Neo-Nationalism and Far Right Studies: Anthropological Perspectives

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Introduction

From an anthropological perspective, scholarly work on the far right in Europe suffers on at least two accounts. Any time issues of populism, nationalism, and far right is reduced to an issue of political parties, who qualify as a far-right party, anthropologists like myself feel perplexed. Not least since this focus comes from the structure of political science studies that prioritizes a top-down, political party focus over the phenomenon itself. The second point springs from this observation. From a classic anthropological methods principle, you should be careful not to impose your categories upon your field-site or phenomenon under study. Thus, as Janet Carsten (1995) convinced us, you do not study kinship by asking people for specific kinship categories as your starting point. You try to follow different forms of relatedness and then “discover” the categories in play. This principle is challenged when violent events are categorized as “terrorism” from the outset and provides a formidable view of how hegemonic understandings operate (Hervik 2017).

School shootings and other mass killings are often mistakenly first represented as “terror”, “terror-like” or “cannot be said to be terror” committed by people with Muslim background. However, against this common belief killings by right wing activists in Norway, Sweden, Germany, and Russia, have outnumbered those associated with Islamist terror (Jåsund and Topdahl 2017; C-REX 2016). At the same time, radical right wing violence, often meant to threaten but not kill, has risen dramatically (Jåsund and Topdahl 2017). These two factual statements help bring attention to the double standards of news media coverage and political rhetoric, where spectacular violence and massacres are labelled and perceived along neo-nationalist, racial, and “left-right” lines.

Within anthropology, and science more broadly, the struggle is ongoing to properly conceptualize and understand the current trend that the right and far right embrace the idea.
that immigration threatens the nation’s cultural homogeneity and the politics of fear that accompany it. Anthropologists have attempted to understand this trend as neo-nationalism (Gingrich and Banks 2006), nationalist populism (Gullestad 2006a, Kalb and Halmai 2011), and “paranoid nationalism” (Hage 2003), with an embedded naturalization of xenophobia and “cultural differences” (Stolcke 1995, Hervik 2011. At the same time, the political communication industry is furthering this process by “dumbing down” conversations and interviews to reach the maximum number of voters and media customers. Since Habermas wrote famously about the public sphere, it has “degenerated in industrialized mass-welfare democracies through processes of commoditization, monopolization, and competition among private interests over state-directed resource allocation” (Cody 2001:39). What this adds up to – and this volume bears witness to - is an insistence that neo-nationalism cannot be studied separately from neo-racism, processes of racialization, anti-elitism, anti-intellectualism, anti-multiculturalism, anti-feminism and a host of other things.

While observing the drastic changes around the turn of the millenium, European anthropologists began to show explicit interests in studying both political party and majority constructions of reinvigorated nationalism with its racial implications. With a special issue of a journal on racism (Ethnos 2004) and an edited volume on neo-nationalism (Gingrich 2004; Gingrich and Banks 2006), neo-nationalism and neo-racism emerged as analytical concepts that sought to capture a trans-national and drastic global increase in anti-Migration sentiments and practices springing from them.

In this chapter, I will emphasize three perspectives anthropology can offer to the study of neo-nationalism and far right studies in the era of global populism, the explosion of neo-nationalism, and the hostile, racialized reactions to migrants and refugees.

First of all, good anthropology will scrutinize key empirical and analytical concepts relevant for the ethnographic analysis of fieldwork material among, in this case, people who
can be said to belong to the far right. When anthropologists began turning attention more
generally to the world they inhabited, not least in the 1990s (Hervik 2004), they would, so to
speak, return from social spaces in far away places, where they could never take the social
space for granted, but had to learn everything from scratch. Once researching at home, they
knew that their own familiarity and vocabulary had to be scrutinized for hidden meanings and
assumptions. James Clifford formulated this process as to making the familiar surreal, just
like they were making the surreal familiar in far away places (Clifford 1988). In particular, I
will deal with the taken-for-granted word “right” as in “far right”, and approach it for its
shadow meanings and accidental baggage. Then, I will turn to “neo-nationalism” itself. Its
meanings and its short history.

The second perception anthropology can offer in studying neo-nationalism and the far
right is how racialization has emerged to become the lens through which Western societies
view Muslim populations (as well as so-called “non-Westerners” and other Others) since the
millennium. Racialization is embedded in the anti-Muslim, anti-Migration and anti-refugee,
anti-foreigner nexus of thinking, and as such, one of the most important features tied to neo-
nationalism. Racialization consists of social and psychological processes of exclusion that
occur along racial, cultural, national, social, and class lines, while agents of this practice rely
on a fixed, essentialist concept of identity that sees certain people as foreigners with
unbridgeable differences and thereby legitimizing austerity measures and sanctions.

Third, and lastly, one of anthropology’s potential and general contributions is to apply
its ethnographic methodology and way of thinking to a personalized, or person-centric,
understanding of actors within the far-right and neo-nationalist movement. This third
anthropological perspective evolves from asking the polemic question: to what extent can we
empathize with the “devoted agents” including people at the far right? (Atran 2016). As such,
empathy can be an important contribution from anthropology, and may emerge as the abililty
to provide insightful personalized understandings of “ordinary” extremist sympathizers. Empathy is a buzz word that is popular and misunderstood, though. For instance, mistaking the Siberian hunter’s moose call (in order to kill the moose) as empathy (Bubandt and Wellerslev 2015) (more on this later). When historians and political scientists in quiet moments say we need anthropological methods to tell us what motivates people across demographic divides to vote for the radical right populists, or to join extremist groups, empathy is a key word that emerges despite the dangers and accidental luggage that comes with it.

If researchers reach through the fog of the discourse of moralization and regard their agents as rational, fellow human beings with concerns and worries within a society where an extreme style of language and confrontational way of thinking has become “the new normal,” then we could get to know “the beast”, so to speak, from the inside. William Westermeyer did this in his ethnographic study of the local chapters of the Tea Party Movement in the United States. His work revealed that members did not see themselves as “racists” in the sense of being motivated by hatred towards blacks; but on the contrary, they see oppression as the racial differences created by the government and liberals. They insisted that they are not “racists” but patriots, or simpler “telling the truth” (Westermeyer 2018).

Conceptual Perspectives

“Right-Left” and “Neo-Nationalism”

A scrutiny of current categories is always part of an anthropological perspective with a depth of thick description (Geertz 1973) or thick contextualization (Ortner 1995). The meaning and use of terms such as “far right”, “extreme right”, “populism”, “nationalist populism”, “global populism”, “neo-nationalism”, “left”, “liberal” and “Non-Westener” reveal they are ubiquitous, opaque, and contain hidden asymmetries and contradictions.
Moreover, they all more or less need to be suspended during experience-near, ethnographic fieldwork, so they do not “contaminate” what shared social practice and interviewing may bring.

**The Right-Left division is not a relationship of equals.** Mark Sedgwick finds no real difference between the terms “far” and “extreme” right. The one important difference, he argues, is between “extreme” and “radical”. The “radical” right (and left) consist of people who are ready to use violence (Sedgwick 2010). However, this distinction is more blurred than what Sedgwick indicates, since violence comes in both direct and indirect, symbolic and cultural forms. Accordingly, the verbal radicalism and securitization of language of populists can be seen as forms of symbolic violence that often precedes physical violence (Betz in Mondon 2013).

The use of the qualifier “right” as in “far-right”, “radical-right”, “right-wing”, and “alt-right” suggest its categorical opposite, yet, this opposition is deceiving. The opposition embraced by the “right” can be regarded either as a construction within itself, or as as an attempt to represent a category of “real” people. Today, opposition to “left-wingers”, “liberals”, liberal media”, “Marxism”, and “cultural Marxists” can be found in rhetoric, articulated ideologies, systems of beliefs, and in practice. However, the left is not what it used to be. Politically, labor parties throughout Europe are in serious decline and under re-construction to reappear in a reduced version as value-oriented parties often with nationalist undertones (Kalb and Haimai 2011). The celebration of authoritarian values in light of external threats, whether phrased as globalization, migration, nationalism of other states, or climate change, presents situations of crisis, or states of exception, where the language of securitization and threat call for strong, authoritarian-oriented leadership to enter with promises of solving the problems, whether these are national-, family-, or masculine values. Dressed up in populist clothes, such dominant discourse requires a contestable set of
opponents for bonding purposes (Hervik 2011). Accordingly, the right has constructed a
targetable “left” while the remaining, self-identityfying left is busy trying to jump on the idea
of tough talk on migration.

A further conceptual complication to the category, “far-right” and “radical-right” is
the so-called “mainstreaming of the radical right.” While there is no doubt that extremist
views have become mainstream (Hervik and Berg 2007, Feischmidt and Hervik 2015,
Mondon 2013), there is little discussion of the process of becoming dominant and hegemonic.
“Far”, “Extreme” and “Radical” are concepts left at the periphery, but mainstreaming will
inevitably “naturalize” extreme speech, extreme policies and practices. “New restrictions”
become the “new normal.” Similarly, when far right parties adhere to older social democratic
welfare values and hard nationalists on the other, they are still extremists, I would argue.

It should be added, that these binary divisions, left and right, the West vs. Islam
(Huntington 1993, 1996, Lewis 1990), Good vs. Bad Muslim (Mamdani 2002) are deceiving,
yet in spite of their different meanings, still dovetailing with the structure of the news media
and the media’s need for simplification to reach the largest audience possible (Peterson
2007). The political “dumbing down” follows the same trajectory (Williams 2014).

As part of his study of French and Australian “far right”, Aurelien Mondon suggested
the usages of “far right” and the “left” could be boiled down to “equality” and “inequality”,
respectively. He found that the right was preoccupied with “inequality” and its opposition
while “the left” was concerned about ideas of equality and solidarity (Mondon 2013). This
inequality assumed by the far right can take various forms such as “nationality, race, ethnic
group and/or religious denomination,” and lead, in turn, to the use of “nationalism,
xenophobia, racisms and ethnocentrism” as political tools (Carter in Mondon 2013). Yet, far
right does not simply pro-actively promote inequality, but inequality is an outcome of a
strong construction of and reaction to the left, and more broadly, to the Enlightenment (ibid.).
But these –isms are not defining characteristics. They are “mere manifestations of the principle of fundamental human inequality, which lies at the heart of right-wing extremism” (Mondon 2013: 18) and its racialized inferiorization of non-Western migrants.

The conceptual discussion has left us with a traditional right–left division that is outdated, misleading, and with an asymmetric relation of power. As Mondon has argued, the most fundamental difference between the sides is the opposition of the right to any issue associated with claims and demands for equality. In the absence of a clear vision and some plan of action to follow, the far-right as well as neo-nationalism is devoted to an anti-equality discourse and practice. The far right builds on an idea of incompatibility between “our” and “their” values. In this optic, any initiative that seeks to “ignore” this maxim can be accused of ignorantly introducing equality.

**The Emergence of the Study of Neo-Nationalism.** Michael Billig’s “Banal Nationalism” (1995) has become a classic within studies of nationalism. Through a critique of earlier theories, he emphasized the importance of understanding the everyday evocations of the national order. While he found that this order tended to relegate nationalism to the periphery’s separatist rebellions against the nation-state system and to “forget” its presence in the everyday, he emphasized omnipresented and priming of the national order in everyday discourse and practice of established nation-states. This “banal nationalism” is everything but banal and could easily be mobilized to wars, for instance, in far away places like the Falkland Islands and Iraq. A key point in Billig’s book is that the “banal nationalism” is what feeds the “hot” nationalism, what we today roughly would call “neo-nationalism.” That is to say, neo-nationalism and neo-racism make sense with reference to the taken-for-grantedness of the nation as the dominant accepted form of community and point of reference. The glue that holds this together is not some age-old primordial condition, but it is the product of the age of
modern nation-state. And it does so through concepts such as “national security”, “national interests”, “national values”, and a specific logic of the “nation-in-danger.”

One of the first and biggest boosts for the use of “neo-nationalism” came with Andre Gingrich and Marcus Banks’ (2006) edited volume, which came out of an almost week-long seminar held in early 2002. Neo-nationalism is a term used in short for “nationalism under new circumstances” particularly the post 1989-world and set within established nation-states. In 2004, similar issues had already been discussed at the meetings of EASA (European Association of Social Anthropologists) in 2000 and published by Ethnos (2004), with Gingrich (2004), Gullestad (2004) and Hervik (2004) being part of both events. The issues focused on racism that anthropologists observed in their country of origin when politicians and media saw possibilities in organizing voters and readers around strong reactions to the increased number of refugees and co-citizens with diverse immigrant backgrounds (Hervik 2011).

The growth of pro-nation, anti-migrant sentiments and practices could be found particularly in Europe’s smallest and most affluent countries (Banks and Gingrich 2006). Forces within these countries, including media, politicians, and scholars began to claim that immigration would threaten the cultural fabric of their nation. A discourse of the emergent threat emerged, the likes of which had never been seen before. Gingrich noted that the common response from most of these early European neo-nationalists was a narrow law and order practice that offered authoritarian values with a strengthening of national, family and male values (Gingrich 2006a, 2006b).

These associations were linked to notions of home community, homeland nation, danger, alertness, commitment, and bravery. Gullestad found a neo-nationalism more narrowly focusing on “neo-ethnification of national identity”, in which she observed a reinforcement of ideas about “family life, kinship, ancestry and descent” (2006a, 2006b).
This development occurred, she argued, along with the collapse of the neighborhood that had been the site of primary social relations and now shifted to the national level instead (Gullestad 2006b). Gingrich wrote about reactions to “illegal immigrants” nearly twenty years ago; neo-nationalists today also focus on the flow of migrants and refugees in general. Yet, after more than 20 years, neo-nationalists still highlight the “threat to cultural homogeneity” migrants and refugees pose to “our values”. “Our” values, as Billig reminds us, refers to the “nation” as “our” place in the world, where we make the decisions.

Inspired partly by Robert Miles and Etienne Balibar, I emphasize that neo-nationalism and neo-racism are part of the same project of inclusion and exclusion in an analysis of Danish media coverage and interviews in the late 1990s (Hervik 2011). The nation as imagined community (Anderson 1991) is the shared belief that some people are part of the imagination of the nation, and some people are not. And since the division tends to fall along racial and cultural lines, neo-nationalism and neo-racism are part of the same ideology and exclusionary rhetoric (Hervik 2011).

Dan Kalb and Gábor Halmai (2011) tie the emergence of neo-nationalism to the social and structural changes related to neoliberal globalization with its decline of blue-collar work in Europe leading to “a displacement of experiences of dispossession and disenfranchisement onto the imagined nation as a community of fate, crafted by the new political entrepreneur generation’s protest votes against neoliberal rule (Kalb and Halmai 2011:2-3). Along similar lines, Ghassan Hage (2003), finds “paranoid nationalism” as a reaction to the capitalism’s decline of hope.

None of these authors are explicit about situating these trends idiosyncratically on the “far right” side of the traditional political spectrum. They do identify that the Austrian Freedom Party, the Danish People’s Party, and the Progressive Party in Norway belong to the same family of “radical”, or “radical right wing parties”, but they also recognize that these
parties are only some of the reactions the meta-events and political changes defining the so-called post-1989 world. Populism can indeed not to be reduced to single political parties.

Racialization

Today, racialization is seen as a medium for race-thinking or racial reasoning that is a better way than race and racism to emphasize how people are put into racial categories. In this way, racialization is more basic and a condition for racism but not directly reducible to racism. Thus, the second anthropological perspective, racialization must begin by asking questions such as: who racializes whom? In what context? And which categories and words co-occur? (Hervik 2004, 2011).

The discourses and practices of racialization, racialized integration, and radicalization coupled with “the War on Terror” are issues that have brought Muslims to the forefront of negative public attention. One of the effects is that racialization is now directed at entire communities of people associated with Muslims, Islam, or “Muslim culture” as well as “parallel societies” and “non-Western” migrants that as “a whole way of life” becomes explanations for peoples’ beliefs and social actions (Hervik 2014, Kundnani 2015). Moreover, with the dominance of racialization of “Muslims”, “Whites” or “Danes”, the principles of fixing group identities spreads from “Muslims” to “foreignness;” to transracially and transnationally adopted Danish Danes (Myong 2009, Hübner and Tigervall 2009); East-Europeans and Jews (Sacks 1996); and children of mixed marriages (Törngren 2019). The emergence of racializing categories appears as “bilingual students”, which is a euphemism in schools for students with visible minority backgrounds (Gilliam 2006, Andreassen 2005). In public debates, categories such as “non-Western” migrants, “immigrants”, “integration”, and “ethnic minorities” have come to denote “racialized” or “cultural” others (Hervik 2011, Andreassen 2007, Gullestad 2006b) who are prototypically perceived as Arab, Muslim, and from the Middle East.
Frantz Fanon is often regarded as having pioneered the work on “racialization of thought”, which took place when colonialism erased differences among and within Africans and blacks in place of racial categories such as “Negro” (Miles 1989). In this way, both “whites” and “blacks” are caught up in racialization and racisms (Gullestad 2004). Marcus Banks made the argument that neo-nationalism is not “just” racism (Banks and Gingrich 2006). Yet, even though he was partly right, today we can see a re-conceptualization of racism. Racialization studies have moved away from being synonymous with racism; the idea of a single monolithic racism and the approach to different forms of discrimination are studied as “distinct silos” (Goldberg 1990, Meer 2012: 2) or single-axis explanations that only focus on race but leaves aside the intersections of race with gender or class (Crenshaw 1991) or nationalism (Hervik 2011; 2019; Miles 1993).

The first point provided by evoking racialization as a key concept is that we are better equipped to grasp the essentialization of racial identity across the political spectrum. Racialization comes in the everyday forms of interaction. It comes out particularly strong in connection with the enforcement of national values and outright warfare, although racialization also pops up separately from neo-nationalism. While the idea of the nation in danger is the underlying engine behind racialization of “Danes” and visible “non-Danes”, then whiteness as a racialized dimension of nationalism has become more and more pronounced (Hervik 2018b).

Racialization is thought to co-exist with other forms of subordination as approaches to intersectionality have demonstrated. Yet, intersectionality studies never seem to fully give in to a person-centric perspective that captures what motivates agents. In the present case, the question of what motivates people to engage themselves in neo-nationalist and neo-racist activities including violence and hate crimes must be examined. Therefore, we turn to anthropological efforts to understand “devoted agents” through an empathy perspective- as a
way of thinking in a personalized, or person-centric, understanding of actors (and within the far right).

Empathizing with “Devoted Agents”

Empathy has long been a cornerstone of anthropological fieldwork practice that may be useful for understanding morally devoted agents from within. Empathy is the third anthropological perspective presented here in an attempt to understand the current trend that the right and far right embrace the idea that immigration threatens the nation’s cultural homogeneity and the politics of fear that accompany it. Before this perspective can be applied the concept must be discussed critically for its accidental baggage. Current use of the term ranges from the ability to distinguish self from the “other” to more scholarly definitions of understanding another person’s first-person subjective experience while upholding a self and other distinction that fosters a true and accurate empathic understanding (Hollan and Throop 2008: 6). Empathy is popularly contrasted with sympathy. Empathy is a positively laden emotion and strategy to pursue because it holds recognition, mutuality, reciprocity, and attempts to bring a non-hierarchical form of genuine dialogue. Sympathy is the caring and feeling of pity or sorrow for those who suffer. Sympathy does not include sharing distress and therefore easily leads to victimization.

The theorizing of empathy has a history that goes back at least as far as George Herbert Mead and his ideas and practices of “taking the role of the other.” According to Mead, only by perceiving one’s own behavior from the standpoint of other persons does identity and consciousness properly evolve (Mead 1934). In other words, the recognition, the misrecognition, or absence heavily influences our identity (Taylor 1994, Honneth 1995). For many years, Clifford Geertz’ strong work impeded the study of empathy:

We cannot live other people’s lives, and it is a piece of bad faith to try. We can but listen to what, in words, in images, in actions they say about their lives. As Victor
Turner ... argued, it is with expressions – representations, objectifications, discourses, performances, whatever – that we traffic ... Whatever sense we have of how things stand with someone’s inner life, we gain it through their expressions, not through some magical intrusion into their consciousness (Geertz 1984:373).

Geertz warned us that the assumptions about empathy to reach people’s inner lives were faulty and merely the projection of one’s own thought into the other. Recently, Hollan has reminded us that empathy, in contrast to psychological projection, implicates the emotional and imaginative capacities of the people we are attempting to understand as well as our own (1984: 391-392). When we seek to understand another person’s first-person subjective experience, we must uphold a self and other distinction to foster an accurate emphatic understanding (ibid.)

Anthropologists have argued that empathy is paradigmatic and good, while lack of empathy is simply bad. Norwegian anthropologist, Anne Sigfrid Grönseth, has written extensively about empathy in relation to her ethnographic fieldwork with Tamils in the remotest area of Northern Norway. Grönseth sees empathy as a psychological transcendence of self in shared practical activity (Grönseth 2010), embracing the willingness to engage one’s self in the life of others. Empathy and mutuality are keys to overcome social and cultural differences, including times of friction and conflict. It is the appreciation of individual experiences that cultural differences can be transcended and makes reciprocity and mutuality possible (Grönseth 2010). While Grönseth’s embrace of empathy goes to those whom she works closest with, whom she likes the most, and who provides a formidable ethnography, she isn’t concerned with the new Russian employees, a shop owner, or the health care workers who often make the lives of the Tamils residents difficult. Does that mean empathy is reserved for the ones we like?
Some anthropologists have embraced empathy in an attempt to cash in on the hot currency of the term. While not using empathy to approach what seems to be “the disliked”, Nils Bubandt and Rane Welleslev (2016), recently argued for attention to the dark side of empathy. Instead of mutual understanding, empathy is much about deception, the aggressive intent, profound in nature, and seizing empathy for the purpose of deception and even killing. They use two illustrative incidents from Siberia and Indonesia of “tactical empathy” of which only the first is relevant here. A male Siberian Yukahgir hunter uses his (empathic) knowledge of the female moose and disguises himself to imitate a moose and catch its curiosity. Once the female moose approaches the hunter, he kills it. Moreover, it is for the better since the moose associates a spiritual being engaged in a predatory act against the human hunter, like accepting seduction for the purpose of acquiring a spouse (Bubandt and Wellerslev 2016). According to Michael Jackson, entering the world of another can be achieved mimetically:

 Attempting to go native by decking oneself out in the costume of the other can only end in parody. Unlike imitation, analogy does not eclipse self in an attempt to become other. Its strategy is, by contrast, to have recourse to common images – such as the metaphors of paths or bridges – that one already part of the discursive repertoire of human relationships (1998:97).

Upon closer look, Bubandt and Wellerslev are hardly talking about empathy. Empathy for a quick kill, or seduction, dismantles the empathy itself, and even, according to the authors, disregarding the “accuracy” of the empathic insight (Bubandt and Wellerslev 2006).

In addition, the authors fail to include themselves in the emphatic relationship giving rise to the risk Geertz warned about, namely, psychological projection, which is no less problematic as both authors as fieldworkers remain in the periphery as observers of the hunter and observer of a relationship he is not himself part of. On the other hand, the authors
make an important point, even though it does not follow from the two incidents they set out to analyze in order to bring out the "dark side of empathy." Can a person literally enact empathy for the intention of killing, whether literally or metaphorically, as in seduction?

Students of uncompromised violence seem to agree that motivation to extreme violence against unknown civilians does not spring so much from ideological doctrine as of different deontic (duty-based) acts (see Devji 2005; Björgo and Horgan 2009; Atran 2016; Blee and Creasap 2010; Christensen 2017). In Atran and Ginges's words, "devoted agents" are defined as the following:

People will become willing to protect morally important or sacred values through costly sacrifice and extreme actions, even being willing to kill and die, particularly when such values are embedded in or fused with group identity, becoming intrinsic to "Who I am" and "Who We are. (Atran 2016:192)

Atran analyzes how marginalized youth in transitional states of life are the targets of, and volunteers, to become devoted agents. He argues that ideas of small groups, sacred values, and identity fusion are more applicable to any "devoted agent" acting out of a sense of moral duty (see also Devji 2005). I believe anti-migrant, neo-nationalists can be approached as devoted agents determined to defend the secular nation as a sacred value and at any cost, although the degree of commitment varies.

In his methodological observations and in reference to the study of Austrian Freedom Party supporters, Andre Gingrich maintains that it may be “impossible for the ethnographer to identify with the people he works with in any positive way” (2006b). Subscribing to an "agree to disagree" strategy allows them "to put some skeptical distance between ethnographer and 'natives'" (ibid.). More broadly, “there are some topics on which the ethnographer cannot possibly agree, for basic professional reasoning, anthropologists value cultural diversity, while nationalists embrace some ideal of cultural homogeneity” (Gingrich
Traditionally, anthropologists have helped give voice to muted groups through commitment and advocacy, but Gingrich, as I read him, finds empathizing with people who are openly racist impossible (2004:161), and in this way he agrees with Gronseth.

In Bubandt and Wellerslev’s account, it is unclear what the motivation is for stressing how empathy, deception, and killing can be misconstrued. In Gingrich’s reasoning, it is equally unclear why it is so important to convey to “the disliked” that he disagrees with the ‘native.’ Anthony Wallace reminded us a long time ago that “much of social life goes on without intimate knowledge of others’ motives and intentions – through habit, routine, common expectation, and widely shared rules of social engagement and etiquette” (1961), so how do we know beforehand that we disagree, or assume there may be a “kill” being unfolded in the name of empathy? Entering the field and suspending judgments and disagreements temporarily has always been a methodological lead in my own practice. Not least of which is following a quest for genuine and naturalized conversations to engage with adversaries with dignity (Gullestad 2006b). Gullestad discusses a power that starts, “Racist I accept you”, which exaggerates the need for hatred to such an extent that it loses any realism (Gullestad 2004:180). Jackson also sees ethnographic empathy as more than a reciprocity and exchange of agreements:

It is a mode of embodied, intersubjective negotiated understanding that comes of coexistence and coordination in common tasks; it is not a form of knowledge consolidated in precepts and enshrined in dogma (1998: 97).

Let me illustrate. As part of our research on racialization and social media, we set out to interview Ann. Ann is an important figure in the history of the involvement of the so-called Islam-critical network in Denmark that goes back to the early 2000s. As we discussed how to approach the interviews in our research project on social media activism, we did not choose the Gingrich option, “agree to disagree.” But more generally and following an empathy track,
we decided that the right thing to do, and the only thing to do, was to approach her with a
genuine interest in understanding Ann’s worries, concerns, reflections, motivations and so on
for her engagement and motivation. Ann was open to talking and explaining her beliefs and
activities:

I have been … well, I do not think it is too much to say: desperate. In despair of what I
see is happening to my country. I love Denmark, and right now my country is being
undermined by an inward migration of people that for the most part do not fit in our
culture. It is that simple (Ann, Adult Education Teacher, 64).

Originally, her moral outrage was evoked when, in the capacity of board member in various
associations, she was approached by an anthropologist. Ann was told that a new report about
young immigrants’ understanding of their view on gender and sexuality had been produced,
but was now being withheld. It was “as if” someone were intentionally preventing the truth
from coming out. This moral outrage pushed her into collaboration and networking that
eventually became known as the Islam-critical network and a new political party to the far
right. Ann conveys her experiences and tells us about how sees migration. This is not an
object relevant for the researcher to disagree with.

Now, one of the important points coming out of the talks with Ann and others has
been raised by the late reading of Bubandt and Wellerslev’s piece. Do I go into talks with
Ann in order to “seduce” and “empathize tactically”, only to “kill” her? The answer is no.
However, I did discover, or perhaps rediscover, something in my former publications. Hollan
and Throop wrote the “Anthropology of Empathy” as one of the more comprehensive
anthropological treatments of the topic. It seems to me that their treatment of the
phenomenon of empathy, the actual experiences of other people, while maintaining their
own, misses the idea or value of empathy as a condition of life. Or, to put it differently, one
could argue that if empathy is evoked as a means to gain something, then it hardly qualifies
as empathy, if empathy is stretched to its fullest meaning. Empathy – as a condition of life – approaches the stranger as a person and not a category.

**Concluding Remarks**

Without reducing anthropology’s contribution to the study of neo-nationalism and the far right to the “usual” sustained ethnographic fieldwork and everything included, anthropology’s ethnographic practice still carries tremendous value. In this chapter, I suggested three perspectives that I found significant as anthropological contributions to the study of the far right and neo-nationalism in the mid to late 2010s. The critical scrutiny of concepts such as “far-right”, “Neo-nationalism”, and the nature of the “right-left” division, illustrate the necessity to continuously challenge the concepts we use in everyday talk as well as in academic practice. The second perspective is racialization (which is a concept that cannot be reduced to the right or left) that opens up for the inclusion of co-existing forms of subordination. Such co-existence is part of the re-conceptualization of racism. The third perspective comes from asking whether you can empathize for the “kill”, which I argue is a false one. With the critical adjustment of empathy as a guiding principle for anthropological fieldwork and in-depth interviewing, this could be a key to entering a genuine dialogue while still maintaining one’s own view of the world.

At a general level, it seems, that neo-nationalism is still inseparable from neo-racism, much like we analyzed in earlier research (Hervik 2004, 2011), but today racialization and neo-racism is more entrenched in the white hegemonic majority than earlier (Hervik 2019). This majority attracts new individuals and groups from where moral outrage can become spurs to increased antagonism and direct violence (Hervik 2018a). The issues of masculinity and gender within neo-nationalism, rightly emphasized by Gingrich (2006b), is a characteristic of the far right, however the increased support of austerity measures and sanctions can hardly be explained by the return of white masculine values. The election of
Donald Trump for president both testifies to a media savvy, rich businessman and the majority segment of votes being white women, who find Trump’s sexism appalling but identity politics towards foreigners more important (Harris-Perry 2016). Similarly, Kalb and Halmai are surely right in the importance of the decline of the labour movements following structural transformations that take blue-collar jobs away from Europe. However, these structural changes can hardly explain the scope, agency, and activism of the far right, which is now becoming mainstreamed as the “new normal” is far right. Fear of falling is a contributing factor, but it is not a constitutive one.

Because a reconceptualization of racialization is necessary, anthropology’s contribution, I argue, is to insist on including the study of actual social practices and personalized approaches to actors situated in a larger context. This endeavour depends on a revision of empathy as a condition for fieldwork and human relations. Empathy-based ethnographic fieldwork has been done under difficult circumstances that include violent street gangs, irregular migrants, prisoners, Satanists, military personnel, supporters of genital mutilation, infanticide, and so on. Now, the task is to turn to people, who are categorized by many progressive people as “far right”, “extremists”, and do what we otherwise think we are champs of doing within the social sciences and humanities: fieldwork that includes temporarily suspending judgement and morality, even if it borders on threats of violence, and use morality to challenge the legal conventions.
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