



**Laidlaw Scholars Undergraduate Leadership and Research Programme**  
**Record of Reflection**

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The Laidlaw Scholars Programme is something I will forever be grateful to, not only for allowing me to produce my best academic work yet, but also for giving me the space to explore who I am as a researcher and as a person. This reflection will walk through my journey through the first summer of research in the Laidlaw Programme, highlighting my high expectations for myself when I was in the planning stage, the ways I had to check my expectations when my research became overwhelming, and how I learned to rely on others and also trust myself in order to find what I wanted to say for my final project. Because of the opportunity this summer provided, I am now a more creative, honest, and ambitious leader than I was before, while developing an even greater respect for the leaders in my field who came before me.

When I was first thinking of applying to Laidlaw, my only picture of political theory-focused research came from reading books and listening to lectures as a sort of intellectual consumer standing on the outside of a community of consistently high intellect. The arguments were always well-formed, the prose of my favorite philosophers such as Susan Sontag, Andrea Dworkin, and Catherine Mackinnon all resonated in my mind as if it was being spoken to me off the top of their heads, and their inclusion of the arguments of other theorists always presented an expansion of the frontiers of political theory. In essence, they made it look easy, always. Moreover, the area of study I chose – political theory concerning the great big political F-word, *fascism* – is something that I have always wanted to approach with the utmost respect and with the highest academic skill I could muster. Firstly because of how important anti-fascism is to me as someone who believes that political harmony is eventually possible, but secondly, out of respect for all the damage done by fascists of the past and of the current day, from the first victims of the Nazis until Heather Heyer at the 2017 Unite the Right rally. It is an area of incredible depth that has been discussed by sociologists, historians, and political theorists – with

extensive overlap in those camps – and thus I entered this area of study with an overwhelming feeling of humility.

As such, the part of the initial application to Laidlaw that presented the most trouble for me was not the statements of why this research was important and why I am interested in it, but the nebulous “methodology” section. How does a theorist start their work? What do they include in it to present the most faithful survey of the ideas about fascism that other theorists have? How do I adjust their approach to fit the much smaller time frame of a single summer while still approaching this topic with respect? I desperately wanted to do this right, but I didn’t know how yet.

This is all to say that I set my expectations high, and though my further writing in this reflection will show that the emotions in that choice were not exactly good for me, the steps I took at this time set me up for some success. I reached out to, first, political theorists here at UofT, who quelled my worries about having a solid methodology right out of the gate. Much of the advice I got was to immerse myself in arguments from different theorists studying fascism, reading them carefully to find their vision of the world and which parts of that world produce fascism. At the beginning of the summer before the research period, I reached out to research librarians who were able to show me how to discern which theorists were the most cited and the most influential in the world of political theory concerning fascism. This not only made me more confident that I could achieve some of my high expectations, but it also established that I didn’t have to emulate the picture of the solitary intellectual that I mistakenly viewed much of these established philosophers as being – I had a community of experts to rely on.

At this point, I felt I knew what to do – I was going to read a set of influential political theory books on fascism all from different eras, find the places to put them in conversation with

one another, and write a paper about how they can be applied to contemporary fascists, all in six weeks. Only, this didn't happen the way that I planned. The books on fascism from just after the era of the second world war were forcing me, through how difficult the arguments were to understand and how broad of a scope these first books covered, to check my expectations for how smoothly this process was going to go. Even though I had set everything up such that I was working on these books and on synthesizing their arguments in my notes full-time, without distractions, my work felt aimless and I often had to reread whole sections of a book because I felt I'd understood the author's point incorrectly. I was taking up far more time than I wanted to on this era of theory, but given how widely referenced these first texts were to the later texts, moving on was not an option.

It was here that I turned to my research supervisor, Professor Clifford Orwin. He had seen through my work that I was being "consumed" by some of these texts (his words), and had told me that not everything of each of these texts needed to be drawn out and into my paper. In fact, it shouldn't, as I only had so much space in those twenty pages of the final report. Prior to speaking with him about my struggles with the texts, I had been worried about not capturing all elements of the text lest I miss something crucial in my analysis and misrepresent the theorists I'm reconstructing in my paper. But it turned out that my problem lay not in how to understand all of the work (as my many re-readings had allowed me to do in my mind) but to draw out only what the reader of my paper needed to understand in order to follow my argument and centre on the part of fascism I was focusing on as my overall project – what fascism opposes. This extra breathing room allowed me to get creative, as even though whole books could diverge quite a lot from other books on fascism, I was able to find major points of agreement between theorists in particular sections.

Through this, I was able to find what I referred to as my “breakthrough,” a common thread in every single one of the texts (given more time in some and less in others, and being phrased in vastly different ways in every book) which could serve as a stable ground to showcase the ways these accounts diverged or presented the same concepts for different purposes. While this common thread ended up taking most of my research time to find and synthesize, my final research would not have been as understandable if I hadn’t been patient and allowed myself to be creatively selective with what I pulled from the theorists I was reading. Even though I had felt like a failure at the start of my research for not keeping right on my initial plan, what I ended up with was a piece of research that really felt successful in showcasing the many complexities of political theory concerning fascism.

In conclusion, this summer has been an irreplaceable point of growth for me. My early ambitions to imitate the intellectual greats – or simply imitate how I viewed them as an outsider – had initially caused me to set high expectations for myself, which resulted in aimlessness and feelings of failure when I overwhelmed myself with the texts I wished to study. But through relying on the community of experts here at UofT and especially relying on the confidence of my research supervisor, I was able to alter my ambitions to be truer to the real world – philosophical research is not a solitary thing, and I had space to be creative with it rather than hesitating on every step for fear of not being as perfect as established scholars are. I was able to be honest with myself about my skills and what I could get done in the time I had, creating not only research that I feel proud of, but a newfound confidence in my abilities as an independent researcher.