

THE FAR-RIGHT AND ITS USES OF THE PAST

Name: Megan Shaw

Faculty: Social Sciences

Email address: ss22m2s@leeds.ac.uk

The research project I developed, titled 'The Far-Right and its uses of the Past' was supervised by Dr. Anna Grimaldi, a lecturer at POLIS. Our overall aim was to explore how the past can influence present day politics, by looking at perceived heroes, influential figures, memorialisations and loyalties to an idea of the past. We also focused on how certain groups and parties gain influence by mobilising the past to communicate with their members and recruit others. The project was interdisciplinary, involving historians, critical theorists and sociologists collaborating internationally. During the first months of the project, the research team analysed Twitter posts of far-right groups in the UK, Argentina and France as a pilot study for a larger funding application in the future. In this way, my involvement in the project has contributed to its development and the dissemination of its outputs.

Summary of the project

It was exciting to have the independence to take my research in whichever direction I wanted, with an extremely supportive supervisor guiding me. It allowed me to develop confidence in the purpose and the principles underpinning my research. When asked how I would like to contribute to the project, I realised it was important to me that academics conduct their research not only with other academics and through journals, books and articles, but also by having conversations with and learning from those working on the ground. I was also keen on developing my public speaking skills. This led me to organise a symposium that brought together various actors from within and outside academia to workshop ideas about the project on the far-right. It became a fantastic opportunity to learn project management skills and meet individuals working to understand and prevent the spread of far-right ideology. The experience taught me the value of equal knowledge exchange and how to use academic best practices to avoid adding to the exploitation of charities and workers for their knowledge and resources. It also surfaced the urgency of working to prevent the spread of the far-right through sharing ideas, informing the public, driving new research and collaboration, and engaging with state actors to develop effective new policies.

One of the Symposium's conclusions was that more needs to be done to engage university students in understanding the workings of far-right ideology and recruitment. In response to this, I co-curated a teaching pack for a module on the far-right, with my colleague Poppy Lown. I scoped and identified relevant primary and alternative media resources, such as campaign leaflets and podcasts, to make the material more accessible. We divided the teaching pack into key themes, such as how the far-right mobilise the past to different effects, the growth of far-right parties through a case study of UKIP, and resistance to far-right figures. With this wide range of resources to consider, students would be able to build their knowledge in a well-rounded way and acknowledge differing learning types. I also included an activity to put knowledge into practice, where students would analyse two UKIP campaign leaflets for persuasive techniques and references to the past.

Whilst researching the topic more broadly, I have also developed my own interpretation for understanding the value of the past for the far-right. I gained insight into how UKIP reference past successes as a way of 'reminding' British citizens of their traditional values; this appears across different media, such as speeches and campaign leaflets. I also learned the relationship between identity and the past. Andrew Tate, a contemporary far-right figure, also explicitly approaches the idea of tradition through extreme and violent gender rhetoric, gaining the support of millions of young boys through social media by presenting himself as the 'ideal man'.

The impact of my research

I believe research should impact communities and create positive change and my research and work with Dr. Anna Grimaldi was grounded in these values. The far-right continues to

pose a threat to society, especially for those marginalised and targeted by far-right organisations. It is vital that researchers, organisations and the public are made aware of just how serious and prevalent the far-right are, especially contemporary figures such as Andrew Tate, who I discussed in the teaching pack.

The aim of our collaboration was to create a dialogue between researchers and civil society initiatives dealing with far-right radicalism, to understand how research on the far-right can better serve and support the work of these organisations. It was and continues to be important for me to listen to those we are researching and for research to make positive changes. Through my research, I have made connections to charities such as Exit Hate, a charity through which former members of the far-right provide personalised support to those trying to leave the far-right. By connecting academics and industry professionals, I have contributed to ensuring that the broader research will develop in a way that has meaningful impact on civil society organisations and the wider public.

Together, my independent research finding, the debates and networks formed through the Symposium and the student learning pack will support the project's application for a larger funding pack by showing that the research has real-world impact. It evidences that the project's objectives are both feasible and capable of reaching different audiences beyond academia.

My learning experience

The Symposium formed the main driver of my research activities. I researched, identified and contacted relevant charities, researchers and organisations, who might have interests in the project's concept of 'the far-right and its uses of the past'. I ensured that the emails were tailored to the recipient, taking time to understand their research interests, explain my own and build a rapport. Once I had identified potential collaborators, I then had to manage the organisation of meetings and find a suitable date for everyone to attend the Symposium, whether virtually or in-person. Something I learned through this process was resilience; it often took several emails to manage seemingly straightforward tasks and sometimes organisations either ceased contact for some time or did not reply at all. This pushed me to be persuasive in my writing and to persevere until I had confirmation of participation, as well as being flexible to participants' needs. After careful reflection, I chose the Symposium date based on the fact that it was outside term time and during the day, to make it more accessible for those attending from afar. In the end, we had five speakers: Claudia Wallner, a research fellow at the Far-Right Extremism and Terrorism programme at Royal United Services Institute; Cath Stinton, a University of York PhD candidate focusing on women in the far-right; Kazim Ukka, a researcher at the Community Policy Forum; Erica Capeocchi, a PhD candidate at Bristol and Cardiff Universities and a member of Cardiff Interdisciplinary Research on Anti-Fascism and Far-Right; and Vicky Bradbury, Operations Manager at Exit Hate.

After debating different approaches, we decided to split the Symposium into two sections: the first would provide a space for six speakers to present their research and work, while the second would facilitate discussions and networking. The workshop approach would allow us to generate dialogue and exchange between academics, organisations, students and the wider public.

To manage the event, I used Eventbrite and created tickets for people to sign up for. This was a learning curve for me, as I was unfamiliar with Eventbrite and had to learn how to advertise the event in a way the public would understand and want to engage with. Using my social media skills was vital in gaining public interest. I shared the Eventbrite with student societies such as History, Politics and Think Tank, to share across their social media, as I felt those students would be most interested in our facilitated discussion and be able to bring

insightful perspectives. I also shared the event on the Laidlaw Scholars Network and an email shared to current Leeds scholars and alumni. It meant a lot to have the support of other Laidlaw scholars who attended the Symposium; they all felt it was great to get involved in the activities and learn so many new things. My sister and friend attended too, so I felt really proud presenting in front of them. I also emailed several lecturers and professors at other universities to invite them to attend. None of them could, but it revealed to me that anything is worth a try and at least it made them aware of the project. Making use of the channels available to me, such as Laidlaw and relevant societies' social media, targeted specific audiences and meaning there was fantastic attendance on the day.



A photograph of myself on the day of the Symposium

The main lesson I took away from the Symposium was from my supervisor Anna. She reiterated that there is nothing in life that does not have a solution. This became evident on the day of the Symposium, as we initially could not get into the room to set up due to a miscommunication between university porters and security staff. While we waited for someone to help us, we decided that if nothing else, we could have the Symposium outside and make it work that way. There were also technical issues connecting the volume and camera to the online speakers. By making a quick apology and working together to find a workaround and connect everything, we were able to begin just a few minutes delayed. The sound of the online speakers did not quite reach the whole room, so we encouraged everyone to roll their chairs around a single TV screen, which was not our original plan. This created an informal atmosphere from the start, allowing everyone to feel comfortable in sharing their opinions and a laugh, so it ended up working great. It also taught me not to assume things will be easy to set up, such as dealing with unfamiliar technology and that I would mitigate against challenges by checking beforehand and being ready to improvise.

As for the content of the Symposium, we perhaps over prepared the activities. We intended to begin with a warm-up group exercise to get thinking about research and organisation activities more broadly, before moving on to a more specific task. The second task was more complex and would require the groups to work together to design either a research project, a data collection project or learning materials for the public. Here, flexibility was key. As the Q&A session overran our planned time slot, as we wanted to give space for attendees to be curious, we decided to skip the first activity and move straight onto the design task. It was important to read the room and not be too rigid with the plan, but if I were to do it again, I would be more time strict to allow more time for networking at the end.

By collectively reflecting on the Symposium together with Anna, I also identified many other learning opportunities. For example, when formulating the order of the Symposium, I decided that it would be best to divide the presentations by starting with the academic researchers and then moving onto the policy and charity-worker presentations. While the Symposium overall stimulated fascinating conversations, I realised that starting with academics framed the event a way that was at odds with its intention to bring academics and charity organisations into an equal dialogue. At the same time, I felt the way I managed the event on the day was clear and purposeful, mitigating against any prioritisation between academics and non-academics. I had practised introducing the speakers with enthusiasm, and I was careful and deliberate in the way I framed and communicated our intentions to the audience.

The Symposium brought together the experiences of different age groups and nationalities, exposing the breadth and diversity of the far-right threat and its global nature. At the same time, it was clear that the diversity in the room might also create tensions when discussing a topic as sensitive as the far-right. For this reason, I spoke to Anna before the event, to ensure I learned how to deal with the potential for agitation, how to guide the attendees out of a heated debate, and how to ensure everyone felt safe in the space.

The Symposium is something I am very proud of, not only because of the successful collaborations, insightful speakers and fantastic ideas generated from the group activities, but because I put myself out there to research in a different way to what I have done before. I am sure the connections I have built through the speakers and attendees will continue to develop. Already, as a result of the connections I made through the Symposium, Anna and I attended a presentation by Erica Capecci at the PSA Populism Specialist Group Workshop. It was so interesting to hear her work in more depth and in a different context, as well as gaining an understanding of what an academic workshop looks like. With all of these experiences, I have learned that bridging academics, charities and organisations is something I hope will continue, as I have seen first-hand how it contributes to positive solutions to common threats in our society, such as the far-right. Anna's colleague, who attended the event, gave some positive feedback regarding this, specifically commenting on how they had not seen such a good combination of academics, practitioners and activists in a while.

Leadership skills in the research period

Before this project, leadership positions were not something I would consider voluntarily putting myself forward for. Now, I feel I have gained a multitude of leadership skills I can take forward into other projects. Public speaking is something I have always enjoyed and found rewarding, which I further developed through the Symposium. I introduced each speaker, gave an introduction of how the event came together and why it felt important to me and I explained the activities, all of which I felt I did clearly and confidently. I got the chance to liaise with different stakeholders, such as academics, policy researchers and charity representatives, requiring different communication methods. I had to communicate the purpose and goals of the research to groups of people I had never come into contact with before and I really appreciated the chance to build this important skill. For example, after the CEO of Exit Hate, Nigel Bromage, said that he could not attend the event himself, I proposed a virtual meeting with myself and Anna to learn more about his organisation in his own words. We were humbled that Nigel also shared with us his personal experience of leaving the far-right, as well as giving insights from the young people he works with, which helped us to think together about how researchers might support the work done at Exit Hate. This helped me to develop skills I might use in other contexts, such as interviews, as I needed to listen closely and respond with relevant questions. Writing formal emails was another skill I developed by reaching out to senior academics and professionals I had never met, who might be difficult to attract to the project. I ensured my language was formal, but I also wanted to come across as approachable, genuine and trustworthy. At first, I sought peer advice on email drafts before sending them, but over time I gained the confidence to do so by myself.

Learning how to evaluate and reflect are also skills I have learned. Anna and I regularly discussed the multiple benefits of reflection; it can be used to think about improvements for the future, but also to celebrate successes and recognise achievements. We evaluated the process at various stages: during the planning stages, seeking and securing funding and following the Symposium. The reflections at the end of the project were also a great way for me to feel like things had been wrapped up with a sense of closure.

Working 1-1 with a supervisor is also something I had never done before. As we reflected, Anna and I discussed how she strived to avoid a hierarchical relationship between supervisors and supervisee by making things as collaborative as possible. I felt able to express my ideas, ask for advice and continually learn from her. The division of tasks was fair and I was able to get involved with much more of the project than I initially expected. I had wrongly assumed that there would be a clear difference in position between us, but there was not, and I have loved our cooperative approach. I feel very fortunate to be able to work with such an inspiring and caring person.

The impact on myself

Looking back, it is funny I almost did not apply to the programme. I doubted my ability, but ultimately I knew I had to push myself out of my comfort zone. I certainly felt imposter syndrome at several stages: being in academic settings, emailing researchers and academics and finding myself in situations and conversations I had not experienced before. I wondered who I was to be emailing these busy, intelligent people whose work I admired and probably would not be interested in what I had to say. But I believed in our project so much and knew how important it was, and this helped me to push through those negative, doubtful thoughts. These imposter feelings came creeping back on the day of the Symposium because I felt that I was too young and inexperienced to lead such an event. What helped me to overpower the imposter feeling was remembering the hard work I had thrown into the day. I reminded myself that there is no specific age or experience required to be a passionate leader and tried to reconnect with my background in performance to guide my public speaking. Now, I feel secure in my abilities, knowing that I could put on a similar event in the future and that I deserve to be there.

My confidence has definitely improved through the research, which encouraged me to put forward my own ideas and actually accomplish what I set out to do. The positive change from the research also brought satisfaction and the knowledge that the work I did create positive steps towards solutions. It also is very exciting to me that the teaching pack will be distributed and used by students to educate and explain how the far-right has got to where it is today. Working with Poppy on that part of the project and globally with Francisco, who I got to meet in-person, was also such a fantastic opportunity. I got to learn so much from them and I really admire their hard work and passion for the project.

Future prospects

Doing this project has confirmed to me that my career will involve research as a way of finding solutions to problems. I will be taking forward the idea that researchers need to work with the people they are researching, to ensure their voices are heard and they are not just exploited for their knowledge and situated experiences. I also would love to stay involved in this project, to see how much further it can expand and discover.

I have always had an outraged interest at right-wing opinions and how this translates into policy in particular, such the removal of women's rights and the marginalisation of the LGBT+ community, so would be interested in continuing to research in this area. Cath Stinton's presentation on women of the far-right also sparked my curiosity as a research area. I really enjoy speaking with people different to myself and learning about their lives, which is an aspect I want to include in future careers or education.

Having been given this chance to do meaningful research with a dedicated, passionate supervisor and to get the chance to develop my academic skills and personal growth, I feel I have made the most of it. I am very grateful for this opportunity and am excited to see what I go on to do.

Supervisor

Megan developed her research scholarship as part of a wider international and interdisciplinary project titled "The Far Right and Its Uses of the Past". As part of the project, Megan carried out a systematic review of related literature and primary sources, which contributed to the creation of a student learning pack based on case studies of the Far Right in the UK. She also took the initiative and lead on organising a Symposium at the University of Leeds, which brought together students, scholars and practitioners from across the UK. To support the event, she also wrote a successful funding proposal. Her efforts were exemplary and went above and beyond the expectations of someone of Megan's career stage. Her achievements were highlighted in the attendees' feedback - one of my colleagues, an expert in the field, wrote: "I haven't been to any conferences for a long time with such a good combination of academics, practitioners and activists." Megan has been a fantastic colleague, whose enthusiasm, proactive attitude and commitment to materialising her ideas has truly impressed me. I would say Megan's leadership skills lie in her close attention to detail, attentiveness to the delicacy of working with different publics, and problem solving. She is a fantastic teammate and it has been an inspiration and a privilege to work with her!