



*Social Movements in the 21st Century: New Paradigms*

# **RESEARCHING FAR-RIGHT MOVEMENTS**

**ETHICS, METHODOLOGIES, AND QUALITATIVE  
INQUIRIES**

Edited by  
Emanuele Toscano



# Researching Far-Right Movements

As extreme and far-right movements become increasingly widespread in many countries, the sociology of social movements is called to confront them. This book addresses the specific challenges entailed by the empirical study of such movements, presenting case studies from Japan, Thailand, England, France, Italy, the USA and Turkey. Based on empirical field-work, the chapters explore the ethics and politics of researching far-right movements, considering the researcher's reflexivity and the methodological issues raised by being emotionally linked to a research object that affirms and strives for values that differ markedly from those of the researcher. As such, it will appeal to scholars of sociology and politics with interests in social movements and research methods.

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### **Researching Far-Right Movements**

Ethics, Methodologies, and Qualitative Inquiries

*Emanuele Toscano*

# **Researching Far-Right Movements**

Ethics, Methodologies,  
and Qualitative Inquiries

**Edited by Emanuele Toscano**

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# Contents

<i>List of contributors</i>	vii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	x
 <b>Researching far-right movements. An introduction</b>	 1
EMANUELE TOSCANO	
 <b>1 The specificities of researching evil</b>	 13
MICHEL WIEVIORKA	
 <b>2 “Field observer: Simples.” Finding a place from which to do close-up research on the “far right”</b>	 23
HILARY PILKINGTON	
 <b>3 Rapport, respect, and dissonance: Studying the white power movement in the United States</b>	 41
LISA K. WALDNER AND BETTY A. DOBRATZ	
 <b>4 Rethinking the party, the state and the world: The case of Turkish right-wing nationalist youth in Gezi protests</b>	 59
DERYA GÖÇER AKDER AND KÜBRA OĞUZ	
 <b>5 Reporting the “good deeds” of far-right activists</b>	 75
DANIEL BIZEUL	
 <b>6 The dark side of the field. Doing research on CasaPound in Italy</b>	 90
EMANUELE TOSCANO AND DANIELE DI NUNZIO	

<b>7 Uncustomary sisterhood: Feminist research in Japanese conservative movements</b>	<b>107</b>
AYAKA SUZUKI	
<b>8 Militant far-right royalist groups on Facebook in Thailand. Methodological and ethical challenges of Internet-based research</b>	<b>121</b>
WOLFRAM SCHAFFAR AND NARUEMON THABCHUMPON	
<b>Conclusions. Doing research on far-right movements</b>	<b>140</b>
EMANUELE TOSCANO	
<i>Index</i>	<b>146</b>

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# Researching far-right movements. An introduction

*Emanuele Toscano*

The first decades of the new millennium have been the scene of a growing global entrenchment of political forces and movements openly inspired by radical and populist right-wing values (Mammone, Godin and Jenkins, 2012; Mudde, 2017). The motivations, causes, and determining variables—economic, social, political—of this growing proliferation are complex and diverse, and open to different interpretations according to the analytical categories used, and the theoretical perspective chosen for analysis.

With regard to the Atlantic world (e.g., Europe and the United States), there are essentially three factors that underpin the rise of the far right in recent years: first, the social and economic consequences of the Great Recession that began in 2007 with the subprime crisis in the United States, and the austerity measures imposed by the European institutions to deal with its global effects; second, the escalation of military conflicts, humanitarian crises, and associated migratory phenomena that have fostered the emergence of anti-immigrant speeches and nationalist positions; and finally, the growing insecurity caused by the assertion of an Islamic and radical terrorism which, beginning with the attack on the USA's Twin Towers and Pentagon on September 11, 2001, has repeatedly and painfully struck the heart of the United States and Europe. Along these lines, in Greece, the far-right party *Alba Dorata* was the third-largest political force in the Parliamentary elections of September 2015 with 7% of the vote. In Hungary, the far-right movement known as *Jobbik* became, after the 2014 parliamentary elections, the third-strongest party in the country with 20% of the vote. Marine LePen's *National Front* of France obtained 27% of the vote in the 2017 presidential elections, the same percentage obtained by the Eurosceptic and anti-immigration party, *Alternative für Deutschland*, in the March 2017 German elections. In Austria the candidacy of the nationalist party, *Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs* (FPÖ), gained 35% of the votes in the first round of the presidential elections in April of the same year.

Although prominent on the Old Continent, it is not only Europe that is affected by this type of phenomena. In the United States, the victory of the Republican Donald Trump in the November 2016 presidential elections was openly supported by American right-wing white supremacists (Lyons, 2017).

In India, Narendra Modi, leader of the *Bharatiya Janata Party* (Indian People's Party), won premiership of the country in 2014 supported by the Hindu nationalist extreme right.

The social sciences have not been indifferent to the rise of the far right, particularly in Europe where literary contributions are fuelling, on a large scale, a wide range of topics investigating the causes, rise, and diffusion of these phenomena. Many of these studies, defined as “externalist” by Goodwin (2006), obtained “at a distance” and based on second-level data, have focused mainly on the analysis of the macro-social and macro-political determinants that underlie the success of these parties, organizations, and movements, but give little information on the motivations that drive individuals to take part in far-right initiatives, the recruitment methods, and the individual and collective identity of the activists. Some authors, such as Blee and Creasap (2010), have instead emphasized the need to study these phenomena closely to understand, beyond their relevance in electoral terms, their nature, causes, cultural dimension, and above all the meaning given to the action by the social actors who bring these initiatives to life. Qualitative studies and close-range research (Daniels, 1967) can indeed provide interesting information and a better understanding of the individual motivations that entice individuals to participate in this type of movement, along with greater awareness of the internal functioning of these organizations and the role cultural dimension plays in the meanings far-right activists attribute to their actions. This type of research, which involves direct contact and, more generally, the creation of a relationship with the subject through interviews, the collection of life stories, and participant observation, are—in the academic landscape—much less widespread than those based on publicly available materials and data. This is mainly due to the daunting challenges that characterize this specific field of research, but especially because of possible ideological and political differences between researcher and researched that may constitute a further obstacle to the fulfilment of close-range research. For this reason, the need for greater focus on these phenomena through qualitative and internal analyses (Blee, 2007; Goodwin, 2006) must necessarily be accompanied by focused attention to the equally important ethical and methodological implications related to this field.

It is precisely these two questions that form the main objectives of this book. The first is to present, without any pretence of being exhaustive, a review of qualitative studies on the far-right worldwide. These include the study of movements and organizations that are very different in terms of size, orientation, practices, and relationship with violence. They range from single-issue movements such as the *English Defence League* analyzed by Hilary Pilkington; anti-feminist conservative organizations in Japan presented by Ayaka Suzuki; racist movements and organizations such as the *White Power Movement* studied by Beth Dobratz and Lisa Waldner in the United States; the nationalist components present in the movements in Gezi Park, Turkey, analyzed by Derya Göçer Akder and Kübra Oğuz;

movements operating mainly on the Internet and social networks, as in Thai vigilantes on Facebook, discussed by Wolfram Shaffar and Naruemon Thabchumpon; political parties such as the *French National Front* studied by Daniel Bizeul; and organizations openly inspired by fascism but with a strong cultural attitude in their actions, as in *CasaPound Italia*, which I researched together with Daniele di Nunzio.

The second objective is to present an analysis surrounding the ethical and methodological issues related to the study of “the evil,” to use Michel Wieviorka’s words in his contribution to this book. The study of the far-right through close-range research presents its own difficulties linked to the specific attributes of the subject: the ethical implications and difficulties related to field access, and the relationship between the researcher and the social world he intends to investigate, which is often far from his or her own moral convictions and values.

## 1. The problem of definition

The first question that a researcher interested in studying the far-right deals with is the problem of definition and what it identifies. Literature defines phenomena and organizations attributable to the same party family (Mudde, 1996) in varying and overlapping terminologies (e.g., extreme right, radical right, extreme radical right, populist right). The term extreme right identifies strongly ideologized subcultures, more complex social movements, and even political parties (Merkel and Weinberg, 2005): a large spectrum of phenomena that share a common ideological matrix, characterized by the rejection of universal rights and social equity in the name of sovereign nationalism, while supporting positions of closure with respect to integration and multiculturalism. These tendencies range from outright biological racism to the differentialist one, in which cultural differences are not regarded hierarchically but rather as something to be safeguarded from the processes of massification and homogenization.

There are three predominant reasons for this terminological confusion. According to Mudde (2017), the main one is due to the fact that many of these organizations do not recognize themselves in a specific definition, often rejecting their placement on a mostly obsolete left-right axis. A second reason, in Ignazi’s (2003) opinion, is the simplification given to the term *extreme right* by the mass media and public opinion, with many among them identifying with these latest phenomena. Finally, the third is the lack of convergence by those studying these phenomena to a unique identifying definition and categorization (Merkel, 2003; Blee and Creasap, 2010). Although offering noteworthy analyses, still much of the existing literature on this topic conceptualizes the definition of extreme right by considering only the political parties (Art, 2011; Carter, 2005; Ignazi, 2003); focus is placed on contextual analysis (Lubbers *et al.*, 2002) by means of analytical perspectives of sociological and political science often

associated with the concept of populist extreme right (Betz, 1994; Mudde, 1996; 2007; and 2017), while eliminating the social movements and subcultures attributed to a wider definition of extreme right. With a greater focus on aspects of macro-social (demand-side and supply-side explanations) (Eatwell, 2003) and meso-social (the study of formal organizations such as political parties) order, these analyses had the goal of providing structural explanations, combining socio-economic and socio-cultural elements such as unemployment, immigration, and the emergence of a culture based on fear and safety (Rydgren, 2007; 2008). However, on the micro-social side, for the majority of time the socio-psychological perspective has been dominant, highlighting the “pathological” traits adherent to far-right movements and organizations, with elements such as ignorance, psychological disorders, and frustration considered distinctive (Allport, 1958; Adorno *et al.*, 1950; Lipset, 1960). In recent years, this latter perspective has been largely abandoned by most scholars who deal with these phenomena (Blee and Creasap, 2010).

This edited book contains analyses of phenomena seen as quite different in ways of action and organizational dimension, even if they are all still identifiable by ideological and extreme-right positions. For this reason, I decided to use the term *far right* to describe them as a whole, inasmuch as it is, as emphasized by Art (2011), an umbrella term under which all phenomena, parties, associations, extra-parliamentary, or subcultural movements that differ from the traditional and moderate right, can be grouped. Art accentuates his reasoning by including an expansive view with respect to this differentiation, highlighting that the radical right “uses a language that the mainstream parties avoid using” (p. 11). I believe this reasoning, which Art himself limits to only political parties, can easily be extended to social movements and subcultures of the extreme right, not only with regard to language but also to modalities of action.

## 2. Far-right and social movement studies

Though the far right, as argued by Mudde (2017), is the most studied among the political party families, there is conversely a smaller amount (although increasing in recent years) of sociological analysis on this issue, particularly starting from the perspective of *social movement studies*, especially when compared to the vast literature on progressive social movements oriented on leftist values.

Among the most widespread approaches to the study of the far right through social movement-specific categories are certainly those of resource mobilization and political opportunity theories (Caiani *et al.*, 2012; Blee and Creasap, 2010; Virchow, 2017). In this perspective, extreme-right movements are analyzed focusing on the organizational networks and their transnational diffusion (Van Hauwaert, 2018), on a range of collective actions, and on the study of the mobilization strategies in the use of material and

immaterial resources to broaden its activist and militant base. Within the theoretical framework of social movement studies, it is worth mentioning the sociology of action approach which, albeit not to the extent of those mentioned previously, has dealt with the extreme right issue mainly through the qualitative empirical work carried out in France (Wieviorka, 1992) and Europe (Wieviorka, 1993) by Michel Wieviorka and his research team. This theoretical approach has never demanded much analysis of far-right movements, largely interpreting them as anti-social movements.<sup>1</sup> This definition identifies those forms of collective action that oppose the three characteristics of social movements, according to social action theory—the principles of identity, opposition, and totality (Touraine, 1993)—thereby distorting its scope and making it impossible to integrate them into the structure of collective action.

Other studies conducted in the United States and Europe, based on a social movement study perspective and close-range research, have enabled investigation into new and unprecedented aspects of activist participation in far-right movements of this kind, focusing attention on a wide range of characteristics: the cultural aspects and the significance of the collective action; gender differences within them; motivations and individual attribution of meaning given to participation and activism; the individual and collective dimension of identity; differences between the “public” façade and internal dynamics. We see this approach demonstrated in studies such as, to name a few, those carried out on the racist movements of the Ku Klux Klan in the United States (Blee, 1993; 2002; and 2007; Ezekiel, 1995 and 2002), and in organizations and far-right movements in the Netherlands (Linden and Klandermans, 2007), in Scandinavian countries (Bjørge, 1997), Italy (Di Nunzio and Toscano, 2011), France (Boumaza, 2001), England (Pilkington, 2016), and Germany (Virchow, 2007).

These studies are often based on ethnographic approaches and the collection of oral histories of activists, which, in addition to highlighting little-investigated aspects capable of providing a better understanding of these phenomena, also raised ethical and methodological questions related to subject peculiarities.

### **3. Ethical and methodological implications of research of the extreme right**

Tackling the study of the far right through close-range research brings with it numerous unique ethical and methodological questions, as well as necessarily requiring study of the researcher-subject relationship in specific far-right contexts, again rarely addressed in social movement research discussions.

Clearly, any field of research has peculiarities and specific access complexities, and those who usually do empirical research using a wide range of qualitative methodologies are well aware of the potential difficulties and



perils inherent in every field enquiry. The subjectivity of the researcher and social actors involved also influence this process. As illustrated by Boumaza and Campana (2007), the concept of difficulty as applied to research field-work has an extremely subjective connotation, and depends on many individual and relational variables, which do not establish a field of research as difficult, *a priori*.

Starting from these essential considerations, it is also possible, through an analysis of the literature, to highlight two main types of problems necessarily faced by a researcher tackling the study of the far right through both a social movement perspective and a survey methodology based on direct field data collection.

The first type is related to close-range field access, within which it is often very difficult to negotiate. Difficulties may arise with the wariness and lack of trust that activists often nurture not only towards researchers (and journalists) but also towards the research process as a whole (Nikolski, 2011). Esseveld and Eyerman (1992), and Boumaza and Campana (2007) show that in addition to a lack of trust there is also a stereotyped prejudice towards the researcher, who is viewed as an outsider and part of the “power system”<sup>2</sup> they want no part of. On the contrary, the activists may at the same time have instrumental motivations to participate in a research project, seeing it as an opportunity for visibility and legitimation. In this case, the risks involved are that the underlying negotiations—including that of field access—become compromises themselves (Cefaï and Amiriaux, 2002): for instance, the acceptance of excessive limitations imposed by activists on the field researcher’s freedom of movement (prior selection of the subjects to be interviewed and even met; interference with the finished research product and/or which parts of the interviews may be reported) make for an emotionally stressful and extremely difficult research process (Boumaza and Campana, 2007).

The second problem is related to the positioning of the researcher in the field, his/her relation to the subject, and the emotional dimension of this relationship. The interest in the researcher-subject relationship has emerged over the last decades, especially from a theoretical point of view, thanks to the growing focus on the sociological aspect of emotion in social movements and its role and importance in the collective action (Goodwin, Jasper and Polletta, 2001). From the methodological point of view, however, much of the progress is due to the establishment of the perspective of feminist studies in social sciences, which changed the nature of the research relationship by shortening the gap between the researcher and the actors involved, and transforming it into an interaction in which the subjective and emotional dimensions are measured (Harding, 1987). Moreover, the diffusion of strong subjectivation-focused research methodologies such as sociological intervention (Touraine, 1993) have contributed to the spread of greater awareness regarding the characteristics of the researcher-subject relationship, as well as on the emotional dynamics of the research process. For the most part,

social movement studies have commonly focused on analysing progressive movements inspired by values of emancipation: workers' movements, civil rights movements, new social movements. The methodologies and research practices based on interaction (interviews, oral histories, participant observation) that work well with this type of movement include, as Blee (2007) points out, an empathetic aspect between researcher and researched, in which the core beliefs and visions of the world are generally and at least partly shared—a methodological bridge that is usually lacking in scholars using qualitative techniques, reflecting specific characteristics needed in the relationship between a researcher and subject who have contrasting values, perspectives, and visions of the world (Esseveld and Eyerman, 1992). The close-range study of the far right involves an analysis of the dynamics and emotional dimension of this relationship, which is rarely seen in the literature (Blee, 1998) and remains little investigated, even though it influences the research process as a whole. Further adding to the difficulties of investigative field access compromises and the problematic researcher-researched relationship, is the negative reputation held by researchers for these social movements and organizations, generally bearers of progressive world visions (Avanza, 2008).

#### **4. This book**

As mentioned earlier, this volume examines different situations of empirical research on far-right movements and organizations in different parts of the world, from Europe, to the United States, to Asia. In their diversity, they share three analytical elements that constitute the supporting axis, the skeleton, of this book. The first concerns the subject, recognized by various far-right attributes—not necessarily a political party, but also a movement and subculture inspired by far-right tendencies. The second is of a methodological nature: having dealt with and analyzed this type of phenomena through close-range research methodology. Finally, the third concerns the ethical and reflexive dimension of one's own research and position in the researcher-subject dynamic. In this way, I wanted to try to articulate a multi-voice analysis that took into consideration different worlds and social realities related to the far right, studied “up-close” and with precise categories and that are compared in the issues of ethical guidelines and methodologies presented in the preceding sections, while trying at the same time to provide possible answers and solutions to these questions that are still rarely addressed.

The opening contribution of Michel Wieviorka introduces the theoretical questions concerning the role and relationship of the researcher with respect to the subject, the axiological neutrality of the understanding produced, and how the study of evil problematizes these aspects, in terms of both theoretical and methodological analysis. Wieviorka in fact begins with an important consideration: good and evil<sup>3</sup> are never separated and

always coexist, often affecting each other; it is therefore necessary to overcome the barriers and fragmentations among those studying social and cultural movements inspired by progressive values and emancipation, and those studying the right, so as to build a common sociological perspective. Starting from his own empirical research on terrorism, racism, and violence, Wieviorka questions the methodological issue of the researcher-study field relationship, presenting two potential mistakes that should be avoided in field access investigation and negotiation: too great of a separation, and disproportionate blending.

The coexistence between good and evil highlighted by Wieviorka is a factor that emerges in many of the contributions in this book, sometimes unexpectedly, as in that presented by Derya Göçer Akder and Kübra Oğuz among young Turkish nationalists at the core of the events of Gezi Park in Turkey. The two scholars show, through a close-range methodological choice, two distinct aspects: the unusual localisation of the radical Turkish nationalist right in the Gezi Protest, and the discourses and meanings attributed by the militants to their individual and collective actions in a movement of government resistance, becoming part of an international perspective (known as the “Mediterranean Spring”). Conversely, this coexistence between good and evil is what drives the question put forth by Daniel Bizeul, the ethical dilemma of the researcher in the face of “positive” behaviors and good deeds performed by racist and sectarian activists, such as his reports from National Front militants in France. Even a very radical right-wing activist may have the opportunity to act in a just or generous manner, and Bizeul particularly questions how to report and document, objectively and without bias, this type of behavior in his own research, while at the same time not justifying the political action as a whole.

The problems of negotiation and field access; the management of emotions and stress in the course of fieldwork; and the relationship between research desire and researcher security are explored in-depth, among other issues, in the contribution from Dobratz and Waldner. Based on a long-term study of the supremacists and racists of the White Power Movement in the United States, the analysis focuses on the characteristics with which this specific fieldwork is presented to those who want to conduct close-range research, and highlights—starting from the direct experience of the two researchers—the strategies adopted to negotiate access, maintain field presence, and manage tensions and difficulties.

Other contributions, by analysing the far right in different contexts, delve into specific aspects of field access, and the complex dynamics of forming the foundation of a relationship of trust with one’s own subject, clearly problematic at its base. Like Geertz with his anecdote of the cockfight in Bali,<sup>4</sup> Hilary Pilkington highlights in her contribution how the role of observer was ascribed and recognized by the group observed (The English Defence League in England) only after sharing a common

experience with them, continuing with how the creation of a research relationship based on trust and respect does not undermine the axiological neutrality of the research. Similar stances regarding the researcher's role and the need to build a relationship of mutual trust and respect—even in fieldwork with distasteful movements—are also supported in the contribution from me and Daniele di Nunzio, in which we report some results of close-range research conducted on the far-right organization CasaPound Italia. The contribution also highlights the value close-range far-right research brings, and therefore allows for the exploration of the cultural dimension of far-right movements and organization actions: an example of this is the importance CasaPound Italia attributes to music to strengthen the group's identity, recruit new potential militants, financially support the movement, and spread material.

The ways in which a close-range approach to the action is useful in bringing out the cultural dimensions are also discussed in the contribution of Ayaka Suzuki, who describes her research experience with women activists of a Japanese nationalist and conservative organization. Suzuki problematizes the methodological dimension by reflecting on her chosen approach, that of customary feminist research. This enabled her to underscore the specific characteristics of female participation in this organization, and to reflect on how the methodological choices she made, along with the gender aspect (her being a woman), influenced not only field access negotiations but also the management and fulfilment of the study.

Finally, but certainly not least, there is the contribution of Shaffar and Thabchumpon, in which an Internet-based research experience is presented on militant far-right royalist groups in Thailand on Facebook. This contribution shows further peculiarities and problems inherent in research on far-right movements and organizations, and, more generally, in conducting research via social network platforms such as Facebook and the ethical privacy implications this type of study entails.

## Notes

1. For a detailed analysis of the concept of the anti-social movement and to grasp its evolution, see Touraine, 1993 (pp. 11–28), and 1997 (pp. 127–133); Wieviorka, 1988 (pp. 17–20), 1991 (pp. 155–157), and 2005 (pp. 15–18).
2. Esseveld and Eyerman (1992) also affirm that this criticism (common to many fields of research and certainly not only in far-right movements) is often faced by the research activists' active involvement at varying levels of possibility, but also raises other ethical role-boundary issues that can generally be resolved by the same activists' involvement, but which at the same time generates other ethical and methodological questions regarding involvement limits and process interference. This latter issue becomes more complex when it comes to activists of far-right movements.
3. The categories of good and evil are not used in religious or metaphysical terms, but as the recognition and negation of the subjectivity and humanity of an individual or group by others (*cfr.* Wieviorka's chapter in this book).

4. In his famous work, *Interpretation of Cultures* (1987), anthropologist Clifford Geertz recounted a story which occurred during a time of participant observation in the Southeast Asian island of Bali. Having been involved, with his wife, in an (illegal) cockfight, he decided to evade the police and run—along with all the Balinese present—rather than stay, explain, and avoid possible arrest. By doing this, he shared a common experience with them, hence becoming recognized by the community by virtue of being a participant observer.

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## The specificities of researching evil

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## **“Field observer: Simple.” Finding a place from which to do close-up research on the “far right”**

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## **Militant far-right royalist groups on Facebook in Thailand. Methodological and ethical challenges of Internet-based research**

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## Conclusions. Doing research on far-right movements

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