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Rise of the Far-Right: Too Broad a Category?

By Luca Farrow

SYNOPSIS

The term Far-Right currently describes a very broad range of phenomena. These phenomena are troubling and demand strong policy responses but imprecise identification of threats can hinder policy.

COMMENTARY

THE FAR-RIGHT, or Right-Wing extremism, is currently in vogue in security and terrorism studies, and is increasingly prominent in mainstream media narratives. Over the last decade, but especially in the last five years, the Far-Right is regularly [described](#) by academics and journalists as the most significant growing form of extremism, not just in the West but also in Asia.

Statistics comparing the number of terrorist incidents that can be ascribed to the Far-Right versus the number that can be ascribed to Islamist extremists are regularly presented. For example, citing such statistics, the *Guardian* [reported](#) on 8 September 2021 that Far-right terror has emerged to pose a bigger threat to the United States than Islamist extremism post-9/11. But when we encounter the terminology of the Far-Right and particularly when we use it, we should maintain a critical perspective as to its usefulness.

Too Broad a Term?

Both the notions of 'Left-Wing' and 'Right-Wing' are notorious for being [unreliable](#) descriptors, and terminology around the Far-Right should not be singled out in this respect. Indeed, we regularly encounter terms that have deeply contested meanings, but which are nevertheless useful, such as "democracy" and "terrorism".

The Far-Right label may similarly be useful and worth retaining. But, given the current popularity of the term, it is worth pointing out that it is being used to describe a breathtakingly wide variety of phenomena.

To give some examples, the Far-Right label is applied to: xenophobic Identitarians in Europe, white supremacists, Christian extremists, [Hindutvavadi nationalists](#) in India, Buddhist movements in Myanmar and Sri Lanka, and to [incels](#).

What do these groups have in common? It is possible to see exclusivist ideologies predominant across most of these, and several feature a strong nationalist, often nativist, current. Some of these movements appear to aim for the return to a bygone golden age in the past and regard themselves as championing traditional values.

Political scientist Cas Mudde has recognised the challenges and controversies around defining what is meant by Right-Wing extremism, [noting](#) at one point that 58 different features are mentioned in definitions in the literature. He identified five features that were mentioned by at least half of the authors he surveyed: nationalism, racism, xenophobia, anti-democracy and the strong state.

Julia Ebner has similarly [suggested](#) the Extreme-Right comprises groups and individuals that “exhibit at least three of the following five features: nationalism, racism, xenophobia, anti-democracy and strong state advocacy”.

Too Loose to be Useful

But such definitions are potentially too wide or too loose to be analytically useful. An argument could be made that the ideologies of extremist Islamist groups share several of these features too: frequently nationalistic (of the ethno-religious variety of nationalism), frequently anti-democratic, and often xenophobic (we might think of the way Western tourists are viewed by Jemaah Islamiyah).

Indeed, Islamists have indeed been [described](#) as Far-Right in the literature. Yet, as noted above, the threat posed by Islamist extremism is also frequently set in comparison with the threat posed by the Far-Right, presenting the two as quite distinct, which shows how unhelpful it may be to describe the former this way.

To scrutinise the working definition of the Far-Right further, would not the ideology of the Far-Left, if manifested in the form, for instance, of some Communist regimes, share many if not all of the features mentioned by Mudde and Ebner?

It is noteworthy that scholars of the Far-Right can very often not agree on what ties the various phenomena they study together. It is often remarked that the challenge of the Far-Right is fiendishly difficult to address because it is ever evolving and spreading. A part of this might be accounted for by the fact that too many different phenomena are being grouped together under a single label.

Politicised Definitions

Sometimes different Far-Right movements are identified to be connected by transnational links and inspirations, for example between fascists in Europe and Hindu

extremists in India. But this raises the question as to whether the existence of such connections and communications across borders are sufficient to conclude that one is looking at closely related phenomena.

Often inspirations from extremist groups overseas pertain predominantly to tactics and not to ideology. For example, links that the Irish Republican Army (IRA) formed with terrorist organisations around the world do not necessarily indicate that such diverse groups are part of one and the same global movement.

As Mudde has also noted, some scholars may define Right-Wing extremism in opposition to their own values, as “an antithesis to their own beliefs”, as he puts it and some politicians use the label to smear their opponents. We only need to look at the way Vladimir Putin sought to legitimise the invasion of Ukraine as an exercise in “de-Nazification”, with Nazism understood by many as synonymous with being extremely right-wing or fascistic.

(This is not to deny the existence of Neo-Nazi groups in Ukraine and indeed in Russia, though of course the idea that the Ukrainian government is controlled by Nazis is absurd.) These factors add to the difficulty of reaching consensus as to what is and what is not encompassed by the term.

But it is also worth noting the argument that scholarship is, to some extent, always inherently political (with a small “p”). What one writes about and how one labels it can be understood as political choices and try as one might, it is difficult, if not impossible to, remain purely “scientific” in one’s goals. Therefore, again, the Far-Right is not a singularly fraught concept.

Policy Disadvantages

Using the Far-Right terminology to describe such a disparate range of individuals and groups may be useful to describe some disturbing trends in extremism that we are seeing across the world. But there are potential policy disadvantages to applying the label overly liberally.

At the moment, when we hear that an individual has been motivated by Far Right ideology, we in fact know very little about what has driven him or her. If countering the narratives of grievance that motivate the violence of those identified as Far Right is going to be important in reducing the security threat they pose, there are good policy reasons for being much more careful with the terminology.

Commenting on the difficulty of defining the Far-Right is not to underestimate the grave threat that the various phenomena described as such undoubtedly represent to societies across the globe. Nor is it to suggest that fewer resources should be dedicated to combat these phenomena.

The rising legitimacy of exclusivist, nativist, xenophobic and very often outright racist viewpoints and their imbrication with mainstream politics is a destructive trend that requires a society-wide effort to challenge.

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