DISCUSSION NOTE

Piotr Kocyba & Sebastian Sommer

On (missing) critical distance and (involuntary) alliances: A warning about the reproduction of far-right ideologies in academic papers

[piotr.kocyba@phil.tu-chemnitz.de] (Chemnitz University of Technology)
[sommermail@zedat.fu-berlin.de] (Freie Universität Berlin)

Abstract

In recent years, far-right actors and movements have become a growing field of scientific research. The specific challenges of this political spectrum have led to a number of interdisciplinary debates on methodology and ethics. In this context, questions concerning a critical distance in research have played a crucial role since there is a constant risk of an involuntary reproduction and thus amplification of far-right ideology. The article 'The Transnationalization of Ethno-nationalism: The Case of the Identitarian Movement' by Petra Mlejnková (published in *Intersections*) illustrates these pitfalls. It shows the consequences of a lack of reflexivity when approaching far-right activism. As a result, the author's findings appear rather one-sided when contrasted with critical debates on far-right ideology and current methodological discussions. Moreover, the presentation of the results creates the impression of, at least implicit, empathy towards the 'Identitarian Movement.' This, in turn, shows the risk of scientific research turning unintentionally into a (discursive) ally of the far-right and promoting ideologies of inequality.

Keywords: far-right ideology, research methodology, research ethics, Identitarian Movement

1 Introduction

Research on far-right movements raises specific methodological and ethical questions. There exists in this field a particular risk of – consciously or unconsciously – promoting ideologies of inequality. In the most recent publication on methods and ethics in the study of the far right, the authors state in their conclusion: '[B]y focusing on such movements, researchers are giving them a platform through which these actors can express, explain and even legitimize and normalize their ideas' (Mondon & Winter, 2021, p. 371). This kind of legitimization and normalization are what we perceive to have happened in an article which Petra Mlejnková recently published in *Intersections*. In her paper 'The Transnationalization of Ethno-nationalism. The Case of the Identitarian Movement,' the author attempts to reconstruct how a movement of the far right frames its agenda to mobilize transnational. In this commentary, we want to focus on selected examples of pitfalls in researching the far right.

2 Methodological critique

In the debates mentioned above on researching far-right movements, questions have been regularly raised about the methods applied. A major discussion concerned the methodological approaches to this specific field in order to gain the desired insights. Working with publicly available primary sources, such as pamphlets or social media content, is, on the one hand, a way of maintaining distance from the stigmatized field of far-right politics while allowing its actors 'to speak for themselves' (Pilkington, 2016, p. xiii). On the other hand, Kathleen Blee describes such sources as 'front-stage presentations' that just 'communicate what racist groups want the public to know' (Blee, 2017, p. 1). Therefore, those sources only offer limited insights into the politics of far-right groups and bear the risk of duplicating their self-representation. One possible mitigation for such difficulties could be the integration of other methods into the research design (e.g. critical discourse analysis). Mlejnková mainly concentrates on primary sources instead, seldomly supplemented with other scientific research or media interpretations. In addition, the empirical database is – with only twelve (short) texts published online and an outdated manifesto – comparatively narrow and the selection of sources is not further explained.

3 Misconception of the object of research

Moreover, hardly any reflection on the terminology used in the article is provided. For example, the author classifies the Identitarian Movement (IM) as 'radical right,' with reference to Hans-Georg Betz (2003). It certainly would have been beyond the scope of Mlejnková's article to repeat the debate about terms such as 'radical right,' 'far right,' 'right-wing extremism,' or 'populist radical-right' which has been going on for decades. Still, some basic terminological reflection would have been necessary since Betz's article was written years before the international diffusion of the IM and mainly concentrated on political parties like *Vlaams Blok*. Mlejnková disregards the context of Betz's paper and transfers the conclusions to a quite different phenomenon. Without a proper explanation, the use of Betz's concept in the context of the IM seems like a discursive de-radicalization of the movement. This becomes clear when reading the author's own sources which clearly place the IM at the outermost edge of the right-wing spectrum. For example, Fabian Virchow characterizes the Identitarians as part of the 'Extreme Right' (Virchow, 2015, p. 181) and Heinz Handler classifies them as an 'extreme right-wing movement' (2019, p. 1).

Only by ignoring the terminological debates and the state of current research on IM can one then conclude that 'The ideology of the radical right is no longer based on biological racism or white superiority, and it does not seek to install a nondemocratic regime' (Mlejnková, 2021, p. 138). It is surprising, that in discussing a far-right group viewed by her own sources as one steeped in the traditions of fascism (Handler, 2019, p. 6; Weber, 2004, p. 157), the author presents their beliefs in a harmless light. Therefore, we will critically discuss the three dimensions mentioned by Mlejnková: Neo-Racism, white supremacy, and democracy.

3.1 IM and Neo-Racism

It is undisputed that certain parts of the far right distance themselves from biological racism. The IM ideologically promotes (historical) concepts of ethnopluralism. One main dispute between actors of current far-right movements and (liberal) theoreticians is the question of whether ethnopluralistic concepts constitute a differentialist 'neo-racism' (Balibar, 1991) that is grounded in and promotes inequality based on the perception of 'cultural belonging.' The research literature has extensively illustrated how 'the incompatibility of cultures' is used to conceal racist attitudes (Hall, 1989). From this point of view, IM's claim of not being racist must be seen as a rhetorical strategy, described in the research literature, for example, as 'politics of denial' (van Dijk, 1992). Nevertheless, without referring to the relevant literature, Mlejnková argues that '*some scholars* conclude that this appears to be true only at a cursory glance and that the IM stands for a form of differentialist or cultural racism that leaves behind the superior attitude of classic racism' (2021, p. 140; authors' emphasis). By contrast, not 'some' but *all scholars* (especially all authors quoted by Mlejnková) attest that the IM is engaged in forms of 'politics of denial' and refers to neo-racialized ideologies of inequality based on perceived 'cultural differences.'

3.2 IM and (white) supremacy

Adding to this, Mlejnková claims that the IM would stand for a simple 'differentialist' view without elements of supremacist thinking. Referring vaguely to Minkenberg and Betz, the author presents the IM as if it *really* believes in a pluralistic and non-hierarchical ideology: 'Rather than superiority, it is an incompatibility of cultures, ethnicities, and religions which is believed in' (2021, p. 138). This argumentation ignores influential theories according to which 'differentialist' ideologies constitute hierarchies, since the construction of differences (and the choice of criteria in doing so) produces, at least implicitly, a (hegemonic) position (Balibar, 1991, pp. 24–25). This is acknowledged in a variety of Mlejnková's own sources. For example, Minkenberg describes the practical consequences of such 'differentialist' views: 'Ethnopluralism only appears to be pluralist and liberal; its essence is a politically *enforced segregation* of cultures and ethnicities according to geographical criteria, a *global apartheid*' (2000, p. 180; author's emphasis). That 'only' the incompatibility of cultures constitutes the IM's reading of ethnopluralism seems hardly appropriate.

3.3 IM and democracy

In consequence, an actor that pushes racism and white supremacy can barely be called democratic. Mlejnková even hints at this anti-democratic dimension herself when she writes that the IM would reject 'universal human rights and freedoms' and argues 'in harmony with the *ideology of National Socialism*' (2021, p. 140; authors' emphasis). Against this background, it seems clear that the authoritarian ideology of the IM has, to say the least, strong anti-democratic dimensions. After all, their political strategy ultimately aims at the change of the political system (Havertz, 2021, p. 103).

4 Repetition and mirroring of right-wing ideologies

In consequence, the claims that the IM is not racist, does not seek white supremacy, and does not have anti-democratic intentions do not only ignore the state of research but repeat far-right arguments. In the paper discussed here, the mirroring of far-right ideology already appears at the linguistic level. Mlejnková uses terms like 'barbarians' or 'invaders,' both coined by the IM, to refer to migrants from the Middle East and North Africa, without declaring them as quotes (Mlejnková 2021, p. 141). But there are more such examples, like when the author writes about the 'concept of the Great Replacement,' which makes the racist conspiracy myth appear like a serious scientific or political concept (ibid., p. 142). This lack of (e.g., linguistic) distancing makes it in parts hard to distinguish whether Mlejnková refers to IM's ideology or presents her own arguments. Adding to that, there are passages in the text that present far-right ideology in a rather unbalanced way.

Here we would like to refer to a particularly striking example, namely Mlejnková's presentation of the '120 Decibels' campaign (p. 142). With this campaign, IM's goal was to create a scandal around sexual violence, not in general, but only that committed by alleged 'migrants.' This reduces the social problem of femicide to a certain group of perpetrators and victims, as crimes against non-white women or crimes conducted by white men are ignored. This racialization or culturalization of social problems is an established strategy of the radical right. And still, Mlejnková simply repeats such argumentation: 'German and Austrian women spoke up against abuse and violence perpetrated against European women by migrants and encouraged other women to share their experiences' (ibid.). First, the author fails to mention that all women presented in the campaign video are well-known female activists of the IM, not ordinary 'German and Austrian women.' Second, the female IM-activists did not 'speak up' but alluded to publicly discussed cases previously instrumentalized by the far right. In addition, the 'speak out' also implies that such violent crimes had been silenced in the public debate. This redoubles the staging of the campaign instead of deconstructing it. But not only does Mlejnková needlessly repeat the message of the IM, which manipulatively plays with emotions and fears. She even describes the campaign as '*very sensitive and emotional*' (ibid.; authors' emphasis). In the end, the passage reads like an affirmation of a far-right political campaign and its underlying ideology, an ideology which should not under any circumstances be presented 'worthy of [...] *empathy* or *sympathy*' (Mondon & Winter, 2021, p. 374; authors' emphasis).

5 Conclusion: Pitfalls of scientific research on the far right

In conclusion, it should be noted that Mlejnková's paper does not reflect upon the methodological debates in this specific research field. As a consequence, the formal and rhetorical presentation of the findings is questionable. Various passages in the article fail to distinguish between the citation of far-right ideology and its scientific analysis and thus blur the lines. Such an (even unintentional) reproduction is in itself ethically problematic – especially if the presentation of research results creates an emphatic impression. This poses the risk of academic articles introducing the language and topics of far-right ideology as valid arguments into the scientific discourse. At this point, scientific research remains at risk of becoming an (unwilling) ally of the far right. Through our criticism, we hope to have clarified that there is a special responsibility in studying the far right, especially when presenting the research results.

References

Balibar, É. (1991). Is there a Neo-Racism? In E. Balibar & I. Wallerstein (Eds.), *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities* (pp. 17–28). Verso.

Betz, H.-G. (2003). Xenophobia, identity politics and exclusionary populism in Western Europe. *Socialist Register, 39*, 193–210.

Blee, K. M. (2017). *Understanding racist activism: Theory, methods and research.* Routledge.

Hall, S. (1989). Rassismus als ideologischer Diskurs. *Das Argument, 178*, 913–921.

Handler, H. (2019). European identity and Identitarians in Europe. *Flash Paper, 1/2019.* https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3338349 Accessed: 26-07-2021.

Havertz, R. (2021). *Radical right populism in Germany. AfD, Pegida and the Identitarian movement.* Routledge

Minkenberg, M. (2000). The renewal of the radical right: Between modernity and antimodernity. *Government and Opposition, 35*(2), 170–188. https://doi.org/10.1111/1477-7053.00022

Mlejnková, P. (2021). The Transnationalization of Ethno-nationalism: The Case of the Identitarian Movement. *Intersections. East European Journal of Society and Politics, 7*(1), 136–149. https://doi.org/10.17356/ieejsp.v7i1.572

Mondon, A. & Winter, A. (2021). From demonization to normalization: Reflecting on far right research. In S. D. Ashe et al. (Eds.), *Researching The Far Right. Theory, Method and Practice* (pp. 370–382). Routledge.

Pilkington, H. (2016). *Loud and Proud: Passion and politics in the English Defence League.* Manchester University Press.

van Dijk, T. A. (1992). Discourse and the Denial of Racism. *Discourse & Society, 3*(1), 87–118. https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926592003001005

Virchow, F. (2015). The 'Identitarian Movement': What kind of identity? Is it really a movement? In P. A. Simpson & H. Druxes (Eds.), *Digital media strategies of far-right in Europe and the United States* (pp. 177–190). Lexington Books.

Weber, M. (2004). Prototyp der Neuen Rechten. Alain de Benoist und die Nouvelle Droite in Frankreich. In W. Gessenharter & T. Pfeiffer (Eds.), *Die Neue Rechte – eine Gefahr für die Demokratie?* (pp. 145–162). VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.