policies are comprehensible in the first place. This understanding is a prerequisite for imagining the world otherwise or anew but neither offers nor implies a concrete program for implementing that vision.

While we give judgment and understanding equal billing here, overall the field of right-wing studies is skewed toward the former. Empirical studies of right-wing politics—seeking causal explanations, rooted in (often underexplicated or at least underexamined) normative frameworks, and with a tendency toward considering right-wing political formations as aberrant and deviant—have long dominated the field. Look no further than the seemingly never-ending taxonomies of right-wing political formations: radical, far, ultra, extreme, fringe, moderate, and so on. The first scholarly book about the “New American Right,” published in 1955 and edited by Daniel Bell, extended central assumptions of *The Authoritarian Personality* to explain McCarthy-era conservatism in the United States, what has since been considered by political historians as the modern conservative movement.⁹ In it, Richard Hofstadter borrowed the concept of the “pseudo-conservative” from Adorno and his colleagues, claiming that McCarthy-era conservatives were protofascists hiding under a thin veneer of traditional conservative rhetoric. Bell contended that modern conservatism was fundamentally antimodern, motivated by individuals who felt “dispossessed” by progress, while Seymour Martin Lipset coined the phrase “status anxiety” to explain how fear of losing social dominance informed modern conservatism’s racist and antisemitic tendencies.¹⁰

8 Arendt, 321–22.

9 The anticommunism associated with the Second Red Scare played an instrumental role in the rise of modern conservatism as both an intellectual and social movement. For a history of the former, see George H. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945* (Wilmington, DE: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 1998). For a history of the latter, see Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

10 Daniel Bell, ed., *The Radical Right: The New American Right Expanded and Updated* (New York: Anchor Books, 1963). It is worth noting, perhaps, that both Bell and Lipset became influential neoconservatives by the turn of the twenty-first century.

These psychosocial explanations of modern conservatism remain salient among journalists and some scholars, who have recently dusted them off to explain the rise in popularity of Donald J. Trump, among other contemporary phenomena on the right. This is in spite of the fact that political theorist Michael Rogin, in his book *The Intellectuals and McCarthy* (1967), had long since disproven many of the core assumptions of Bell and his fellow authors. Rogin famously accused such “pluralist” intellectuals of “participating in the status politics they analyzed,” and argued that modern conservatism (what he termed the “countersubversive tradition”) ought not to be relegated to the political fringe—as pluralists were wont to do—but ought to be considered as existing “at the core of American politics.”¹¹ Rogin’s later work epitomizes the project of understanding, as we conceive it. Rather than locate right-wing authoritarianism as exogenous to the US political tradition, Rogin illuminates the centrality of racist and settler-colonial logics at the heart of US “democracy.” If the project of judgment within right-wing studies is to frame right-wing politics as a fringe social pathology capable of remedy without disrupting the extant political system, the project of understanding challenges that view by suggesting that right-wing politics emerges from the central logics of the extant political system itself.

A more recent illustration of this dialectic can be found in the dueling questions of journalist Thomas Frank and historian Bethany Moreton, both notable contributors to the field of right-wing studies in the United States. Frank asks, in his 2004 bestseller of the same name, “What’s the matter with Kansas?” In her 2009 book, *To Serve God and Wal-Mart*, Moreton retorts, “What matters to Arkansans?”¹² Frank’s question rests on a liberal version of vulgar Marxist “false consciousness,” which presumes that people ought to act politically based on their material economic interests and sees “cultural issues” like abortion as means by which conservative elites trick their constituents into voting irrationally. Frank’s investigation begins with judgment: conservative voters are being duped, how? Moreton, on the other hand, sees no contradiction in conservative voters synthesizing the material and the ideal, and voting accordingly—her work demonstrates how evangelical Christianity and support for laissez-faire capitalism were articulated within US Sunbelt communities due to historically contingent political, economic, and cultural forces that emerged during the Cold War.

Frank and Moreton, Bell and Rogin, Adorno and Arendt: these thinkers and debates demarcate the contours of a central and ongoing discussion within the field of right-wing studies. Is right-wing politics a “far” or “fringe” or “radical” intrusion into

11 Michael Paul Rogin, *The Intellectuals and McCarthy: The Radical Specter* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1969), 274, 277.

12 Thomas Frank, *What’s the Matter with Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004); Bethany Moreton, *To Serve God and Wal-Mart: The Making of Christian Free Enterprise* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

otherwise stable, pluralistic, and egalitarian democratic societies? Or is right-wing politics a mere expression of the core contradictions and repressive tendencies at the heart of liberal democracy? We acknowledge there will be no definitive and universally satisfying answers to either of these questions. Yet, by engaging with our core question—are our studies driven by judgment or understanding?—we can more deliberately and reflexively situate our answers within the established, if underrealized, field.

Terminology: Between Analysis and Euphemism

Situating ourselves more reflexively within the field of “right-wing studies” also requires grappling with its unwieldy array of terminologies. Even the definition of “right,” with its varying prefixes and adjectives qualifying degrees of intensity (“far,” “radical,” “extreme,” “ultra”), remains far from settled. Geography presents one challenge. What is left, right, or unmarked in one country context can be perceived as being on the right, left, or center in another. Take the case of Colombia, where the very idea of the welfare state or workers’ rights has been construed and is largely perceived in mainstream culture as akin to communism (recently recodified as *castrochavismo*), while in Switzerland—where the far-right Swiss People’s Party has been the strongest party in the National Council since 1999—public services, workers’ rights, and the welfare state are considered to be part of the natural order of things.¹³ History presents another challenge. Something identified with the “right” at one point in time might become unmarked, naturalized, or mainstreamed at another point, or the other way around. The challenges presented by geography and history extend beyond the object of study, encompassing the questions posited, the approach taken, and the language used by the researcher. Imbalances of power between the Global North and Global South are at the heart of the Eurocentrism that skews knowledge production in mainstream English-language academia, and they play a central role in shaping how certain concepts are used and popularized.¹⁴

13 As Oscar Mazzoleni has noted, the Swiss People’s Party certainly criticizes social spending and bureaucracy, not to oppose social benefits themselves but to slam what they call the “profiteers” of the system—such as “false refugees,” “false unemployed individuals,” drug addicts, and so forth. See *Nationalisme et populisme en Suisse: La radicalisation de la “nouvelle” UDC* (Lausanne, Switzerland: Presses Polytechniques et Universitaires Romandes, 2008), 74. Despite the embrace of neoliberalism in the last decades of the twentieth century, welfare states (which are part of the legacy of postwar Keynesianism) remain strong in continental Europe. Again, the contrast with Colombia—where the entanglement of “political violence and neoliberal restructuring” has been extreme—could not be starker. See Lesley Gill, *A Century of Violence in a Red City: Popular Struggle, Counterinsurgency, and Human Rights in Colombia* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 23.

14 See Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), and *Black Rights / White Wrongs: The Critique of Racial Liberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

That is to say, the terminology used in right-wing studies often insufficiently engages with the legacies of colonialism and empire.

Take, for instance, “populism.” In Western Europe and beyond, it has emerged as a master trope in both academic and popular discourse over the last decade to designate anything considered “politically odious.”¹⁵ The term is usually employed to categorize political figures, projects, and parties challenging the liberal status quo, regardless of whether the challenge aims at advocating for justice and downward redistribution or at entrenching various forms of inequality. This unwittingly reinforces Eurocentrism. Placing the institutions and values of liberal democracy at the top of a political philosophical hierarchy elides, or misreads as inferior, non-Western radical forms of democracy.¹⁶ It also obscures the more authoritarian practices at the heart of Western liberal democracy—including both historical and ongoing imperial and colonial projects.¹⁷

The term is also problematically imprecise. It paints radically opposing projects with the same analytic brush, which is why “populism” typically requires an extra qualifier—left or right, “exclusionary” or “inclusionary,” and “identitarian,” among others.¹⁸ Nevertheless, within right-wing studies, “populism” often appears “unqualified and as a key definer” to designate right-wing actors in lieu of more precise terms that might better indicate their “more extreme nature.”¹⁹ This

15 Anton Jäger, “The Myth of ‘Populism,’” *Jacobin*, March 1, 2018, <https://jacobinmag.com/2018/01/populism-douglas-hofstadter-donald-trump-democracy>.

16 For an example of scholarship that places liberal democracy at the top of such a hierarchy without acknowledging other types of democracy, see Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 95. Some examples of non-Western, non-liberal, and/or radical democratic formations include Bolivia’s Ayllu communitarian democracy, Venezuela’s Comunas, Colombia’s San José de Apartadó Peace Community, and the Zapatista Caracoles. See, respectively, Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, “Liberal Democracy and Ayllu Democracy in Bolivia: The Case of Northern Potosí,” *The Journal of Development Studies* 26, no. 4 (1990): 97–121; George Ciccariello-Maher, *Building the Commune: Radical Democracy in Venezuela* (New York: Verso, 2016); Christopher Courtheyn, *Community of Peace: Performing Geographies of Ecological Dignity in Colombia* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2022); and Walter Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011). For more details on alternative modes of democratic social organization, see Arturo Escobar, *Designs for the Pluriverse: Radical Interdependence, Autonomy, and the Making of Worlds* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).

17 See Domenico Losurdo, *Liberalism: A Counter-History* (New York: Verso, 2014); Aurelien Mondon and Aaron Winter, *Reactionary Democracy: How Racism and the Populist Far-Right Became Mainstream* (New York: Verso, 2020); and Mills, *The Racial Contract and Black Rights / White Wrongs*.

18 Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, “Exclusionary vs. Inclusionary Populism: Comparing Contemporary Europe and Latin America,” *Government and Opposition* 48, no. 2 (2013): 147–74; Marc Ferro, “Le tentations radicales du populisme contemporain,” in *Le retour des populismes: L’état du monde 2019*, ed. Bertrand Badie and Dominique Vidal (Paris: La Découverte, 2019), 73–81.

19 Aurelien Mondon, “Epistemologies of Ignorance in Far Right Studies: The Invisibilisation of Racism and Whiteness in Times of Populist Hype,” *Acta Politica* 58, no. 4 (2023): 876–94, at 884–85. For

association of populism with the extreme right wing is often taken for granted. A review of European scholarly literature on the topic identified the common deployment of “populist” as a synonym for extreme right parties and movements whose primary overt political aim is to protect “the identity of the ‘Christian Western civilization’” and to mobilize overtly xenophobic and/or anti-Muslim discourses.²⁰

Indeed, perhaps related to its increasing use as an epithet, “populist” has become a salient term among right-wing activists themselves. For instance, leaders of the National Rally (formerly the National Front) party in France—first Jean-Marie, then Marine Le Pen—have threatened to sue anyone who describes the party as extreme right.²¹ But they have happily embraced the “populist” designation because it serves their longstanding efforts to move from the electoral fringes to the mainstream.²² Jean-Marie adopted *Le Pen le peuple* (Le Pen the people) as his slogan in 1988, and Marine set on *la voix du peuple, l'esprit de la France* (the voice of the people, the spirit of France) as hers in 2012. While this is certainly tantamount to performing “the people,” foregrounding these populist claims in scholarly analyses—as though they are the core of the Le Pen political project—obscures the clear ethnic/racial dimension of their notion of peoplehood.²³ Their “people” necessarily excludes Muslim, Arab, and Black populations, even second- or third-generation individuals born and raised in France but with ancestors in, say, Algeria.²⁴ As French sociologist Annie Collovald has argued, referring to National Rally / National Front as “populist” has leant the party a “fictional identity,” deradicalized in appearance

another study about how “populism” performed the function of euphemizing and trivializing the European extreme right in a six-month “The New Populism” series run in 2018 by the *Guardian*, the British liberal newspaper par excellence, see Katy Brown and Aurelien Mondon, “Populism, the Media, and the Mainstreaming of the Far Right: The Guardian’s Coverage of Populism as a Case Study,” *Politics* 41, no. 3 (2021): 279–95.

20 Yannis Stavrakakis, Giorgos Katsambekis, Nikos Nikisianis, Alexandros Kioupkiolis, and Thomas Siomos, “Extreme Right-Wing Populism in Europe: Revisiting a Reified Association,” *Critical Discourse Studies* 14 no. 4 (2017): 420–39. It is indeed at the right and far-right end of the spectrum that the explicit rejection of Muslims and their religion is most pronounced. In France, this is especially the case among overt supporters of the National Rally / National Front party. See Félicien Faury, *Des électeurs ordinaires: Enquête sur la normalisation de l'extrême droite* (Paris: Seuil, 2024), 118.

21 Cécile Alduy, Annie Collovald, and Jean-Yves Pranchère, “Les faillites du langage,” interview by Anne-Lorraine Bujon and Michaël Fœssel, *Esprit* 10 (2023): 65–79, at 68.

22 Brown and Mondon, “Populism,” 287.

23 Cécile Alduy and Stéphane Wahnich, *Marine Le Pen prise aux mots: Décryptage du nouveau discours frontiste* (Paris: Seuil, 2015), 171.

24 See Ali Rattansi, *Racism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 102; and Stéphane Wahnich, “Marine Le Pen dévoilée,” *La Cause du désir*, no. 112 (2022): 160–71, at 162.

but not in substance.²⁵ This has resulted in increasing acceptance of their politics because it has contributed to the breaking of certain psychological barriers among constituencies that had traditionally been resistant.²⁶ Applying “populist” as a mere descriptor of these actors’ practices, without critically interrogating the broader racial and ethnic hierarchies that structure most postcolonial Western societies, is detrimental to nonwhite populations that, following dramatic demographic changes in the aftermath of empire, have at this point been part of European nation-states for generations.²⁷

Using the term “populism” to describe right-wing political formations can thus function as a sort of analytically unhelpful, and (for the right) politically productive, euphemism for “racism” or “supremacism.”²⁸ A key commonality among right-wing formations around the world is the naturalization of hierarchy to justify the supremacy of certain privileged segments of society.²⁹ Placing our analytical emphasis on their rhetorical opposition between “people” and “elites” distorts the picture. On the one hand, doing so downplays the racial/ethnic supremacist underpinnings of the projects in question;³⁰ on the other, doing so obscures the fact that right-wing demands often

25 Alduy, Collovald, and Pranchère, “Les faillites du langage,” 68.

26 Cécile Alduy, “Nouveaux discours, nouveaux succès,” *Pouvoirs* 157, no. 2 (2016): 17–29, at 27–28.

27 In this context, another term, “nativism,” most commonly defined as an ideology promulgating that “states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group (‘the nation’),” is also flawed. See Cas Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 19. This definition, like the others, elides that right-wing actors use rhetoric that constructs certain (racialized) native-born populations as “foreigners.” For a critical assessment of the ideational approach to “nativism,” see George Newth, “Rethinking ‘Nativism’: Beyond the Ideational Approach,” *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* 30, no. 2 (2023): 161–80. Furthermore, in the current moment of intense ideological struggle, the term reinforces the core myth of settler colonialism, namely, that the lands in the North American continent were empty prior to the seventeenth-century arrival of British settlers. See Lorenzo Veracini, “Settler Colonialism,” in *The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Imperialism and Anti-Imperialism*, ed. Immanuel Ness and Zak Cope (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 2412–17.

28 See Humberto Cucchetti, Alexandre Dézé, and Emmanuelle Reungoat, *Au nom de peuple? Idées reçues sur le populisme* (Paris: Le Cavalier Bleu, 2021); Stavrakakis et al., “Extreme Right-Wing Populism”; Brown and Mondon, “Populism”; and Alduy and Wahnich, *Marine Le Pen*. For a historical account of the euphemistic tradition within the far right, see Roger Griffin, “‘Lingua Quarti Imperii’: The Euphemistic Tradition of the Extreme Right,” in *Doublespeak: The Rhetoric of the Far Right since 1945*, ed. Matthew Feldman and Paul Jackson (Stuttgart: ibidem Verlag, 2014), 39–60.

29 See Corey Robin, *The Reactionary Mind: Conservatism from Edmund Burke to Donald Trump*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

30 A recent ethnographic study in France has shown the flaws in customary explanations for the twenty-first century electoral rise of the National Rally / National Front that insistently focus on social class and the trope of the left behind of neoliberalism while downplaying racism. See Faury, *Des électeurs ordinaires*.

have a lot to do with elites' agendas rather than popular demands driving "bottom-up pressure."³¹

Populism's dual valences—referring to an analytical concept of some use in understanding right-wing formations, but also to a form of identification that serves the interests of right-wing actors themselves—presents a particular problem for scholars whose terminology and mode of analysis may unwittingly bolster the self-serving rhetorical and conceptual needs of the actors they study. Since rhetoric is a key component of the political game in liberal democracies, it is crucial for scholars of the right to reflect carefully about what terms to utilize to designate and qualify their object of study and to do so from a global and longer-term historicized approach. If as scholars we aim at explaining and analyzing, it seems crucial not to align our conceptual tools with the political objectives of our object of study.

The Researcher: Between Stance and Reception

Researchers studying the right face a unique twofold challenge, namely the need to grapple with the impact of their own standpoint and personal history on their work, and with the reciprocal influence of their work on their personal lives. When it comes to scholars addressing their own positionality and personal history and considering how these factors might affect their work, several complexities emerge. While certain scientific frameworks, especially critical approaches, encourage and even expect explicit acknowledgment of scholars' positionality, others uphold epistemological values that suggest that such introspection may not be well received and could potentially undermine the credibility of the research. Consequently, this complicates engaging in comparative interdisciplinary research, even though, as has been argued before, it would greatly benefit future research in right-wing studies (see Tran's commentary in this issue).³²

Reflection on one's positionality when studying the right, whether explicit or not, can help prevent researchers from inadvertently sustaining specific biases. Recognizing the researcher's privileged position can be useful to avoid assumptions that one's experiences and interpretations are universally applicable and standard. Alternatively, such biases can limit research's capacity to capture the complexities inherent in right-wing studies. Further, failing to acknowledge the role of factors such as race, class, or historical oppression in the research process can obscure and therefore maintain social inequalities. For example, Gurminder Bhambra defines methodological whiteness as a constraint on scholarly epistemologies, where whiteness is taken for granted as the universal standard, resulting in its conflation with other concepts such as class when

31 Mondon, "Epistemologies of Ignorance," 885.

32 See the contributions in "Right-Wing Studies: A Roundtable on the State of the Field," *Journal of Right-Wing Studies* 1, no. 0 (2023), <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7dc7t9jd>.

analyzing the factors driving right-wing movements (e.g., the successes of Trump and Brexit), while overlooking nonwhite populations' experiences of class struggle.³³ Additionally, as this lack of acknowledgment can inadvertently elevate certain narratives and methodologies over others, it reinforces the existing power structures within academia, potentially perpetuating disparities stemming from historical barriers and discrimination.

Furthermore, as the right focuses on attacks against minority groups, researchers whose identities align with these groups or whose personal experiences connect them deeply to these issues might be more compelled to engage in self-reflection. Certainly, they may not have the option to avoid such introspection, resulting in a heavier load and an additional layer of exposure within their work. Because many of the subjects they study often wield power, researchers, especially those presenting identities targeted by the right, independently of their political stance, are particularly exposed to violence, such as doxing and harassment, or live in fear that such actions might take place.³⁴ Moreover, constant exposure to hateful content and threats can be especially impactful for those who have experienced victimization in the past, while a lack of institutional and structural support may compound this sense of vulnerability (see Buchanan's commentary in this issue).

This leads us to a second distinctive challenge encountered by researchers studying the right, which revolves around managing the impact of this work on their lives. Many scholars specializing in right-wing studies are at an increased risk of encountering situations that jeopardize their physical and mental well-being. As previously mentioned, one of these challenges involves the very real threat of physical violence.³⁵ This can intensify when scholars make themselves visible to subjects, for instance in the context of recruitment, fieldwork, and other types of data collection.³⁶ Furthermore, immersing themselves in content marked by intolerance at best, and explicit violence at worst, often triggers feelings of hopelessness that may extend beyond their professional lives.³⁷ Studying such rhetoric and behavior in contexts in which they may appear

33 Gurinder K. Bhambra, "Brexit, Trump, and 'Methodological Whiteness': On the Misrecognition of Race and Class," *The British Journal of Sociology* 68 (2017): S214–S232.

34 Elizabeth Pearson, Joe Whittaker, Till Baaken, Sara Zeiger, Farangiz Atamuradova, and Maura Conway, *Online Extremism and Terrorism Researchers' Security, Safety, and Resilience: Findings from the Field* (Vox Pol, 2023), <https://voxpol.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Online-Extremism-and-Terrorism-Researchers-Security-Safety-Resilience.pdf>.

35 Pearson et al., *Online Extremism*.

36 Thomas Colley and Martin Moore, "The Challenges of Studying 4chan and the Alt-Right: 'Come On In the Water's Fine,'" *New Media & Society* 24, no. 1 (2022): 5–30.

37 Tina Askanius, "Studying the Nordic Resistance Movement: Three Urgent Questions for Researchers of Contemporary Neo-Nazis and Their Media Practices," *Media, Culture & Society* 41, no. 6 (2019): 878–88.

normalized, even normative or desirable, can foster feelings of isolation. These emotions are compounded when the topics under study personally resonate with researchers, serving as a strong motivation for their work but also intensifying its negative effects.

Adding to these difficulties, the potentially solitary nature of scholarly work may amplify the negative emotional impact on researchers of the right, making it crucial to find peers who experience their work similarly.³⁸ In this context, it is essential to emphasize that scholars, beyond their research responsibilities, are also often tasked with teaching duties in contexts of heightened political polarization, introducing additional complexities for those focusing on the right (see Mudde's commentary in this issue). The challenges associated with teaching the right unfold in response to, and are shaped by, the specific political climate within the scholars' sphere (e.g., within the institution, region, or state). Moreover, these challenges become more intricate, and more apparent, amid the ongoing mainstreaming and normalization of far-right ideologies, resulting in such arguments finding space in class, student-led professor watchlists, or unfavorable anonymous feedback from students sympathetic to the far right in teaching assessments at the end of the semester.

To further complicate this issue, the demands of academic productivity make it increasingly difficult to detach from this work (see Pruden's commentary in this issue). Even when attempting to do so, researchers' complete mental disengagement remains challenging due to the intense nature of the content under analysis, thus contributing to heightened stress levels.³⁹ In addition to the stress that may arise from potential harm to scholars' physical and mental health, as well as from the limitations on taking breaks that may be imposed by academic productivity demands, another stressor is the inherent complexity of conducting this type of work. Alongside the risks of recruiting subjects for research in the field of right-wing studies, there is the resistance of right-wing individuals to engaging with academic research.⁴⁰ Consequently, this difficulty can lead to delays, extended research timelines, or even the termination of studies.

While these challenges exist for many scholars regardless of rank, they can weigh heavily on early-career researchers, who already are under substantial pressure to publish or perish. While acquiring research skills and knowledge and building a substantial publication record to enhance their future job prospects, they may need to learn how to protect themselves. Ironically, taking measures to protect themselves might involve decreasing their visibility, potentially exposing them to negative

38 Kathleen M. Blee, "Studying the Enemy," in *Our Studies, Ourselves*, ed. Barry Glassner and Rosanna Hertz (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 13–23.

39 Paris Martineau, "The Existential Crisis Plaguing Online Extremism Researchers," *Wired*, May 2, 2019, <https://www.wired.com/story/existential-crisis-plaguing-online-extremism-researchers/>.

40 Kathleen M. Blee, "Ethnographies of the Far Right," *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 36, no. 2 (2007): 119–28.

professional repercussions.⁴¹ Further, they might still lack a network of fellow scholars to offer guidance and support during this learning process. For instance, although the field of right-wing studies is expanding, they might be the only scholars studying these topics within their department, intensifying their sense of isolation. As they may need to advocate for particular research strategies, such as tailored approaches that protect researchers as well as subjects, or potentially unconventional timelines, these feelings may be aggravated when dealing with senior scholars who may be less familiar with these specific challenges.⁴²

This special issue aims to initiate a dialogue around these challenges. While admittedly we do not possess definitive solutions, our goal is to shed light on these issues and provide a platform for insightful scholars to begin addressing them. Simultaneously, we aim to foster conversations among researchers employing diverse approaches, enabling them to better understand their own and each other's positions and biases. We see this effort as an important step to initiate interdisciplinary collaboration and ultimately move the field forward. Additionally, we hope that this special issue will support scholars advocating for adjusted guidelines and specific accommodations due to their work studying the right. While we do not claim that this compilation can replace a supportive network of scholars, we hope that it will offer guidance on potential strategies to approach this work. By sharing insights from researchers who have navigated or are currently navigating similar challenges, we aim to illuminate ways to mitigate them and, importantly, provide solace to those undergoing the emotional toll of engaging in this work, assuring them that they are not alone.

41 Pearson et al., *Online Extremism*.

42 Maura Conway, "Online Extremism and Terrorism Research Ethics: Researcher Safety, Informed Consent, and the Need for Tailored Guidelines," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 33, no. 2 (2021): 367–80.