Ethnographies of
the Far Right[1]

Kathleen M. Blee
University of Pittsburgh

Despite the gains of far-right and racist movements in many parts of the world, they have been the subject of relatively little ethnographic research. This volume assembles work by prominent scholars on right-wing extremist movements in various places across the globe. Despite significant differences in the agendas and contexts of these groups, close-up examination of their dynamics and the motivations of their activists suggests that emotionality, culture, suspicion of outsiders, and the choices of members are key to understanding how the far right recruits members and garners support from the general population.

Keywords: *racist; far right; organized racism; ethnography; credibility*

In recent years, there has been a resurgence of extreme right-wing and racist movements across the globe, even in places long regarded as models of ethnic and political tolerance. Far-right parties have garnered substantial numbers of votes in local and national elections in France, Austria, Italy, and Belgium; part of a larger mobilization of far-right movements in those nations (Klandermans and Mayer 2006, 7). Neo-Nazi gangs and white power skinheads have been implicated in a rash of teroristic attacks on immigrants and Jews in Germany, Sweden, Canada, and elsewhere. And racial/ethnic/religious supremacists, ranging from Hindu nationalists in India to white power movements in the United States, have fomented intergroup hatred and violence in various locales.

The surprising gains of far-right and racist movements, even in places regarded as fairly impervious to such appeals (Pred 2000), make it imperative to understand how these movements develop ideologies, recruit participants, and craft strategies and tactics. Yet, our knowledge of modern right-wing extremism is limited. Most scholarship on social movements in recent years[2] has focused largely on those with progressive agendas such as feminist, labor, civil rights, environmental, antiglobalization, peace, animal rights, and gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgendered movements (McAdam et al. 2005). Although there has been increasing attention to countermovements against abortion, feminism, immigration, racial equity, and other forms of

social change, the vast majority of social movement studies focus on those attempting to broaden opportunities and advance social equality.[3] Indeed, some social movement concepts are nearly synonymous with progressive movements. The concept of transnational social movements (Smith and Johnston 2002), for example, evokes images of international alliances against corporate globalization, imperialism, trafficking in women and children, or slavery, not cross-state networks of anti-Semites or fascists (exceptions include Bacchetta and Power 2002; Castells 1997).

Moreover, the limited—although growing—scholarship on the far right generally analyzes right-wing extremism from a distance.[4] Many studies are what Matthew Goodwin (2006) characterizes as "externalist"; that is, they analyze the economic, social, attitudinal, or cultural environments that nurture organized racism and right-wing extremism rather than the dynamics of the far right itself. Such studies have provided crucial insight into the conditions in which far-right movements are likely to flourish, but have not been able to fully explain the periodic emergence of the far-right since, as Doug McAdam (2001, 223) argues, movements "are not, in any simple sense, born at the macro level." A more complete understanding of the occurrence of far-right movements also requires attention to issues of micromobilization, especially why people are attracted to such groups. But it is problematic to use data garnered in externalist studies to draw conclusions about micromobilization since it is not possible to infer the motivations of activists from the external conditions in which the group emerged. Because people are drawn to far-right movements for a variety of reasons that have little connection to political ideology (Blee 2002)—including a search for community, affirmation of masculinity, and personal loyalties—what motivates someone to join an anti-immigrant group, for example, might—or might not—be animus toward immigrants. To understand why far-right groups emerge in particular socioeconomic contexts thus requires analysis of individual and collective identities, the ways in which people come to see right-wing extremism as a means of exerting claims based on these identities, and the processes by which far-right groups recruit members and supporters.

Even many studies that focus on far-right movements directly are externalist in the sense that they rely on publicly available data such as propaganda from newsletters, flyers, and Internet sites and postings; police and criminal records; newspaper accounts of public events; speeches of self-proclaimed leaders; and pronouncements by spokespersons (e.g., Koopmans and Olzak 2004). Such data are valuable for understanding how groups present themselves to the public. Yet, publicly available data may not accurately reflect the

internal ideology of members or even goals of groups because of considerable divergence between the statements of self-proclaimed leaders and the beliefs of far-right activists and between the public facade and the internal dynamics of far-right groups (Blee 2005, 2002).

Close-up or "internalist" studies of far-right movements can provide a better understanding of the workings of far-right groups and the beliefs and motivations of their activists and supporters, but such studies are rare because data from interviews with members, observations of group activities, and internal documents are difficult to obtain. The most obvious barrier is that of access. Although some far-right movements can be studied through observation of their public appearances, close-up analysis of many racist and right-wing extremist groups requires access that can be difficult, even dangerous. Far-right groups tend to regard academics as untrustworthy or hostile and generally are determined to prevent entree to their groups or members. Indeed, it is not uncommon for extreme rightist groups to actively intimidate potential researchers with explicit or implicit threats of violence for gathering data or publishing analyses of them (Blee 1998). Scholarly access to the far right also is limited because academics tend to have few, if any, personal contacts through whom they can gain entrance to secretive rightist groups or who can vouch for them to less secretive ones. Indeed, the predominance of scholarship on politically progressive movements stems partly from personal networks of access since many studies are written by scholar-participants or those with friends or family in the movements they study (e.g., Gitlin 1980; Gould 2004; Whittier 1995).

It cannot be access alone that explains the lack of internalist research on far-right groups as there is a considerable tradition of ethnographic research on hidden and potentially dangerous groups like street gangs, drug users, and revolutionary parties. With the far right, however, most scholars face the additional barrier of political affinity (Blee 2003). Right-wing extremists are sufficiently distant from the political orientations of most academics to be "mysterious, frightening and irrational" in Ronald Wintrobe's (2002) terms. Scholars with progressive political affinities have made good use of the values, experiences, and worldviews that they share with members of politically similar social movements to generate trust and mutual understanding and to understand the issues faced by progressive movements such as coalition politics or struggles over gender and race (Blee 1993; Blee and Taylor 2002; Nepstad 2004). This methodological bridge typically is missing for scholars studying racist and extreme right-wing movements. Few scholars want to invest the considerable time or to establish the rapport necessary for close-up studies of those they regard as inexplicable and repugnant, in

addition to dangerous and difficult. Yet, as the articles in this volume demonstrate, internalist studies of the far right can reveal otherwise obscured and important features of extreme rightist political mobilization.

The View from Inside

This volume examines a range of far-right and racist groups, from extremist right parties contending for electoral office to semi-underground racial terrorist movements. Mabel Berezin's study focuses on the French National Front, a national right-wing electoral party with an anti-immigrant and, increasingly, anti-European integration and antiglobalization focus. In a similar vein, Fabian Virchow examines far-right public gatherings in Germany which include both right-wing electoral parties and small, local neo-Nazi groups. The work of Meera Sehgal explores a paramilitary encampment in India run by the women's branch of India's right-wing Hindu nationalist movement. Annette Linden and Bert Klandermans focus on activists rather than groups, exploring different paths to participation in far-right groups in the Netherlands; similarly, Michael Kimmel profiles former neo-Nazis in Scandinavia. Each study explores the context and dynamics of mobilization into far-right political movements, but with a variety of methodological approaches, ranging from life-history interviews with individual activists to participation at secret training sessions and observation of public and semi-public extremist events. Taken together, these studies reveal not only the particularities of right-wing extremism in differing political contexts, but also common patterns across various contexts, including the following.

The Agency of Activists

Right-wing extremist groups and activists are more heterogeneous than the fairly uniform public ideology of the far right would suggest. Indeed, without differentiating the external facade of the far right from its internal dynamics it is easy to assume that the public proclamations of its spokespersons are mirrored in the motivations of its activists and the actions of its groups. This overlooks the agency—the choices and strategic decisions—of far-right activists and groups.

The studies in this volume suggest how far the external, public face of the far right can diverge from its internal operations. The skinheads studied by Kimmel are attracted to rightist violence to validate their masculinity

and adult status as much as to safeguard their racial privileges. Similarly, while some of the personal trajectories of Dutch extremists collected by Linden and Klandermans suggest that they joined the far right for political commitments, others joined for personal reasons that had little to do with political ideas or agendas. By focusing closely on the dynamics of far-right groups and activists, the studies in this volume are a model for how to move analytically between the manifest external presentation of far-right ideas and agendas and the decisions and actions through which individuals and groups support these goals.

The Importance of Emotions

Viewed from a distance, the blatant appeals to rage and frustration in the public propaganda of far-right groups create the impression that such groups are essentially emotional; the collective embodiments of the irrational fears of their adherents. From a closer perspective, however, the emotional operations of extremist politics appear differently. The expected emotions of hostility, persecution, and anger certainly are generated and reinforced in the far right, but—less expected—so are feelings of pride, amusement, and sensuality. Moreover, the emotional tenor and styles of the far right are surprisingly variable over time and across groups. As Virchow shows, the German far right effectively creates what he terms an "emotional collective" of tension and frustration to mobilize current activists and recruit new ones. In contrast, the Hindu nationalists studied by Sehgal generate feelings of exhaustion and disorientation among young participants that eventually impede their commitment to the party.

Far-right groups not only seek to develop emotions among their adherents; some also teach supporters to embody the emotional styles of extremist politics. As they march in paramilitary formations, learn to wield a weapon, or listen to the jarring beat of white power music, right-wing extremists are meant to absorb the affective nature and intensity of extremist movements into their physical bodies, to take on the pomposity and belligerence of the far right. The "palpable energy" that Berezin describes at the festival of French National Front or that Virchow discusses in the demonstration marches of the German far right is experienced as both collective and individual emotion. Ethnographic work is able to convene the feelings of such political rituals, recording both the variable levels of intensity projected by extremist leaders and groups and the variable ways in which audiences respond or fail to respond to these messages.

The Variation in Tactics and Strategies

The blustering and bravado of far-right leaders can disguise variation, even subtlety, in the actions of extremist movements. Externally, racist and right-wing extremist groups appear rather uniform in their tactics and strategies. Up close, however, the situation is more complex, in part because it can be difficult for far-right groups to develop strategies and tactics consistent with the group's own ideologies. Many extremist groups, for example, try to balance the extremist agendas necessary to retain their hard-core supporters and project an image of power with more temperate tactics that can appeal to a wider base of recruits and voters.

Such variation in the strategy and tactics of the far-right is evident in a number of essays in this volume. Sandinavian neo-Nazis, as Kimmel finds, are torn between the glorification of raw masculine violence that attracts young male recruits and what they see as Nazi principles of discipline and order. Those in attendance at the festivals of the French National Front witness both benign memorabilia of Joan of Arc and tracts of the most blatant racist propaganda. And in Hindu paramilitary camps, women receive extensive weapons training meant to bolster their fear of Muslim men but which also generates a sense of female empowerment (however poorly implemented) that runs counter to the group's beliefs in female passivity and subordination.

The Centrality of Culture

From the outside, extremist right-wing movements appear to coalesce around ideas and ideologies, but internalist studies show that culture is also key to the attraction and durability of the far right. Music, clothing, style, bodily disciplines, ritual, identity, and performance are critical for recruiting new members and solidifying the commitment of participants in far-right groups. Cultural features may be important to all social movements, but they take on a particular salience in racist and far-right movements. Such groups need to convince recruits that extremist, even bizarre, ideas are valid and that a movement around these ideas is feasible. They also need to instill in their participants a sense of commitment that will help them withstand the stigma, marginalization, legal consequences, and even physical assault they may face in such a movement. Cultural practices are essential in this process, by creating bonds among members and normalizing the ideas and actions of the far right.

As young Indian girls learn to wield daggers in defense of Hindu nationalism, Scandinavian neo-Nazis boys absorb the musical anthems of white power music, or German far rightists adopt the soldierly stances they see as emblematic of a Nazi past, they are participating in and shaping a right-wing political culture that undergirds much of the recent surge in far-right movements. The import of such practices is difficult to discern from a distance, yet these are clearly vital to instilling a sense of group cama-raderie and political passion that can sustain political activism on the far right.

The Role of Suspicion

All ethnographic research is based on negotiation, but this takes on par-ticular characteristics in studies of the far right because of a pervasive sus-picion toward outsiders, including scholars. All movements discussed in this volume, from official electoral parties to paramilitary groups and violent gangs, regard researchers as dangerous—as potential agents of an enemy state (police, infiltrators, informants), spies from rival groups, or general antagonists who will expose their operations and cause harm. Many of the authors in this volume talk about the complicated negotiations that are required to study far-right groups, such as needing to observe from the mar-gins of events to avoid danger, to back-stage aspects of identity that might increase the threat of danger, to pass as a participant, and to assuage mis-givings about the purpose of the research.

Suspicion is also pervasive, although often less recognized, on the part of researchers studying the far right. While scholars tend not to scrutinize very deeply the motives or actions of those with whom they share a frame of reference (Whittier 2002, 291) as these seem to "make sense" and thus be credible (Barnes and Bloor 1982; Huggins, Haritos-Fatouros, and Zimbardo 2002, 27), all words and actions in far-right movements are likely to be regarded with skepticism. Researchers who work on what Susan Harding (1991, 392) terms the "repugnant cultural other" or who "solicit accounts of morally indefensible" behavior (Huggins, Haritos-Fatouros, and Zimbardo, 2002, 26) are likely to be highly attuned to the contradic-tions, incongruities, and illogical assumptions of such groups and persons. This is particularly true because scholars of the far right often confront the tangled issues of balancing scholarly ethics of fairness to the subject with moral and political interests in exposing and helping to disable the very movements they are studying.

Conclusion

The studies of far-right groups, parties, and activists in this volume move the agenda of scholarship on right-wing extremism in new directions. They identify motivations of activists and aspects of far-right movements that are not evident in studies done at a distance. In particular, they are able to detect contradictions within the world of extremist right-wing and racist movements that are impossible to discern with externalist strategies and data. Additionally, these studies show the value of multimethods in ethnographic work. The varying combinations of life-history interviews, document analysis, participant observation, interviewing, and observational methods produce a rich and nuanced depiction of far-right groups, allowing insight into the often-surprising complexities of this world. Finally, these studies advance the much-needed project of comparative analysis of contemporary far-right movements in the contemporary world. Some explicitly compare groups over time or across national contexts, others are studies of single groups but their similar focus on culture, emotionality, strategies, and the choices and rationales of activists allows the reader to make comparisons across different types of extremist right-wing groups. The prominent scholars who have contributed to this volume provide new insights into the far right as well as a model by which researchers can use ethnographic, internalist, and deeply contextualized methods to study even the most abhorrent and suspicious social movements.

Notes

1. Thanks to Ashley Currier and Deborah Gould for comments on an earlier version of this article.

2. As David Meyer (2004: 127) notes, mid-twentieth century scholars of political protest did concentrate on fascism and Nazism, although these were typically understood as irrational episodes of collective behavior rather than as social movements.

3. Consider the bibliographies of three important recent edited volumes of social movement research: Jeff Goodwin and James Jasper, *Rethinking Social Movements: Structure, Meaning, and Emotion* (2004); Mario Diani and Doug McAdam, *Social Movements and Networks: Relational Approaches to Collective Action* (2003); and Nancy Naples and Manisha Desai, *Women's Activism and Globalization: Linking Local Struggles and Transnational Politics* (2002). Counting only references to studies of specific movements and only those in which the political direction of the movement was clear from the title of the article or book, works on progressive movements (anti-nuclear; women's suffrage, AIDS activism, environmental, human rights, etc.) range from 77% to 100% of the total (mean = 90%). In the volume with the highest proportion of references to non-progressive movements, virtually all were from a single article on Nazism.

4. There are important exceptions to this, especially studies of racist skinheads and neo-Nazis such as those by Hamm (1993) and Ezekiel (1995) and studies of right-wing extremists in Europe (e.g., Klandermans and Mayer 2006).

References

Bacchetta, Paola, and Margaret Power. 2002. *Right-wing women: From conservatives to extremists around the world*. New York: Routledge.

Barnes, Barry, and David Bloor. 1982. Relativism, rationalism and the sociology of knowledge. In *Rationality and relativism*, edited by Marin Hollis and Steve Lukes, 21-47. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Blee, Kathleen M. 1993. Evidence, empathy and ethics: Lessons from oral histories of the Klan. *Journal of American History* 80 (2): 596-606.

———. 1998. Managing emotion in the study of right-wing extremism. *Qualitative Sociology* 21 (4): 381-99.

———. 2002. *Inside organized racism: Women in the hate movement*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

———. 2003. Studying the enemy. In *Our studies, ourselves*, edited by Barry Glassner and Rosanna Hertz, 13-23. New York: Oxford University Press.

———. 2005. Racial violence in the United States. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 28 (4): 599-619.

Blee, Kathleen M., and Verta Taylor. 2002. The uses of semi-structured interviews in social movement research. In *Methods in social movement research*, edited by Bert Klandermans and Suzanne Staggenborg, 92-117. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Castells, Manuel. 1997. *The power of identity*. Malden: Blackwell.

Diani, Mario, and Doug McAdam. 2003. *Social movements and networks: Relational approaches to collective action.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Ezekiel, Raphael. 1995. *The racist mind: Portraits of neo-Nazis and Klansmen.* New York: Viking.

Gitlin, Todd. 1980. *The whole world is watching: Mass media in the making and unmaking of the New Left*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Goodwin, Jeff, and James Jasper. 2004. *Rethinking social movements: Structure, meaning, and emotion.* New York: Rowman & Littlefield.

Goodwin, Matthew J. 2006. The rise and faults of the internalist perspective in extreme right studies. *Representations* 42 (4): 347-64.

Gould, Deborah B. 2004. Passionate political processes: Bringing emotions back into the study of social movements In *Rethinking social movements: Structure, meaning, and emotion*, edited by Jeff Goodwin and James Jasper, 155-75. New York: Rowman and Littlefield.

Hamm, Mark S. 1993. *American skinheads: The criminology and control of hate crime.* Westport, CT: Praeger.

Harding, Susan. 1991. Representing fundamentalism: The problem of the repugnant cultural other. *Social Research* 58 (2): 373-54.

Huggins, Martha Knisely, Mika Haritos-Fatouros, and Philip G. Zimbardo. 2002. *Violence workers: Police torturers and murderers reconstruct Brazilian atrocities*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Klandermans, Bert, and Nonna Mayer (eds). 2006. *Extreme right activists in Europe: Through the magnifying glass*. London: Routledge.

Koopmans, Ruud, and Susan Olzak. 2004. Discursive opportunities and the evolution of right-wing violence in Germany. *American Journal of Sociology* 110 (1): 198-230.

McAdam, Doug. 2001. Harmonizing the voices: Thematic continuity across the chapters. In *Silence and voice in the study of contentious politics*, edited by Ronald R. Aminzade, Jack A. Goldstone, Doug McAdam, Elizabeth J. Perry, William H. Sewell, Jr., Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly, 222-240. New York: Cambridge University Press.

McAdam, Doug, Robert J. Sampson, Simon Weffer, and Heather MacIndoe. 2005. 'There will be fighting in the streets': The distorting lens of social movement theory. *Mobilization: An International Journal* 10 (1): 1-18.

Meyer, David S. 2004. Protest and political opportunities. *Annual Review of Sociology* 30:125-45.

Naples, Nancy, and Manisha Desai. 2002. *Women's activism and globalization: Linking local struggles and transnational politics.* New York: Routledge.

Nepstad, Sharon Erickson. 2004. *Convictions of the soul: Religion, culture, and agency in the Central America solidarity movement*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Pred, Allan. 2000. *Even in Sweden: Racisms, racialized spaces, and the popular geographical imagination*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Smith, Jackie, and Hank Johnston. 2002. *Globalization and resistance: Transnational dimensions of social movements*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Whittier, Nancy. 1995. *Feminist generations: The persistence of the radical women's movement*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Whittier, Nancy. 2002. Meaning and structure in social movements. In *Social movements: Identity, culture, and the state*, edited by David S. Meyer, Nancy Whittier, and Belinda Robnett, 289-308. New York: Oxford University Press.

Wintrobe, Ronald. 2002. Leadership and passion in extremist politics. In *Political extremism and rationality*, edited by Albert Breton, Gianluigi Galeotti, Pierre Salmon, and Ronald Wintrobe, 25-45. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Kathleen M. Blee is Distinguished Professor of Sociology at the University of Pittsburgh. Her books include *Women of the Klan: Racism and Gender in the 1920s* and *Inside Organized Racism: Women in the Hate Movement*. She is currently working on a comparative ethnography of emergent social movement groups and an ethnography of how hate-motivated violence is experienced by victim communities.