Critically examining the role of the scholar in policymaking on the Far Right

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Chapter Abstract

How should researchers studying the Far and Extreme Right relate with policy and policymakers, and what does an ethical relationship between scholars and the state look like? Whilst there is some research into whether and how academics should engage with authorities, much of this is examined through the lens of the racialised nature of counterterrorism and its securitised interaction with minority subjects. However, with greater focus in recent years on the development of policy at a national and European level to counter the Far Right, what duty do researchers have to engage with policymakers in its construction? Does such engagement – particularly on policymaking designed to defang the Far and Extreme Right – undermine our ethical responsibilities and practical means for engaging with Far Right actors through research? Should engagement with stakeholders be a core part of research in countering the Far and Extreme Right, or does this entrench concepts of security criticised as stoking Islamophobia? What are the ethical questions to consider when political considerations of stakeholders come into tension with academic standards for rigorous research? And how should researchers engage with states that have been accused of openly encouraging Far or Extreme Right movements, ideologies or policies, and that may co-opt research for reactionary purposes? This chapter draws on our experience in policymaking projects and processes as well as existing research practice and publications to develop key questions that scholars could use to consider whether and how processes of engagement could best occur.

Introduction

Recent incidents of far-right violence and terrorism have perhaps awakened some governmental institutions to the threats and dangers posed by the far right. Despite the tardiness of this attention by policy-makers, many researchers studying the far right – not to mention those directly affected by far-right activity – have tentatively welcomed the sprouting of some political will to address these issues. Moreover, the readiness and even occasional alacrity of some governmental and intergovernmental institutions to seek input from select researchers may also be viewed as encouraging. But this presents a question: how should researchers studying the far right relate with policy and policymakers, and what does an ethical approach to this relationship look like? In this chapter, we reflect on this topic and several of its components, viewed through the lens of researchers encountering policy-making arenas,[1] to help researchers cogitate about their participation in policy processes.

With greater focus in recent years on the development of policy at national and European levels to counter the far right, researchers who are approached to engage in such processes must reconnoitre terrain strewn with hazards. What duty do researchers have to engage with policymakers in its construction? Does engagement – particularly on policymaking designed to defang the far right – undermine our prospects, ethical responsibilities, and practical means for

[1] We focus on the relationship of researchers to state-based governing institutions and related policy processes. This relationship may be complicated by intersecting or parallel relationships with other researchers and research institutions, non-governmental organisations and civil society actors, and with research participants and subjects. It is well, therefore, to read this chapter, especially our guidance to researchers in the penultimate section, as a framework to think through one set of issues in what may be more complex policymaking collaborations.

engaging in other research on the far right? What are the ethical questions to consider when political considerations of stakeholders come into tension with academic standards for rigorous research? And how should researchers engage with states or actors that have been accused of openly encouraging far-right movements, ideologies, or policies, and may distort research for malign purposes? Drawing on experience in several collaborative research projects supported by governmental institutions as well as participation in intergovernmental consultative bodies for policymaking to address far-right mobilisation, we consider these questions and offer guidance to other researchers pressed by similar considerations.

The chapter will firstly explore the context fuelling increased concern over the far right and relatedly increasing state policy discussions and responses, often within the counterterrorism paradigm. This is followed by discussion of the sensitive nature of working with states: whether and how scholarly engagement with the state may risk lending legitimacy to existing racialised policy approaches bound up within the liberal-state's long 'War on Terror,' to hard-right elements within national governments, and even to far-right movements. Finally, the chapter sets out general principles and questions by which researchers can critically examine their work to determine the honesty, risk, costs, and incentives involved in scholarly engagement with policymaking. This is designed to support the researcher as they navigate situations and power structures during engagement in policy responses to the far right.

Counterterrorism, Policymaking, and the Far Right

Issues of whether and how researchers studying the far right should involve themselves in policy work around extremism are becoming more critical, especially given long-standing criticisms of counterterror policy as stoking Islamophobia and racism, and spurring on the securitisation of minorities, borders, and human rights. Concern arises from the development of counterterrorism and counter-extremism practices which have typically focused on Muslim communities or, when attempting to address far-right violence, have drawn upon implicitly racialised practices native to the War on Terror. Ultimately, this risks acting to enable the very same processes involved in far-right mobilisation.

Far-right threats have often been underemphasised in counterterror contexts that have treated Islamically-framed terrorism with disproportionate concern. Counterterror and deradicalisation legislation introduced in Europe since the start of the War on Terror have overwhelmingly focused on Muslim communities (Kundnani 2012). This has reinforced the problematisation and securitisation of Muslims throughout Europe (Pantazis and Pemberton 2009, O'Toole, Meer et al. 2016, Abbas 2019). Whilst there have been recent attempts to address far-right threats – for instance, in the proscription of European far-right groups (Zeller and Vaughan, 2021), the construction of an EU-wide definition of Violent Right-Wing Extremism and work with major online platforms to challenge violent far-right content (McNeil-Willson 2022) – current European policy still contains a heavy Islamist bias (Weilnböck and Kossack 2019), alongside a systematic underestimation of neo-Nazism, white supremacism, and similar far-right movements.

When policy has addressed the far right, it often relies on existing structures imported from the War on Terror. Current Prevention or Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE) approaches, for instance, emphasise the role of individual and localised factors in drawing those deemed as 'vulnerable' towards terrorism – and are criticised for pathologising radicalisation and

disregarding the wider political context of violence (Coppock and McGovern 2014; Younis and Jadhav 2020; Aked, Younis, and Heath-Kelly 2021). This is particularly problematic in the context of far-right violence as it delineates and disassociates violent right-wing extremism from key contextual factors, such as interaction with and co-optation of extreme nationalistic anti-minority or anti-migrant language by mainstream politicians, governmental actors, and national media (Winter and Mondon 2020). The expansion of the securitised lens to include the countering of extremism as a means of combating the far right also risks researchers actively participating in policing the borders of legitimate political activity. The conception of a political mainstream as separated from radical and extreme currents constructs at least notionally discrete channels from a spectrum of political views and actions (Brown, Mondon, and Winter 2021). The distinction between radicals – at least tolerably committed to liberal democratic principles – and extremists – representing rejection of and (in some degree) a threat to those principles – is partially rooted in terminology adopted and propagated by German security agencies (Butterwegge and Meier, 2002). Such a framework has effectively trivialised state acts of racism and violence, whilst also allowing for the amalgamation of wildly incongruous phenomena – such as the alluring but misleading parallelism between 'right-wing extremism' and 'left-wing extremism', or comparisons with Islamically-justified violence that obfuscate processes of government legitimisation towards the far right.

Researchers inevitably engage in policy-making processes dominated by such conceptual frameworks. Their input is often sought as advisory towards policy processes: presenting relevant research, suggesting approaches and options, and providing alternative perspectives. Often attributed status as an 'expert,' researchers are nevertheless constrained by conditions of the policymaking arena. They enter into an environment which almost universally stresses a 'security-first' paradigm that aligns the approach to the far right with politicised governmental interests. For instance, the label of what is and is not far right largely depends on the government, media, and other relevant national or international actors present in that moment; and the type of solution that can be put forward is similarly bound to these actors. In sum, researchers face a phalanx of actors that encourage the advancement of specific state or governmental interests, whilst being discouraged and disincentivised from more critical work (Breen Smyth 2009:209).

There are also questions as to what extent research and findings conducted within an academic study should be repurposed for policy design. Studies into politically sensitive areas of politics inevitably involve the navigation of knotty questions of academic research ethics, with projects required to undergo ethical reviews at an early stage to ensure they are based upon the Participant Protection Model (PPM) – in which the safety and security of the research subject is held as sacrosanct. Such safeguards are designed to ensure that the scholar does not act to harm the safety or reputation of a participant through their research, as well as allowing for further research in the field. Navigating this process is particularly difficult when the research subject holds views that are directly in conflict or even abhorrent to the researcher – such as in the case of the far right. And whilst scholars are developing guidelines for researcher physical and mental wellbeing (e.g., Conway 2021), these in no way absolve researchers of responsibility towards their subject. Therefore, the scholar should examine their intentions, to consider whether the application of their research and research subject to advance policy and policy-based careers risks a disservice to academia and potentially hinders future research activity.

Researchers studying the far right, when asked to deploy their research within a policymaking setting, are thus faced with a problem. The requirement to engage with national policymakers and practitioners in the hope of tackling violent, virulent, or simply visible manifestations of the far right may potentially offer legitimacy to racialised governmental counterterror practices, lend credence to far-right actors purporting to moderation and tolerance, or may risk the safety of research subjects – a consideration no matter how unpleasant their views – and the degradation of academic ethics and research practice. Disengagement with policymakers, on the other hand, preserves academic purity but will likely limit the impact of academic research and leave policymakers reliant on less critical or scrupulous actors that operate in the field of security research. The decision to engage with policymakers is therefore a constant exercise in assessing to what extent engagement is possible, ethical, and impactful.

Working with sensitive states

To work with policymakers is to work with politicians and, inevitably, confront political considerations. This is the crux of the challenge confronting researchers involved in policymaking. Proffering recommendations or even submitting factual research may face resistance arising from actors' commitment to principles and programmes or to electorates. Without gainsaying political jockeying for electoral support – it is essentially democratic, even if we might wish politicians would be guided more by the better angels of their nature – it clearly deters actions that risk alienating constituents, whatever the merits of such actions. And a large and increasing number of policy arenas are occupied in part by far-right actors representing far-right constituents. The growth of political actors that claim to act as 'the voice of the people' against a constructed and contradictory imagining of 'the establishment' encompasses the adoption of aggressive political language as an election-winning strategy. As non-mainstream parties on the Right have gained electoral success, and traditional parties have sought to outmanoeuvre this threat, parties in many countries have embraced key elements of far-right discourses, normalising and embedding them within government (Wodak 2019).

At both national and supranational levels, election to democratic office is cited as cause for withholding proscriptive and other punitive measures – and even of stopping short of designating far-right actors as such. But this is disconsonant both with the lessons of historical experience and with the modern legal and juridical context of many states. Anti-system actors – that is, actors (of any ideological stripe) that wish to change fundamentally the political system in which they operate – widely enjoy a significant degree of popular support, which they have and continue to leverage into political representation. The fact that such actors gain representation through legitimate democratic means does not preclude the possibility that they are illegitimate actors insofar as they aim to subvert established liberal democratic systems of procedures and protections. Democratic legitimacy, merely winning electoral representation, should not be used as a fig leaf to conceal demonstrable facts about far-right actors nor prevent policy input taking account of those facts.

Yet this is the situation researchers encounter in many policymaking contexts. There are policymaking institutions and processes partially compromised by the influence of far-right actors, but that does not mean there is no avenue therein for meaningful and beneficial research input. Evaluating the benefits of realistically possible policy outcomes against the risks of

legitimising wilfully misleading policy processes and their outputs is a calculation that demands continuous attention from researchers. Though there is no definitive answer to this question – not least because of the varieties of policymaking contexts – we provide below guidance to thinking through it: when to engage, how to navigate and evaluate a policymaking context as a researcher of the far right, and when to leave. Through these considerations, though, we encourage researchers, empowered with the hard-won knowledge and critical insights of independent inquiry, to remain open to policymaking participation: not to sacrifice the good that may be won through policymaking on the altar of an ideal outcome.

Far-right political actors are empowered in many contexts, exercising influence on policy processes and in some cases dictating them. Across Europe and North America, radical right parties enjoy political representation, partially relying on extremist constituencies: from U.S. Republicans to Poland's Law and Justice party, Sweden Democrats to Italy's Lega, Forza Italia, and Fratelli d'Italia. In a few cases unabashedly extremist parties have won national political representation; this was the case with Golden Dawn in Greece until 2019 (and the subsequent court ruling that declared the party a 'criminal organisation'); it is the case with the Our Homeland party in Hungary and the People's Party Our Slovakia. The effects of such political realities confine the scope for research input to policymaking.

In national policymaking contexts where a far-right party has won representation, researchers broadly confront one of two situations. In one, a far-right party is in government. The opportunity for meaningful policymaking input is relatively closed. Even as progress may be possible in addressing violent right-wing extremism, work confronting less aggressive strains of the far right is probably limited by the commitments of governing far-right actors to constituents. Any policymaking engagement in such situations must seriously reckon with the risk of researcher participation conferring legitimacy on far-right actors. In the other, far-right parties are represented but not a part of government. The opportunity for meaningful policymaking input is relatively open. Yet far-right actors may exercise influence or indeed vetoes in policy processes. Even without such encumbrances, the possible extent to address and mitigate the causes and consequences of the far right may stop at the point of legislatively represented actors. Nevertheless, when national governments are unoccupied by far-right actors, researchers may reasonably expect the greatest latitude for input to policymaking.

In supranational policymaking contexts, where consensual decision-making is more common (and the number of veto points much greater) researchers face a more complex quandary. Far-right influence from one national context may limit the form, extent, and full veridicality of research input relating to that national context. The variety of national approaches and conceptualisations of what is (and is not) 'far right' may hamper research input from different researchers or bodies and may require the adoption of differing standards to ensure transnational acceptance. In addition to attending to the quality of their input, researchers must continually assess the degree to which that input is subject to constraints imposed by far-right actors beyond their own context, to determine whether it will be acceptable.

Researchers engaged in policymaking processes confront at all times the choice identified by Albert Hirschman (1970): loyalty, voice, or exit. That is, researchers may find the process and its prospects satisfactory, may find it necessary to raise issues and problems in attempts to mitigate

deficiencies and ameliorate conditions, or may withdraw from the process. Below we provide a guide to thinking through the considerations that underlie researchers' choice.

General principles and questions

How should researchers adjudicate the ethics of engaging with policymaking around the far right? Like other ethical questions, this is not a mechanical process and requires a high degree of contextual information and subjective judgement. With that caveat in mind, we offer four critical questions based on our experiences which can act to stimulate and structure the reflection of those working in the field.

Q1: Is my research honest?

A key concept in research ethics is *integrity* – meaning whether research is conducted honestly and according to recognised principles.[2] Scholars who are relatively comfortable applying these standards within a strictly academic context may nevertheless find unexpected challenges from working with policymakers. If researchers collaborate with government in producing some output, they may find that government actors have a role in research design, reviewing work in an ongoing way, or even approving final products. Does this influence significantly degrade the research input to the policy process?

As opposed to academic peer reviewers who should theoretically share the same priorities around research integrity, governmental actors operate according to a different logic. Some of the abiding tensions in far-right policymaking involve the definitions of extremism, the designation of particular actors as far right, or the efficacy of different policy solutions. In Denmark, for example – a country with a strong focus on the right of assembly – the bar for enacting proscription or similar legal sanctions against extremist groups is typically set high, limited to groups involved in demonstrably violent acts; those that only use hate speech and violent rhetoric on the other hand, such as the *Stram Kurs* ('Hard Line') party or neo-Nazi organisations, generally do not face restrictions based on extremist views alone. Does the Danish government's stance significantly encumber useful policymaking? In policy aiming to track and counter far-right violence, perhaps not; in policy aiming to identify the causes of far-right violence, including macro-social factors like polarisation, probably yes (cf. McNeil-Willson et al. 2019). Researchers may find the possibilities for productive input more constrained in the latter case.

Government actors may also have a greater tendency towards lack of transparency, particularly concerning politically sensitive topics such as the far right, which conflicts with researchers' preferences for public accessibility and contribution to public knowledge. For example, the results of projects completed for the European Commission are typically owned by the EC itself. In projects that do not explicitly include a dissemination component, the EC may decide to withhold results from wider publication. Researchers do well to address this point early on: how will deliverables be handled and disseminated? Is it possible to publish, if not the direct outputs of a project, the data and to share other versions of analyses? Looking after the honesty and integrity of research input means to expose that research to review and criticism, so attending to dissemination among broader research communities and the general public is essential.

[2] Australian National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research, p.10.

Q2: Who benefits and who bears risk?

A potentially more difficult test centres on *beneficence*, namely the risks and benefits associated with the research and how they are distributed among different groups. In contrast with questions about integrity which mostly involve factors endogenous to the research itself, assessing beneficence requires judgements about how research will interact with complex social and political systems.

At its most obvious, researchers can consider the intended goal of the policy under consideration, and its possible ramifications. For example, in 1972 the German government adopted the so-called *Radikalenerlass* ('radical decree'), which attempted to prevent people opposed to the liberal democratic system from civil service offices. Although the decree was directed against supporters of the far-right NPD (*Nationaldemokratischen Partei Deutschlands*) in civil service, in practice it almost exclusively affected supposedly radical leftists, working as teachers, judges, doctors and nurses, administrators, secretaries, engineers, and social workers. (Recently in Germany, some have suggested a new *Radikalenerlass* should be used to deal with far-right supporters in the army and other civil sectors.) Involvement in such processes may lead to the creation of policy that, though putatively aimed at countering far-right violence, may have wide-reaching impacts of securitisation on a variety of democratic actors. Using a more recent example of far-right violence, in some cases broadcast through social media, we can see greater pressure for more effective moderation of right-wing extremist content online. This is precisely the aim of the Christchurch Call to Eliminate Terrorist and Violent Extremist Content Online,[3] which has been taken up by bodies like the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT) and the European Union Internet Forum (EUIF). This spurt of policymaking contains the potential to reduce the direct harms of hate speech and the indirect harms resulting from far-right mobilisation. But it also risks reinforcing a shift in the regulation of speech towards for-profit tech corporations or illiberal states with lesser transparency or accountability.

Both risks to the public (especially marginalised groups) and benefits for far-right actors constitute obvious grounds for revising or withdrawing from a project, especially where those consequences are direct, significant, or outweigh any prospective benefits. Yet in most cases the calculus will likely be less clear cut.

Q3: What are the costs of participation and non-participation?

Another consideration beyond the substantial issues of integrity and beneficence involves the cost of participating (or, indeed, not participating) in policymaking processes.

In terms of the cost of participation, we suggest that research activity inevitably involves an opportunity cost calculation. In other words, if you agree to participate in some policymaking process, what other research will be unexplored – either because of the reality of finite resources or because of the path dependency of your research agenda being steered in a particular direction catering to the demands of a policymaking audience? The answer to this question will vary from researcher to researcher; one may feel their agenda aligns completely with policymakers while

[3] For more information, refer to the Call's webpage: https://www.christchurchcall.com/.

another may perceive a risk of co-optation. Naturally, the cost of participation is also a question of scale: small, one-off projects will not reshape your research agenda to the same extent as a multi-year grant. Yet if, as a field, experts are consistently co-opted into government paradigms as discussed previously, it will likely reduce the capacity for scholars to act as critical agents.

Flipping the question, what are the costs of non-participation by researchers? If policymakers continued making decisions without the input of research experts, how would the policy system and its outcomes develop over time? Researchers are likely to have greater independence to challenge perceived assumptions than the policymakers themselves and, with many instances of policy engagement taking place outside of formal academic projects, are likely to be less constrained by hierarchical structures of those within governmental or intergovernmental bodies.

Q4: What incentives could be affecting my decision?

We also suggest it is worth reflecting on the professional incentives which could bias any ethical considerations.

Researchers are increasingly encouraged or incentivised to engage in 'transfer' activities which demonstrate their impact in broader society. Especially for researchers facing precarious working conditions, this may increase the appeal of engaging with policymakers. Yet measures of impact in academia can tend towards the quantitative – the more the better – and have lesser regard for the kind of nuances discussed above about who benefits and who bears the risk. Indeed, discerning different kinds of transfer is likely to only compound the problem: the highest impact is gained from working with the most powerful actors such as trans/national governments and major corporations; these are the groups most easily able to dictate the terms of any research collaboration (potentially encroaching on research integrity) and to occupy and therefore likely to be reproducing the patterns of domination which oppress currently marginalised groups (raising questions around beneficence of the research).

Finally, we want to draw attention to how timing affects ethical considerations, and in particular the trade-off between repercussions and information. For example, before a research project begins, the repercussions of non-participation are minimal, making such a choice on ethical grounds more straightforward. However, you will also be making that choice based on imperfect information: you may only be able to guess at the outcomes the policy system will produce, how your research will play a role, and what outcomes might result from your non-participation. As a research project progresses you may acquire clearer information about some of these dynamics, and yet the costs of withdrawal will also grow, whether sunk costs of time and resources or damaged relationships with policymakers.

Some evaluations, of course, are only possible in hindsight, when the cognitive cost of admitting mistakes is highest, such as: what were the final outcomes of the policy system you participated in? How did your research agenda and that of the field develop over time, and what avenues were left unexplored? For this reason, we suggest that the ethics of engaging with policymakers should be treated as an ongoing question rather than a preliminary screening test.

In conclusion, scholarly engagement with policymaking practices is a process that requires constant critical self-reflection, evaluation and adjustment. The scholar is largely required to engage on terms determined by policymakers, within a counter-extremism paradigm consistently critiqued as stoking phenomena, such as Islamophobia, which feed the far right, and may risk giving credence directly to far-right political actors and governments. We suggest that careful consideration of the honesty, risks, costs, and incentives for scholarly engagement with policymaking could help to mitigate some of these problems – although we recognise that many of the structural problems and inequalities between researcher and policymaker remain. Ultimately, the decision to engage or not is a personal one, and one that many scholars working to understand the far right have already had to grapple with during their work. It is a decision that, we believe, can be helped by more open and honest conversation amongst scholars on the perils, pitfalls, and indeed the potential of such engagement.

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