



The Evolution of the Radical Right: An Interview with Matthew Feldman

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Matthew Feldman, a specialist on fascist ideology, looks at how the radical right has changed over time.

Q. As someone who has examined the history of radical right movements, how similar is the current political environment to the situation in the 1920s and 30s?

Very **dissimilar** at first glance. There are few fully-fledged fascist movements today, and certainly not those capable of seizing power in the manner of Hitler's Nazis or, earlier, Mussolini's blackshirts. Shirted paramilitary movements seem very much a thing of the past, and even leadership cults are much rarer in an age of social media. So the movements themselves are very different, and openly revolutionary right groups rarely command support of hundreds, let alone thousands or millions, of militant activists.

However, there is certainly a surge in "reformist" radical right groups in Europe, and leaders who have taken mainstream right politics in a distinctly authoritarian way - in Poland and Hungary in Europe, under Trump in the US, and in India, the Philippines and most recently under Bolsanaro in Brazil. Those thinking the ideology of the radical right is purely European, or purely a pre-1945 phenomena, are therefore mistaken - and perhaps complacent about the seductions of radical right extremism.

Q. Since the end of the Second World War, how have the strategies and rhetoric of far-right movements shifted?

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I argued recently to the Council of Europe that three big changes, and one similarity, have governed radical right movements over the last generation.

First, they have traded jackboots for ties, and racist rhetoric for the language of democracy. Since the publication of Umberto Eco's landmark 'Ur-fascism' a quarter-century ago - a lament at the success of the first radical right parties to gain widespread support since 1945 - these movements have embraced what Orban famously praised as 'illiberal democracy'; that is, majoritarian systems that have a democratic facade but limited checks and balances or protections for minority groups.

Secondly, this "mainstreaming" of the radical right is not coincidentally occurring as the memory of historical fascism and the destruction it has caused passes into historical memory. The experience of fascist terror is being consigned to history books, making the risk of radical right extremism less visceral. It is precisely this memory, for example, that so inoculated post-Franco Spain from successful radical right groups for nearly fifty years - until the recent breakthroughs by [Vox](#) in regional elections.

Third, poor digital literacy and the rise of social media means that politics has become more superficial and soundbite friendly, which is a huge boon to single-issue radical right groups' ominous xenophobic warnings about putative enemies (often Muslims today, but scapegoat groups vary). The radical right is better at emotive 'messaging' than champions of liberalism these days, it often seems. This is the similarity between past and present in my view, long-ago identified by the brilliant scholar [Juan Linz as the failure of liberal institutions](#). I would extend this to a failing liberal ethos in many of the countries witnessing a rise in radical right 'populism' today. The case for liberal

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democracy must be passionately made if for no other reason than the alternative may be far worse under radical right ideologues and policies.

Q. We've recently witnessed a series of electoral victories for radical right figures across parts the globe. When did this turn towards more radical right-wing politics begin and why?

Aside from a few outliers (Denmark in 1973, or France in 1986, elections - both of which having special circumstances) the national breakthroughs for radical right parties did not come until the end of the Cold War, which also seemed to swiftly close the 'anti-fascist' consensus between blocs so usefully enumerated in the historian Dan Stone's aptly titled '[Goodbye to all that](#)'. There were certainly regional stirrings in places like Belgium and former Yugoslavia in the second half of the 1980s, but the real models for these election victories were in Austria under Jorg Haider and Italy's first Berlusconi cabinet - which saw a majority of seats for the radical right [Lega Nord](#) (now La Lega under Salvini) and the all-but-defunct MSI, an explicitly post-fascist party. It was precisely those tectonic shocks in Europe that led Eco to [lament that](#)

“ It would be so much easier for us if there appeared on the world scene somebody saying, "I want to reopen Auschwitz, I want the Blackshirts to parade again in the Italian squares." Life is not that simple. Ur-Fascism can come back under the most innocent of disguises. ”

The reason it began, I think, is much easier to explain: with electoral success comes power, and the chance to make policy. By taking up more ‘innocent’ disguises, radical right ideologues like Haider were able to come up with the formula for electoral success: demagoguery framed in politically correct language, and policies that would appeal to disaffected voters through a scapegoating of the "other".

Q. You’ve described the **alt-right movement as “perhaps the most successful rebranding of fascist ideology since Axis denouement of 1945”. Why have the alt-right been so successful in this respect? What have they done differently compared to other radical right movements?**

When soon to be US presidential advisor Steve Bannon **bragged** that his online publication *Breitbart News* was the "platform for the alt-right", he was partly right. Or better, he was the platform for the "alt-lite", a more "populist" form of alt-right messaging regarding white nationalism and radical right politics. What was crucial about this platform was that alt-right ideas by the

likes of Jared Taylor, Richard Spencer and even the neo-Nazi Andrew Anglin were migrating from neo-fascist circles, via watered down forms by those like Milo Yiannopolous or Mike Cernovich and into the pages of Breitbart News.

In this way, the alt-right has had an influence that few advocates of fascist ideology today have had. And that was done through a variety of ploys suited to the internet age: the creation of memes like "Pepe the Frog" and slogans like "You (often Jews) will not replace us!" - but above all, a style of trolling that provides the thinnest of ironic distances from the appalling contents of what they are saying; for example, calling for forms of ethnic cleansing, or even genocide, against minority groups. On the whole, sophisticated visual propaganda and the veneer of "humour" has proved immensely successful for the alt-right, allowing its messages to receive perhaps the widest hearing they've had since 1945.

Q. The term populism is often employed to describe much of modern radical right politics. There are certainly differences between movements from country to country, but how far are these movements actually grass roots driven phenomena? Are there more prominent roles played by elites than some pundits make out?

I am wary of the term populism, even though I have enormous respect for the work done on this subject by leaders in the field like Cas Mudde. Unlike him, however, I see populism not as a 'thin' ideology but as a mobilising tactic. I wholly agree with Prof. Mudde that populism sets "the people" against the 'corrupt elites' and therefore, amongst other features, can be employed by the right as well as the left (think of Alexis Tsipras in Greece, or Bernie Sanders in the US, or even Jeremy Corbyn here; to some extent all use populist language).

Yet that seems to me more a political tactic rather than an ideology. And importantly, not all radical right groups are populist. There is an "intellectual" and even anti-populist tradition for the postwar radical right that stretches back to the [Nouvelle Droite](#) (New Right) in post-1968 France - recently taken up by the non-populist militants of Generation Identity - and even before that, Mosley's 'Europe a Nation' or, still earlier, Francis Parker Yockey's *Imperium*, were scarcely meant to appeal to the "common man". While this trend has been understandably eclipsed by the rise of a form of radical right that is certainly populist - Bolsonaro is merely the latest iteration of this fashion that was pioneered by Jean-Marie Le Pen some thirty years ago - most of the supply-side is indeed provided by elites, usually from middle- or upper-class backgrounds. Donald Trump may have learned to speak the language of populism, but his upbringing is one that 99% of Americans would scarcely recognise!

Q. How long do radical ideas need to remain in the mainstream for them to stop being considered radical?

That depends on which ideas! Not all things radical are bad of course - a subject that very much [interests me](#) - and perhaps just what's needed is a bit more radical practices of liberalism, a radical defence of the other, and a radical shakeup of democracy to re-engage an *informed* citizenry (and providing for the latter is no easy matter). But it is certainly true that radical ideas can become normalised, which [Aristotle Kallis](#) has called 'breaking taboos' and "mainstreaming" extreme ideas. That is clearly a danger, though I wonder if it is so much a question of time as memory - which can form part of a national consciousness (think of the American revolution or Civil War), or quickly forgotten. Think of how long ago the 2012 Olympics seem, with the global

Britain touted in the opening ceremony appearing quite at odds with the Brexit vote only four years later.

Which is the more accurate picture of Britain: 2012 or 2016? Or is it a case that both of these things are, as they must be, contested in the mainstream over what they mean about a country of nearly 70 million people. While time and memory are crucial questions to ask, for me modes of transmission between (usually elite) suppliers of radical ideas and the way they do, or don't, receive a "demand-side" response from the wider public are equally pressing. And I say pressing because, I fear, we are still in the foothills of the radical right challenge today. We have a mountain to climb.

Image credit: [tiburi/Pixabay](#).

About the Interviewee

***Professor Matthew Feldman** is a specialist on fascist ideology and the far-right in Europe and the USA. He has written widely on these subjects, for both academic and general audiences. He has long researched the interaction between politics and faith in the modern world, and has taught these subjects for some two decades to school, undergraduate and postgraduate students. An Emeritus Professor in the History of Modern Ideas at Teesside University, in 2013 Prof. Feldman led Britain's first unit dedicated to analysis of radical right extremism, the Centre for Fascist, Anti-fascist and Post-fascist Studies (CFAPS), and prior to that, directed the Radicalism and New Media Group at the University of Northampton. He is a Visiting Professor at Richmond, the American University in London, having previously held fellowships at the universities of Bergen (Norway), Birmingham and Oxford (thrice). He is an editor*

of Wiley-Blackwell's online journal, Compass: Modern Ideologies and Faith, and co-edits two academic book series Bloomsbury Publishers, Modernist Archives and Historicizing Modernism.

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