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Research on Conservative Islam in Europe: Navigating Ethical Considerations

GULNAZ SIBGATULLINA

Abstract

This contribution discusses the ethical dilemmas inherent in researching marginalized communities, particularly in contexts where security approaches predominate. Focusing on a project involving white male converts to Islam who express critiques of liberal norms and institutions, this paper explores why such research is necessary despite the risk of amplifying illiberal voices. It also addresses the methodological challenges of conducting such research, considering the safety and well-being of different actors: the researcher, their respondents, and those who may be adversely affected by the exclusivist rhetoric of an illiberal community.

Keywords: conversion to Islam, conservative Muslims, Islamic critique of liberalism, research ethics

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Academic research on conservative and ultraconservative groups raises numerous ethical concerns, many of which are rooted in the broader challenges of studying marginalized and securitized communities. These challenges encompass issues such as power imbalances between researchers and participants, as well as the risk of objectifying the groups in focus.[1] In addition, there are specific ethical dilemmas related to researching the right end of the political spectrum.

These latter dilemmas can be categorized into two main groups. First, there is the question of "why" we undertake this research—why focus on individuals, organizations, and associations that often promote exclusive and hierarchical societies when there is a potential risk of our academic work inadvertently legitimizing and popularizing these viewpoints? Second, there is the question of "how" to conduct this research ethically—assuming that such a study is necessary, how can it be carried out without causing harm to participants or the researcher, while ensuring maximal fairness and impartiality throughout the process?

Ethical considerations surrounding research into illiberal groups have recently attracted much attention in academic scholarship.[2] The trend reflects the heightened visibility of these groups and the (not always proportional) rise in research projects devoted to them.[3] In this essay, I seek to contribute to these ongoing discussions by drawing on my experience working with a religious minority within the contemporary political right. The minority status, as I hope to show, brings additional challenges in identifying who needs protection and from whom—the deliberation required for calibrating one's ethical compass.

Identifying as Muslim and as a Conservative

My research focuses on individuals who had in the past or continue to maintain connections of varying nature with European right-wing parties, (ultra)nationalist groups, and conservative religious groups. These individuals are predominantly white men who are likely to be viewed as representing the majority population in a given region. Their political views diverge but contain pronounced elements of nativism, ethnocentrism, and/or cultural conservatism on issues of gender, family, and LGBTQ+ rights. Unlike "ordinary" European right-wing and illiberal movements that assume the incompatibility of Islam with European culture and the European value system, the members of this loosely connected network have publicly demonstrated their support for Islam, often after a religious conversion.

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[1] E.g., Fida Sanjakdar et al., *Re-searching Margins: Ethics, Social Justice, and Education* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2022), https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429346286; Laura Parson, "Considering Positionality: The Ethics of Conducting Research with Marginalized Groups," in *Research Methods for Social Justice and Equity in Education*, ed. Kamden K. Strunk and Leslie A. Locke (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 15–32, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-05900-2; and Nadia von Benzon and Lorraine van Blerk, "Research Relationships and Responsibilities: 'Doing' Research with 'Vulnerable' Participants," *Social & Cultural Geography* 18, no. 7 (2017): 895–90, https://doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2017.1346199.

[2] Illiberalism pertains not only to the far right but also to the far-left actors, though the latter receive considerably less attention. For the definition of illiberalism, see Marlene Laruelle, "Illiberalism: A Conceptual Introduction," *East European Politics* 38, no. 2 (2022): 303–27, https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2022.2037079. For scholarship on the research ethics, see Emanuele Toscano, ed., *Researching Far-Right Movements: Ethics, Methodologies, and Qualitative Inquiries* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019); Stephen D. Ashe et al., eds., *Researching the Far Right: Theory, Method and Practice* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020); and Adrienne L. Massanari, "Rethinking Research Ethics, Power, and the Risk of Visibility in the Era of the 'Alt-Right' Gaze," *Social Media + Society* 4, no. 2 (2018), https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305118768302.

[3] What Aurelien Mondon and Aaron Winter refer to as "bandwagonism" in their chapter "From Demonization to Normalization: Reflecting on Research," in *Researching the Far Right*, ed. Stephen Ashe et al., 370–82.

The group in question constitutes a minority within the broader and multifaceted community of European converts to Islam, due to their active political self-positioning on the right of the spectrum.[4] They also represent a minority within the European right, due to their distinctive, that is, Muslim, religious identity. These two identities—religious and political—are often categorized in the mainstream discourse as challenging or even incompatible with liberal-democratic norms. Reinforcing each other, these identities lead to a "double" ostracization of the group. In practical terms, this implies that research informants from this group are likely to encounter disproportionately high scrutiny from security services, particularly in Europe.

In academic research, this double ostracization has resulted in the practically exclusive dominance of the security studies approach toward this group. The trend has been intensifying after the post-9/11 securitization of Islam in general and the phenomenon of foreign fighter-converts in *jihadi* groups in particular, which has contributed to an already pejorative media portrayal of Muslims, especially converts.[5] While there are documented cases of European converts to Islam assuming leadership roles within extremist organizations like the Caucasus Emirate in Russia or Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, where their brutal actions were filmed and even used to promote these organizations on the internet, generalizing this particular image to encompass all converts is clearly impossible.[6] When combined with research methodologies that rely solely on publicly available data, media overrepresentation of *jihadist* Muslims inevitably introduces bias into the depiction of highly diverse convert communities.[7]

A problem with the security studies approach, as discussed by Cobain Tetrault, among others, lies in the preexisting popular consensus, "such as in the form of activists' public social media posts, speeches, websites and/or institutional or government narratives, reports and policy" about the violent character of individuals in question.[8] In other words, if the research by default presupposes the violent nature of white, male converts to Islam, the public image that these individuals maintain—which is boosted by the (social) media, that is, openly available data—is likely to reinforce this perception. This is despite the fact that the performative acts, such as social media posts, and the actual views and deeds of individuals within the right and far-right organizations can vary significantly.[9] Moreover, security-focused studies often fail to capture the full range of various groups, their motivations and dynamics, and especially developments that emerge in reaction to changing social conditions.[10]

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[4] On the European community of converts, see, among others, Kate Zebiri, *British Muslim Converts: Choosing Alternative Lives* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2008), https://doi.org/10.1093/jis/etp070; Esra Özyürek, *Being German, Becoming Muslim: Race, Religion, and Conversion in the New Europe* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014); Juliette Galonnier, "Choosing Faith and Facing Race: Converting to Islam in France and the United States" (PhD diss., Northwestern University and Science Po, 2017), https://explore.openaire.eu/search/publication?pid=10.21985%2Fn2hq3j; and Karin van Nieuwkerk, *Moving In and Out of Islam* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2018).

[5] David Herbert and Janna Hansen, "'You Are No Longer My Flesh and Blood': Social Media and the Negotiation of a Hostile Media Frame by Danish Converts to Islam," *Nordic Journal of Religion and Society* 31, no. 1 (May 2018): 4–21, https://doi.org/10.18261/issn.1890-7008-2018-01-01; Thomas Sealy, "Making the 'Other' from 'Us': The Representation of British Converts to Islam in Mainstream British Newspapers," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 37, no. 2 (2017): 196–210, https://doi.org/10.1080/13602004.2017.1339500; and Gulnaz Sibgatullina, "Translation and the Construction of Conversion Narratives: Language Strategies of Russian Converts to Islam," in *The Routledge Handbook of Translation and Religion* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2022), 348–63.

[6] For the Caucasus Emirate case, see Danis Garaev, "Jihad as Passionarity: Said Buriatskii and Lev Gumilev," *Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations*, 28, no. 2 (2017), 203–18, https://doi.org/10.1080/09596410.2017.1288460. For the ISIS case, see Marion van San, "Lost Souls Searching for Answers? Belgian and Dutch Converts Joining the Islamic State," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9, no. 5 (October 2015): 47–56, https://www.jstor.org/stable/26297433.

[7] Justin Everett Cobain Tetrault, "Thinking Beyond Extremism: A Critique of Counterterrorism Research on Right-Wing Nationalist and Far-Right Social Movements," *The British Journal of Criminology* 62, no. 2 (March 2022): 435, https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azab062.

[8] Tetrault, "Thinking Beyond Extremism": 435.

In my research, I focus on the last point and analyze the *evolution* of conservative ideas expressed by Europeans through their affiliation with Islam. Like any socially engaged individuals, my research interlocutors continuously accumulate new experiences, are exposed to novel ideas, and adapt to the changing contexts around them. Some had already been actively involved in public debates for many years and experienced marginalization due to their prior or ongoing associations with far-right groups or certain political views they had articulated or supported, especially at the inception of their political activism. Conversely, others found greater acceptance in mainstream discourse precisely because of their religious conversion. Over the years, these individuals have been actively involved in generating intellectual content and organizing grassroots mobilization initiatives. The main driving force behind my research project has been the analysis of convictions, principles, and ideologies held by these converts. In my case, as in many other studies involving politically marginalized groups, this entailed direct engagement with the individuals and a thorough examination of their work.[11]

In the subsequent sections of this essay, I will delve into four crucial facets central to my research project, which are closely linked to the broader discourse on the ethics of researching the political (far-)right. The first two aspects pertain to the "why" question, focusing on the researcher's personal motivations and the contemporary challenges associated with investigating conservative Islam in Europe. The other two aspects address the "how" question and revolve around ensuring the security of respondents during data collection and the responsible presentation of data while upholding the researcher's ethical obligations. In deriving these general conclusions drawn from my personal experience, I recognize that they do not apply to everyone and that there may be variations depending on the researcher's background, perspective, and research focus.

The Researcher's Personal Motivation

Research on far-right movements and actors is often motivated by a collective, shared desire to comprehend the ongoing processes within our societies and to gain insight into groups whose views may differ from our own. This motivation arises from a combination of intellectual curiosity and practical necessity to uphold the systems that we value and cherish. However, when discussing the reasons for scholarly engagement with the (far-)right, there has been little emphasis on the individual motivations of researchers. It is important to recognize that delving into the core of groups we oppose can be an inherently personal journey, as it directly addresses our individual concerns and anxieties about the future of the societies to which we belong.

My positionality as a researcher—particularly within this project—has been strongly influenced by the set of identities related to my gender, ethnicity, and religious background. The interplay of these identities is prone to creating various kinds of discrimination and privilege conditions, and my individual experiences have played an important role in the way I have approached the project and my research interlocutors, as well as how they have perceived and interacted with me. Some of the methodological issues were connected to the well-discussed issue of a female researcher operating within male-dominated spaces, such as difficulties getting access and gendered perceptions of the researcher within the community.[12] Even the Muslim identity, which might seem like the most obvious shared identity, was often dividing rather than creating a basis for rapport. Our experiences of being and becoming Muslim, in fact, have been vastly different.[13] As someone born into a Muslim family, my relationship with Islam has been shaped by family traditions and a sense of minority identity in Russia, leading to a generally apolitical or quietist perspective on religion. In contrast, my research interlocutors had converted to Islam as adults and viewed it as an active and often political choice.

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[9] Colin Jerolmack and Shamus Khan, "Talk Is Cheap: Ethnography and the Attitudinal Fallacy," *Sociological Methods & Research* 43 (May 2014): 178–209, https://doi.org/10.1177/0049124114523396.

[10] Kathleen Blee, "Ethnographies of the Far Right," *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 36 (April 2007): 119–28, https://doi.org/10.1177/0891241606298815; and Hilary Pilkington, "Field Observer: Simples," in *Researching Far-Right Movements: Ethics, Methodologies, and Qualitative Inquiries*, ed. Emanuele Toscano (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), 23–40.

[11] For another study, see Agnieszka Pasieka, "The Banal Transnationalism of the Far Right," *Dissent*, Spring 2020, https://www.dissentmagazine.org/online_articles/the-banal-transnationalism-of-the-far-right.

My interlocutors and I often hold opposing views on significant social and political issues. As a researcher from an ethnic-minority background, I occasionally find their ideas, even if they were expressed in the past and are not prominent in their current discourses, to be personally “triggering”; that is, these ideas can evoke feelings of fear and anger. As scholars, we are taught to acknowledge and scrutinize how emotions can impact our analysis and decision-making. However, we rarely explore how conducting research involving groups that elicit strong emotions in us can sometimes serve as a mechanism for addressing and processing these very emotions. This project, for instance, has provided me with new insights into my experiences of fear and anger generated by practices of exclusion.[14] This is because similar emotions (though more often anger than fear) have been present among my research interlocutors. Although the practices of exclusion targeting representatives of ethnic-minority and -majority communities obviously differ substantially, there was nevertheless an instance of shared experience, and exploring boundaries between where experience was indeed shared and where it diverged provided fruitful material for reflection.

It is noteworthy that several accounts that discuss the emotional aspect of researching groups that tend to be unfriendly or even hostile toward females, LGBTQ+ individuals, or people of color are written from a gendered or minority perspective.[15] These works critically reflect on the emotions involved in such encounters and emphasize the possibility of extending empathy even toward persons whose beliefs may be "unlovable" to us.[16] It is as if personal experiences of researchers—who have been objectified by society because of their gender, skin color, or sexuality—become a compelling motivation for advocating against any kind of exoticization, essentialization, and marginalization, even of those whom we may have preferred to see marginalized.

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[12] Saija Katila and Susan Meriläinen, “A Serious Researcher or Just Another Nice Girl?: Doing Gender in a Male-Dominated Scientific Community,” *Gender, Work & Organization* 6, no. 3 (July 1999): 163–73, https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0432.00079; and Bernadeth Laurelyn Pante, “Female Researchers in a Masculine Space: Managing Discomforts and Negotiating Positionalities,” *Philippine Sociological Review* 62 (2014): 65–88, https://philippinesociology.com/recent_issues/volume-62-2014/.

[13] For a comparable account, see Neila Miled, “Muslim Researcher Researching Muslim Youth: Reflexive Notes on Critical Ethnography, Positionality and Representation,” *Ethnography and Education* 14, no. 1 (2019): 1–15, https://doi.org/10.1080/17457823.2017.1387063.

[14] Unlike fear, anger has the capacity to propel us toward an unknown object rather than away from it. Acquiring a more detailed understanding of the “other” side can potentially assist in developing an informed activist stance. Such a stance, ideally, would direct the struggle for change not so much at groups, often imagined as cohesive communities, but at particular individuals and, even better, at institutions and systems that underlie existing hierarchies (cf. Myisha Cherry, *The Case for Rage: Why Anger Is Essential to Anti-Racist Struggle* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021]).

[15] Kathleen M. Blee, *Understanding Racist Activism: Theory, Methods, and Research* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315461533; Agnieszka Pasieka, “Anthropology of the Far Right: What If We Like the ‘Unlikeable’ Others?” *Anthropology Today* 35, no. 1 (2019): 3–6, https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8322.12480; and Vidhya Ramalingam, “Overcoming Racialisation in the Field: Practising Ethnography on the Far Right as a Researcher of Colour,” in *Researching the Far Right*, ed. Stephen Ashe et al., 254–69.

Showing empathy toward a particular group does not imply justifying their actions. Similarly, comprehending the social circumstances that have led to specific perspectives does not absolve individuals of accountability for their decisions and behaviors. Ultimately, the individuals in question maintain agency and responsibility for their actions. As Agnieszka Pasieka has emphasized in her account of working among the far-right, a distinction should be made between critique and judgment.[17] Although emotions are an inherent part of any debate on subjects that are important to us, even if such a debate draws only on rational critique, empathy toward the opponents and understanding the root causes of their standpoints create opportunities to go beyond the friend-foe rationale, while also enabling us to comprehend the sources of our own anxieties.

The first response to the question "Why conduct research on the (far-)right?" has delved into the emotions often prevalent in the coverage of these groups. It emphasized how such research can offer insights into understanding both "our" and "their" emotions (though, as I tried to show, such rigid binary divisions often prove inadequate). The subsequent section will give another response to the "why" question and reflect on knowledge production by exploring the need to address gaps in how we understand the phenomenon of conservative Islam in Europe.

A Need (Not) to Be Seen

Engaging with conservative Muslim communities not only presents personal challenges but also positions the researcher within the broader discourse on "Islam in Europe." This debate has been intricate and riddled with controversies since at least the 1990s, when several European governments began expressing concerns about the integration and assimilation of predominantly migrant Muslim communities. On the one hand, Europe currently grapples with a prevailing Islamophobic sentiment and institutionalized discrimination against individuals of Muslim heritage. Islamic practices and identities continue to bear a stigma, and their expressions are often subject to control. On the other hand, there is a Europe-wide concern about the inflow of migrants from Muslim-majority countries, radicalization among Muslim youth, and the global reach of jihadist networks. The highly charged debate about the compatibility of Islam and Europeanness—the latter often understood in terms of liberalism, democracy, and secularism—creates a situation in which criticism of either is likely to be perceived as an attack, either on the minority group facing persistent discrimination or on the democratic institutions already under significant strain.

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[16] The account of Vidhya Ramalingam, a woman of color, who conducted fieldwork among the Swedish far right, is a powerful illustration of that (Ramalingam, "Overcoming Racialisation in the Field," 258). For the discussion on the difference between empathy and sympathy toward respondents whose values we do not share, see Koen Damhuis and Léonie de Jonge, "Going Nativist: How to Interview the Radical Right?" *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 21, https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069221077761; and Piotr Kocyba, Magdalena Muszel, and Corinna Trogisch, "Empathy and Mutuality in Qualitative Research: Reflections from Three Different Research Fields," *Ethnologia Polona* 43 (2022): 21–41, https://doi.org/10.23858/ethp.2022.43.3018.

[17] Pasieka, "Anthropology of the Far Right," 6.

To answer the "why" question posed at the beginning of this essay, I believe that research on conservative converts to Islam is necessary in order to create a legitimate space for conservative Muslim identity. Being unable to distinguish between ultraconservative, moderately conservative, centrist, liberal, and far-left Muslims deprives us of instruments to engage with different groups and layers of society in the political sense. Over the last two decades, the European conservative landscape has changed dramatically: if previously it was dominated by Christian democratic parties, the newcomers on the right do not have a strong religious identity, though they may continue to draw on "Christian values" and the legacy of the "Judeo-Christian civilization."[18] At the same time, it is increasingly common for religious communities—Muslim, Christian, and Jewish—to join forces to advocate for center-right conservative causes.[19] In the political arena, however, Muslim communities continue to be traditionally recognized by the left parties, often because of the migration aspect, or, as in the Netherlands, by populist and far-right parties that seek to capitalize on the Muslim youth that challenges the exclusivity of existing center-right and right-wing parties.[20]

At the same time, Muslims spanning the political spectrum, whether on the left or the right, have been actively involved in critiquing European liberal-democratic institutions. Analyzing the experiences of European Muslims, a consistent body of research demonstrates how the existing liberal systems of governance and representation tend to marginalize non-Christian religious expression.[21] It is crucial to note that this does not inherently brand liberalism as anti-Islamic, but its historical ties to colonialism and Orientalist scholarship require a meticulous examination of embedded biases. The critiques of Western democracy and economic neoliberalism articulated by my Muslim interlocutors tend to be in line with the decolonial arguments against the Europe-centered liberal hegemony and have validity in many aspects. They and I tend to differ in our perspectives on potential solutions to address these issues. However, categorizing their arguments solely as "anti-liberal" or "anti-democratic" would be both inaccurate and potentially harmful, because silencing this kind of arguments disregards the value of extensive critique of Western colonial modernity and the role of liberal thought in justifying it, developed from a Muslim perspective.

That being said, I acknowledge that the adoption or, as some would argue, appropriation of the Muslim identity by converts from privileged backgrounds may result not in a change but in a strengthening of the existing power hierarchies.

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[18] To give just few references to some of the critical analyses of the phenomenon: Rogers Brubaker, "Between Nationalism and Civilizationism: The European Populist Moment in Comparative Perspective," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 40, no. 8 (2017), 1191–226, https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2017.1294700; Nicholas Morieson, *Religion and the Populist Radical Right: Secular Christianism and Populism in Western Europe* (Wilmington, DE: Vernon Press, 2021); and Nadia Marzouki, Duncan McDonnell, and Olivier Roy, *Saving the People: How Populists Hijack Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

[19] Clifford Bob, "The Global Right Wing and Theories of Transnational Advocacy," *The International Spectator* 48, no. 4 (2013): 71–85, https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2013.847685; and Julia Mourao Permoser and Kristina Stoeckl, "Reframing Human Rights: The Global Network of Moral Conservative Homeschooling Activists," *Global Networks* 21, no. 4 (October 2021): 681–702, https://doi.org/10.1111/glob.12299.

[20] Soehayla Halouchi and Saskia Loomans, "Hoe Baudet's campagne gericht lijkt op jonge moslims en waarom die werkt," *NOS*, March 19, 2023, https://nos.nl/artikel/2468047-hoe-baudets-campagne-gericht-lijkt-op-jonge-moslims-en-waarom-die-werkt.

[21] To name just a few: José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994); Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003); Saba Mahmood, *Religious Difference in a Secular Age: A Minority Report* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015); and A. Sophie Lauwers, "Religion, Secularity, Culture? Investigating Christian Privilege in Western Europe," *Ethnicities* 23, no. 3 (June 2022), https://doi.org/10.1177/14687968221106185.

In particular, white, male converts are able to elevate their voices above those of naturalized or European-born Muslims.[22] Using a minority identity to advocate for exclusive ideas that ultimately benefit the majority can potentially undermine the struggles experienced by individuals facing more profound forms of discrimination. Yet, even this kind of discussion would contribute to a more nuanced approach to the communities of converts and Muslims than is currently achieved by the dominance of the security studies lens.

Finally, confining religion exclusively to ethnic backgrounds and analyzing Islam only as a religion of minorities risks overlooking the emerging trend in which Islam is dissociated from specific territories, historical communities, and contexts.[23] Presently, Islam has transformed into a form of protest identity that transcends cultural and ethnic boundaries, becoming inclusive even of non-Muslims. While the interplay between far-right communities and Muslims may still appear counterintuitive and unfamiliar, growing evidence suggests otherwise.[24] Gaining an understanding of this interplay equally necessitates in-depth research within the communities and discussions about their respective ideologies in order to register larger processes of cultural change.

The Right to Be Forgotten/Forgiven

The following two sections will address the "how" aspects of conducting research within conservative Muslim communities: how to make sure that the research does not bring harm to communities, even if these are communities whom we oppose. While ethical concerns related to data collection and the representation of marginalized groups are complex and extensive, these sections will narrow the scope to two specific issues: the ethics of omitting information and the potential for reciprocity with research interlocutors.

My research interlocutors often possess higher education, including academic backgrounds; they closely follow my research and have the potential to engage with my work, whether through comments or critiques in online spaces. We may share some social circles, both online and offline, and have established reputations within those circles. This creates a situation where the distance between me as a researcher and my informants is minimal, and the research process, especially the dissemination of research findings, affects both sides. In simple terms: both parties have the means to influence or potentially harm each other.

The challenge associated with the marginalized position of my interlocutors lies in the specific intersection of religious identity and political views that can serve as grounds for persecution. In a context where Islam is seen as a security issue, the data and findings derived from my study have the inadvertent potential to harm participants by attracting negative attention from the public or media and could even incentivize increased control from state institutions. While various standard measures, including informed consent, anonymization techniques, and secure storage of interview data, have been implemented to minimize these risks, there is always an underlying concern that any kind of data, when stored and organized, can be used against the group. This dilemma raises a fundamental question about a researcher's responsibilities. On the one hand, there is a responsibility toward the researched communities not to cause harm, while on the other hand, there is an ethical obligation within the realm of academic research not to inadvertently amplify or empower illiberal voices.

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[22] Gulnaz Sibgatullina and Tahir Abbas, "Political Conversion to Islam among the European Right," *Journal of Illiberalism Studies* 1, no. 2 (2021): 1–17, https://doi.org/10.53483/VCIS3529.

[23] Olivier Roy, *Globalized Islam: The Search for a New Ummah* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004) and *Holy Ignorance: When Religion and Culture Part Ways* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

[24] Gulnaz Sibgatullina, 'Illiberalism and Islam', in Marlene Laruelle (ed.), The Oxford Handbook of Illiberalism (online edn, Oxford Academic, 20 Nov. 2023), https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780197639108.013.14.

As researchers, we possess a level of control over how we structure and categorize our data. In the course of my research project, which covers multiple decades in the history of a particular movement, my original plan was to create a network map that would connect individuals featured in the study, utilizing publicly available information. However, as the project progressed, I encountered a significant number of individuals who had disengaged from political activism, shifted their ideological stances, or simply chosen to move on with their lives, distancing themselves from the public discourse. This discovery led me to realize that constructing and publicly sharing a network map of connections would oversimplify the complex reality I was encountering. Many of these individuals have expressed regret about their past involvement in political activism and, in some cases, have altered their support for certain ideas. Others have asked that I refrain from discussing their past in my work, allowing their historical life events, which are now buried in the depths of search engine results, to remain undisturbed. In response to this, I have established an ad hoc rule that guides the inclusion of names. Names are included only for those individuals who are currently actively engaged in advocating for conservative causes and/or with whom I have personally engaged in consented conversation, to ensure that publicly available data aligns with their present reality.

In navigating ethical dilemmas concerning the storage and sharing of information that might potentially expose participants' involvement in illegal activities, I find myself aligning with colleagues who suggest that researchers should assume a guest status within the research field.[25] This status carries implications for confidentiality. Adopting such a status means not only refraining from actively seeking knowledge of offenses to avoid breaching confidentiality but also involves establishing personal boundaries—preferably agreed upon with an ethics committee—to determine which types of offenses should be reported and which should not.

The pressure to "valorize" our research results places researchers in a precarious position within a media landscape that often prioritizes sensationalism. This dilemma forces us to navigate between the responsibility to avoid perpetuating oversimplified perspectives regarding converts and Muslim communities, ideally even challenging these perspectives, and the obligation not to justify the actions of the subjects we study. In response to this, I have adopted a strategy that involves refraining from labeling data in a manner that could lead to overly simplistic conclusions. I also avoid presenting and discussing my research in brief media comments, blogs, or short interviews; instead, I seek opportunities for more in-depth discussions where the complexities and nuances of the central issues in this project can be thoroughly explored. However, I recognize that in my efforts to avoid causing harm to my informants, with whom I have established personal connections throughout the research process, I may have inadvertently neglected addressing the well-being of victims. The victims are those who were harmed by the institutional structures of the movement or by the discourses of its members, and who—because of the lack of extensive contact—have remained a blind spot in my research project.

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[25] Adrianna Surmiak, "Should We Maintain or Break Confidentiality? The Choices Made by Social Researchers in the Context of Law Violation and Harm," *Journal of Academic Ethics* 18 (September 2020): 229–47, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10805-019-09336-2; and Emily Finch, "Issues of Confidentiality in Research into Criminal Activity: The Legal and Ethical Dilemma," *Mountbatten Journal of Legal Studies* 5, no. 1/2 (2001): 34–50.

(Un)expected Consequences

The final issue concerns the public presentation of research results. Despite the adherence to ethical guidelines in a research project, researchers working on controversial topics can never ensure absolute protection against potential backlash, both within the academic realm and among the communities they study.[26] If not critical enough, a researcher risks being accused "by association" of maintaining illiberal views or of "covering up" for illiberal groups. This can result in emotional distress, exclusion from research communities, and even a loss of career opportunities.[27] If "too" critical, a researcher, especially after publication of their findings, will likely be ostracized by the communities they studied, facing reprisals from community members and having to sever connections with informants.

The latter kind of experience can also be deeply traumatic for the researcher. At best, they might find themselves compelled to break personal connections that they had invested significant time and energy into building—connections that may have even held personal value to them. At worst, the researcher may become a target of bullying and harassment in response to their research outcomes. Falling out with a research group can carry repercussions not only for the researcher's own future access but also for colleagues who may wish to conduct research in the same community in the future. If we assume that repeated access, whether by the original researcher or their colleagues, is essential for the reasons discussed earlier, the question arises: How can one mitigate the risks of falling out, if that is possible at all?

For research interlocutors, the accuracy of information presented about them in research results is of utmost importance. Each individual has their own unique reasons for engaging with a researcher. Some seek to rectify their public image and contribute to challenging mainstream narratives by adding nuance to their accounts. Others share their personal stories in a quest to be heard and understood. Those who have withdrawn from public discussions for years may genuinely want to help gather reliable information.

One approach to maintaining a fair and ethical stance toward research participants, without compromising the researcher's integrity, involves sharing segments of the research findings with them. The concept of reciprocity and giving back to the communities we study is a well-established principle in the fields of ethical ethnography and anthropology. Nevertheless, these standards have seen limited application in the context of research involving conservative and far-right communities. For instance, researchers might consider sharing interview quotations and cross-checking provided information with the respondents. This not only improves the accuracy of the study's findings but also fosters a sense of shared ownership and responsibility regarding the research outcomes among the participants. Involving participants not only during the initial data collection stage but also at later points in the research process can reduce the risk of a negative surprise upon publication and, consequently, mitigate potential undesired consequences.[28]

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[26] E.g., Caroline Brettell, *When They Read What We Write: The Politics of Ethnography* (Westport, CT: Bergin and Garvey, 1993); and Sarah Riccardi-Swartz, "Fieldwork and Fallout with the Far-Right," *American Ethnologist*, June 18, 2020, https://americanethnologist.org/online-content/essays/fieldwork-and-fallout-with-the-far-right/.

[27] Emanuele Toscano and Daniele Di Nunzio, "The Dark Side of the Field: Doing Research on CasaPound in Italy," in *Researching Far-Right Movements*, ed. Emanuele Toscano (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), 100–101; see also Emanuele Toscano, "Conclusions: Doing Research on Far-Right Movements," in *Researching Far-Right Movements*: 144.

[28] Richard McNeil-Willson, "The Murky World of 'Extremism' Research," *The New Ethnographer*, April 15, 2020, https://thenewethnographer.com/the-new-ethnographer/the-murky-world-of-extremism-research.

Indeed, there is a valid concern associated with this approach of involving research participants in the review of research findings, as researchers may unintentionally or intentionally become conduits for the perspectives of their interlocutors, endorsing specific actions or viewpoints. However, adopting an ethical approach to protect the well-being of participants does not have to mean relinquishing to them control over the narrative. To strike a balance, tactics can be implemented to distinguish between factual aspects of the narrative that can be verified and discussed with the research respondents, and the researcher's analysis. Such a differentiation helps ensure that the researcher can still maintain both accuracy and independence when discussing research findings with interlocutors.

Conclusion

This essay has sought to demonstrate the necessity of conducting research into conservative Muslim communities, given the persistent relevance of the "Muslim Question" in Europe. Such research can help transcend the limitations of security studies frameworks, which often overlook the diversity and evolution of Muslim communities, especially those that do not neatly fit into the categories of extremism or liberalism, majority or minority. Convert communities, for instance, serve as a prime example of such complex cases.

Ethnography-inspired research is essential to comprehending the motivations of groups that advocate for illiberal, exclusivist ideas. Knowledge about those who hold views opposing ours paves the way for addressing and productively redirecting the emotions of fear and anger that frequently dominate public discourse surrounding such groups. Furthermore, within the context of Muslim communities in Europe, ethnographic research has the potential to provide a more intricate map of political orientations. It can shed light on emerging alliances between various religious groups and connections between Muslim and non-Muslim communities on the right side of the political spectrum.

Nonetheless, this ethnographic work naturally leads to the development of personal relationships between the researcher and the informants. Like all personal relationships, these connections are inherently messy. This "scholar-informant solidarity in ethnography" is both "morally volatile" and "epistemologically vital."[29] And there are no easy solutions to mitigate the moral and ethical challenges that arise. A fundamental issue is about who deserves protection. On the one hand, there is an imperative to protect those whom we study, even if we might dislike them, and to prevent their further marginalization by the state and public media. On the other hand, we must protect those who might become victims of exclusivist narratives promoted by some members of this community. Practically any research that strives to maintain a balance between the two imperatives risks criticism for not being "enough"—either not critical enough or not protective enough.

Ultimately, the choices that the researcher makes in conducting, presenting, and discussing their project are inherently personal, in the sense the researcher's positionality will influence the research process in a unique way: their access to the field, types of information shared, and lenses through which it will be analyzed. Such research on controversial topics becomes personal also because acceptance of certain research methods by the interlocutors, the academic community, and the broader public will be influenced by who the researcher is, including factors such as their gender, race, religion, ethnicity, and existing public capital.

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[29] Benjamin R. Teitelbaum, "Collaborating with the Radical Right: Scholar-Informant Solidarity and the Case for an Immoral Anthropology," *Current Anthropology* 60, no. 3 (June 2019): 415, https://doi.org/10.1086/703199.

Although personalized and endorsing case-by-case solutions, the academic debate on ethical issues related to research on conservative, illiberal, and far-right communities remains highly relevant, especially given the increasing prevalence of such research. The debate offers a valuable platform for exchanging ideas and scrutinizing research practices, ultimately contributing to developing new standards and norms. However, academic knowledge production has never been apolitical. Discussions surrounding the morality of certain research practices when dealing with opposing groups are inherently linked to the reinforcement or challenging of power hierarchies, both within academia and in relation to society at large. Therefore, it is crucial to continue engaging in these debates while also being mindful of the broader implications that stigmatizing or normalizing certain research topics or practices may have.[30]

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