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Think Piece: Ways of Seeing: Anthropological Approaches to Right-Wing Movements

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Abstract:
The article shows the diversity of ethnographic work on the far right. It distinguishes between different approaches, highlighting their potential for the anthropology of right-wing movements: participant observation, interview-based studies, and a focus on cultural semiotics and political economy.

Key words: right-wing, populism, anthropology, ethnography, research ethics

With the 'shift to the right' that has become increasingly evident in Europe and beyond since the 2010s, a new branch of anthropological research, a dynamic subfield of political anthropology, has emerged. In a highly politicised field of research, the question of the appropriate relationship between proximity and distance to those being researched plays a special role. There are different and controversial answers to the related questions of research ethics, ranging from 'ethically correct' to 'ethically permissible' to 'immoral anthropology'. This brief, trenchant sketch of ethnological approaches is based on a longer, German-language publication (Wellgraf 2024).

The anthropology of right-wing movements sits in an uncomfortable position, as it exposes shortcomings in the academic debate and reveals gaps and misunderstandings in public debates without wanting to become an advocate or champion of the right. It resists monocausal explanations and undermines common stereotypes, for example by presenting right-wing groups as heterogeneous and contradictory entities and right-wing actors as complex but by no means always unsympathetic personalities. At the same time, ethnographers must be prepared for hostility, attempts at appropriation, and threats from the right. The study mentioned here focuses on right-wing movements in Europe and North America. In order to diversify the spectrum of ethnographic work and to highlight its achievements and current challenges, I distinguish between different approaches: participant observation, interview-based studies, and a focus on cultural semiotics and political economy. These approaches build on older traditions and are now being transferred to a new field of investigation.

Participant observation is considered the most important research tool in anthropology and the importance it is given in the research process marks

a difference to approaches in other disciplines. Examples of such a classic approach in the studies of right-wing movements include Hilary Pilkington's (2016) *Loud and Proud: Passion and Politics in the English Defence League* and Lene Faust's (2020) *Neofascism in Italy: Politics, Family, and Religion in Rome*. The strengths of the ethnographic approach based on participant observation lie in the fact that it opens up a complex perspective on the inner views of right-wing movements and often also sets new conceptual accents. Such studies make clear what drives the actors in right-wing movements and what holds them together. By showing that right-wing fields are complex and changing, stereotypes can be challenged and new perspectives opened up. This body of work tends to focus on more positively connoted emotional complexities such as pride and empowerment, as well as feelings of solidarity and community, or at least appeals to the reader's understanding. The danger of this approach is that it gets too close to the field in that it adopts self-victimisation and the political partisanship that goes with it.

Some studies primarily or exclusively use interviews as a data collection method. These differ from conventional qualitative sociological studies in that they focus on the encounter itself, making the personal journey to right-wing actors the object of research. Biographical accounts, with the attempt of getting '[i]nside the racist mind' (Ezekiel 2015), walk a fine line, as the abyss of glorification and heroisation is always only a step away and giving an account of the problem through individual stories runs the risk of personifying social problems. Kathleen Blee (2002), who published such a study on the American white power movement, later wrote about the question of whether anthropologists should talk about rights. She set out a strict guideline: research should not only be 'ethically permissible' but must be 'ethically right', including in terms of the possible consequences of the research (Blee 2018: 98). The burden of proof associated with this high ethical bar is difficult to meet as ethnographic research is often exploratory in nature. However, such demands can be read as a reminder to keep a closer eye on the potentially negative consequences of one's own research. For anthropologists, the question of how to talk with right-wing actors – in what contexts, in what forms, and for what purposes – is perhaps even more relevant. Appropriate positioning is evident in the ways we meet our interlocutors and how we write about them.

Alongside ethnographic approaches in the narrower sense, which rely on intensive participant observation and intense personal encounters, there are also anthropological works that are based on selective or kaleidoscopic field research in which different facets of a thematic context are illuminated. These works on cultural semiotics often take detours, broadening the perspective at best. As a result, ethnographic fieldwork sometimes takes a back seat to discursive and semiotic inquiry. Two very different studies from cultural anthropology in the United States – Nitzan Shoshan's (2016) *The*

Management of Hate: Nation, Affect and the Governance of Right-Wing Extremism in Germany and Benjamin Teitelbaum's (2017) *Lions of the North: Sounds of the New Nordic Radical Nationalism* – show that the pendulum of interpretation can swing in very different directions. Whilst Shoshan was conducting undercover research to expose 'Nazis' in East Berlin, Teitelbaum was fraternising with radical right-wing musicians in Scandinavia. This proximity is part of Teitelbaum's (2019) provocative programme of an immoral anthropology. Based on the imperative of unconditional solidarity with research subjects and the primacy of friendship as a relational mode in fieldwork, Teitelbaum necessarily makes anthropologists collaborators with their fields, even if this does not mean acting immorally themselves. Blee's admonishing do-no-harm principle and Teitelbaum's sinister immorality can be seen as two opposite poles of a broad spectrum of research ethics. However, there is also a middle ground between an immoral anthropology and a militant anthropology, as advocated by Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1995, 2019), who is unsurprisingly one of Teitelbaum's most vehement critics. Rather than having to take sides in this battle, the anthropology of right-wing movements should be more concerned with further exploring the in-between space of what is ethically justifiable, recognising the specific problems and challenges of ethnography in specific right-wing fields and seeking appropriate solutions.

Whilst interpretations in cultural semiotic approaches are sometimes quite arbitrary, the thrust of neo-Marxist research on right-wing movements tends to remain relatively clear. In this line of interpretation, the rise of right-wing movements is primarily the result of the oppression and disenfranchisement of the former working class, which is increasingly drifting to the right politically after being largely abandoned by the left. Texts of this kind often contain long historical and theoretical derivations. Marxist anthropologists have also been amongst those who have taken up the task of analysing right-wing movements at a time when little attention was paid to this topic. The anthology *Headlines of Nation, Subtexts of Class* edited by Don Kalb and Gábor Halmai in 2011 can be seen as programmatic for this line of research. It implies that although (neo-)nationalism dominates the headlines, there is a subtext of class underneath, a politically momentous transformation of the class structure. Books written in this way are therefore often a little more abstract than is usual in the ethnographic genre, and the analysis of political-economic circumstances they practice can sometimes seem rather cumbersome. Comparative approaches and large-scale explanations are also typical. In his study *Integral Europe: Fast-Capitalism, Multiculturalism, Neofascism*, Douglas Holmes (2001), for example, jumps from northern Italy to Strasbourg, Brussels, and London to work out an overarching motif of integralism that, in the context of right-wing populisms and under the conditions of contemporary capitalism, leads to a new fascism.

As we have seen, anthropologists look at right-wing movements differently from how they look at other topics. The first step must be to recognise the very different types of research a focus on the right wing requires and to appreciate its specific contributions to the understanding of right-wing movements. A second step could be to combine the strengths of the different approaches and avoid their weaknesses as far as possible. The ethnographic sensitivity of participant observation to everyday contexts, the art of listening in interviews and the potential of biographical writing, the importance of cultural contexts and artefacts in semiotic analyses, and the impact of larger political and economic developments emphasised in neo-Marxist writing – there is much to be learnt from each of the research strands described. A final step could then be to bring anthropological research more confidently into the public sphere, to highlight the valuable contributions and insightful perspectives of our research on right-wing movements. This may help to reduce mistrust of such approaches to the far right – not only amongst colleagues from other disciplines but also within our own discipline.

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