# 'If there is no tension, there is no reason to talk'

Ivana Marková tells fellow dialogical psychologist Nicola Magnusson how growing up in a totalitarian regime shaped her interest in dialogue

Dr Nicola Magnusson is a Social Psychologist and Associate Lecturer in the School of Psychology and Counselling at the Open University. Her main area of inquiry is the human rights of refugees and asylum migration, with a particular focus on the psychological and dialogical processes associated with navigating the legal and rights systems pertaining to forced migration.

Ivana Marková is a Czech born social psychologist, Emeritus Professor at the University of Stirling, and Visiting Professor in the Department of Psychological and Behavioural Science and Research Associate in the Centre for Philosophy of Natural and Social Sciences.at the London School of Economics.

**Ivana, you have just published your latest book, *The Making of a Dialogical Theory: Social Representations and Communication*. It presents a dynamic social theory situated within historical, political, and cultural challenges. What can social psychologists learn from the concept of dialogicality in relation to the study of contemporary political issues?**

When people speak about dialogue, they often have in mind that dialogue will make our interaction much easier, smoother… that we shall resolve problems. Intersubjectivity is important. Although some researchers also speak about the question of subjectivity, 'I express myself as an agent, and I also take into consideration you as my co-participant and we construct dialogue together'.

However, it seems to me that what is much more important to acknowledge is that dialogues are about strife. There are different ideas which come together, and it doesn't mean that we are going to resolve the problem. We can make problems even bigger. The question of subjectivity and intersubjectivity creates questions – about tension, strife in dialogue and coping with strife. In fact, this feature of tension is absolutely essential in interaction… if there is no tension, there is no reason to talk.

**Are there any significant events in your own story which have inspired your lifelong work on dialogicality?**

It's always difficult to look at your past with hindsight… you tend to find things which perhaps were not like that, when you actually lived them. I could give you at least two examples.

The first one influenced me tremendously and somehow persecutes me even now. I was 12-years-old, in 1950. There were political trials or artificial trials in Czechoslovakia, in which people were submitted to torture and death. There was a politician, a deeply democratic person who spent her life during Nazism in a concentration camp, but who also worked very hard for resistance. I could understand what Nazism meant. But what I couldn't understand was why in 1950, she was imprisoned and condemned to death, because she was disagreeing with the communist regime, which came to power only two years earlier. This woman had a daughter, who was four or five years older than I was. I experienced this so strongly that somehow it persecutes me, even now. I feel offended. I felt offended.

I wrote everything I could. This was the most drastic case where Albert Einstein wrote a letter, the French president Auriol, Madame Roosevelt… but no, she was hanged for crimes which she didn't commit. That was the regime in which I lived.

The other case was in 1953, three years later. Communism was well established in Czechoslovakia, and the regime decided to make a financial reform. A lot of people lost their money, whatever they had. There was a demonstration where I lived. I was 15, it was my last year in the secondary school and my father, my brother and I, went out together with the crowd. People were throwing out the photos of all these political leaders, Stalin. My brother, who was four years younger, he was just shouting, 'Oh, it's funny, Father, isn't it'. Nothing much happened. But the next day, I was interrogated by a teacher, whom I desperately loved. She asked me with her very nice voice, 'Did you go to the march, Ivana?'. What could I say? I was 15, I wouldn't be allowed to go to gymnasium and to university. So, I just lied.

But it was such a big problem for me because I had colleagues, friends who didn't lie. I met one after 40 years and she told me: 'I couldn't lie. I told the truth I was there. I was interrogated with my mother, and she was kicking me, not to speak, but I just couldn't. So I was not allowed to go to school to study at all. My only satisfaction came later, after many years, when my children were good in sports, and became internationally renowned as sports people'.

There were many occasions of this kind, which must have had influence on what I did later. The question of loyalty: how do you split your responsibilities between your conscience and others?

**Do you remember how you made sense of that at the time?**

I knew that there are things I can say at home, and different things which are for the public. People asked me, 'why did you emigrate to Britain? My answer, for many years, was that I didn't want my children to be brought up in this conflict. One for you, and one for the public.

> "how do you split your responsibilities between your conscience and others?"

**A few years back you were a guest editor on a special issue of the journal *Culture and Psychology*, and you also contributed a piece on 'chronotopes'. Tell us about that.**

The notion of chronotope, that time and space are very important for the way you interpret an event or interaction, is extremely useful. When I go back to that event in 1953, we could say the main chronotope was the event of the financial reform – a particular time in a particular period of communism. But then we had different sub-chronotopes inbetween, for example, mother kicking her daughter under the table. or my brother, shouting, 'isn't it fun'. So, within one chronotope you can have different events and each of them would have different ethics, meanings, style.

Of course in politics, from day to day, you have a totally changed world. But when we look at time, space and politics even more broadly, we see how inconsistent these relations could be. I have in mind the years from 1917 to 1970, in Russia, in the Soviet

Union, with respect to work of Albert Einstein. There would be stages where Einstein's work would be accepted, then rejected, and these ups and downs continue. Even more drastic, I would say, were cases of musicians constantly persecuted by the Soviet Union. When you do something, then your family is responsible, everybody's responsible, so everybody's finished. This is what happened in my family as well – my father was imprisoned for political reasons, I was thrown out from school, my brother wasn't allowed to study, my mother was thrown out from her work, other relatives would just try to avoid us.

**What does it mean to be political in the public sphere, from the perspective of dialogicality?**

To be political, I would say, means to be engaged in the problem or in whatever you are concerned with. What does it mean to be engaged? It means to take responsibility for something or not; to be committed, or not; to consider something as ethical, or not. To be engaged in ways which the issue necessitates. But these interdependencies need a balance between thinking and passions. That is a basic problem. Political events are historical events, cultural events, economic events… they require very complex thought.

If you want to be political about something which happened in the past, you must be able to appreciate that past, on its own merits, and not try to interpret it from your point of view, because of your passions. You can appreciate it only if you try to understand it on its merits, and not on your own merits. This is very important for young people to try and understand this. Why do people today judge Aristotle, Plato, Churchill, without even trying to understand the time in which they lived and what may lead them to certain kinds of ideas, which today are appreciated as a wrong idea.

In addition, the media are responsible for many, many things and we must be very careful about this. It becomes common sense because everybody believes in it. When I came to Britain, I wanted to be more political. I joined Amnesty International. I joined it just for one day, because what I experienced there was going marching and shouting, and that was that. You see, we need actions which are based on historical knowledge, proper knowledge, appreciating things as they happened at the time and not just implanting our own ideas into that.

> "We always judge, evaluate, want to understand and justify actions of our own and others"

**You make the point in your 2022 article 'Willing and Action' in *Culture and Psychology* that social psychology is political. How would you define political psychology?**

The study of interdependence between individuals and communities, because that interdependence is never neutral, it is always evaluative. We always judge, evaluate, want to understand and justify actions of our own and others. Social psychology was created after the Second World War, and for those people it was a political science. I adopted this perspective, because although I didn't remember much of the war, of course I remember something. I certainly lived in a totalitarian regime, which gave me the same idea. Social psychology is about loyalties, lack of loyalties, responsibilities, ethics, lack of ethics, commitment. For me, that is political psychology.

I would say that in Britain, it is important that the British Psychological Society's Social Psychology Section was created, because perhaps more than elsewhere, psychology, or social psychology, was not political. It was a very narrow experimental science… until only recently we still feel that it is the experiment, and now neuroscience, which is somehow the most important. So, the Section can play a big role, but it is also a big responsibility to do it properly.

**You were Chair of the Section: can you give an example from that time?**

Yes – it was 1985 to 1988, apartheid in South Africa. How should the social section behave at that time? Should we abandon South Africa? Should we abandon academic contacts, or should we not? There was a psychologist called Don Foster, I think he still functions in America, who came to Britain, and he argued for abandoning any social contacts. Some people were very much for, I would say it was the majority. I was one of those who were against it, didn't feel that was a proper way. Not abandoning these contacts would support apartheid regime, but it's only half of the story. It would also damage those who live in South Africa, these colleagues who would be just left.

Of course, that is not the only event… in 1968, there was supposed to be a congress of European social psychology, in Czechoslovakia in Prague. It was immediately after the invasion of Russia. So again, there was a problem between psychologists who thought we should go and those who didn't. We have the same problem now with Ukraine, with Russia.

So, if we want to work as social psychologist, we have to be very careful about what we say, how we say it, and what we do, and to not just be passionate about a ready-made solution. I think it's very important that young people become part of this movement of political psychology, but that they study very carefully the reasons, thinking and be aware of these passions.

**Any last thoughts on the development of political psychology?**

I would be arguing for thinking, thinking and thinking! We cannot think without passions – of course we have passions. But we must be able to judge and evaluate.





# Political polarisation: Are you part of the problem?

Sandra Obradović and Anthony English

Have you ever had that awkward experience? That moment when someone says something about current affairs that you disagree with. The silence that emerges, the sense of discomfort and wondering how to respond. Do you tell them they're wrong? Do you lecture them and hope they'll see common sense? Or do you simply change the subject and mentally file away the topic as one to not broach with that person?

Type 'how to talk about politics' into Google and the first suggested search is '…without fighting'. These negative experiences with political talk seem counter to what an ideal democracy should be: a context where a diversity of political opinions, discourses and disagreements thrive and lead to productive solutions. So, what is it that makes talking about politics so difficult? Most people would probably answer this question by saying: 'other people'. But have you ever considered that maybe, just maybe, you're part of the problem?

We pose this as a question not only to every person who has ever had a political conversation, but also political psychologists and those who research in this area. Turning the lens on ourselves, and our groups, we consider how political polarisation is not only perpetuated through those intense online interactions with keyboard warriors, but also through more subtle interactions with like-minded others, where you not only share and bond over similar opinions, but also end up perpetuating further distance, and difference, from other political opinions and the people who hold them.

## The Polarisation Paradox

There is a paradox here that is worth considering. In her book *Hearing the Other Side*, political psychologist Dianne Mutz shows that there is a tension between deliberative democracy and participatory democracy. Getting people to talk more with those who hold different political views (what Mutz refers to as 'cross-cutting exposure') can actually discourage political participation. The argument is that exposure to diverse opinions can make people more ambivalent about their own political views, making participation less straight-forward. As Mutz herself explains 'The kind of network that encourages an open and tolerant society is not necessarily the same kind that provides an enthusiastically participative citizenry' (p.125).

Is real political polarisation actually the problem here, or is there something more fundamental going on? According to political scientists, the extent to which political polarisation is a reality is often exaggerated. This is captured by the idea of 'false polarisation'; people tend to overestimate how 'extreme' the average person in their (political) group is and view themselves as more moderate than the people 'out there'. In other words, we return to the answer provided at the beginning: other people are the problem.

Yet this is, to some extent, also a false notion. By turning the lens on ourselves and focusing on the contexts within which we tend to have most of our political conversations, we can understand why we tend to think others are more extreme in their views than us. We need to look at what we are doing when we're interacting with likeminded others.

**Sandra Obradović** *is a senior lecturer in the School of Psychology and Counselling at the Open University, and a researcher at the Electoral Psychology Observatory, London School of Economics.*

**Anthony English** *is a post-doctoral research fellow on the Horizon-Europe/Innovate UK funded OppAttune project with the Open University, and is a visiting research at Lancaster University.*

## Misrepresenting others – where's the harm?

Talking with likeminded others – be it sharing stories, personal disclosures, gossiping about others, etc. – is important. It helps us define who we are and our place in the world. Indeed, gossiping is considered one of the oldest ways in which we were able to create communicative ties with our local community (Dunbar, 1996). Of course, it is still handy in today's world to gossip about others in order to develop collegiate work relationships (Alshehre, 2017) and maintain friendships (Watson, 2012).

However, when it comes to talking to likeminded others, we tend to gossip about those who are

perceived as different (Dong et al., 2023) which can result in 'us' talking about 'them' in ways which are problematic. In a political context there is not always a comfortable middle-ground which can be adopted when discussing such issues with likeminded others. For morally polarising issues, it seems entirely reasonable to frame those with whom we disagree as profoundly wrong. With this in mind, should we as a society even care about mispresenting the views of others that we consider to be on the wrong side of the moral argument?

In a word, yes! Misrepresenting the contrasting opinions of others with those who are likeminded risks being both self-limiting and corrosive to political dialogue (Gillespie, 2008). An essential aspect to consider here is the intention of such a misrepresentation – is it the result of a genuine misunderstanding? An act of self-deception? Or a bad-faith misrepresentation aimed at solidifying in-group opinion? If it is the latter, then how a group of likeminded individuals represent the views of those with whom they disagree can negatively impact the individual. This can create a group dynamic in which members feel they must obfuscate any opinion which invalidates the collective consensus (Tang et al., 2021). Such an environment prioritises silence over a plurality of opinions, as allowing group members to freely voice incisive criticism by others risks threatening group bonds (Havey, 2021).

Even in a best-case scenario, simplistic misrepresentations of the prevailing counterargument lack nuance and perspective. It's a Disneyesque version of reality in which there are only 'good people' and 'bad people'. Take the example of research (Obradovic & Draper, 2022) on group discussion after the Brexit vote in the UK. The aim of the study was to put groups of likeminded people, who voted the same on the referendum, together, and ask them to engage with the perspective of the other. Our aim was to examine how that dialogue unfolded and moved as the group discussed why other voted differently, what their motivations might have been and what influenced their vote choice. What we found is that often, when we talk about the political views of others, we move from discussing what these opinions are to who holds them. We found examples of attempts to 'naturalise' differences by mentioning generational differences between Leave and Remain voters. One participant even mentioned that younger generations 'naturally think' differently to older ones.

By making these kinds of claims, we are anchoring political opinions in essential, and non-changeable characteristics of certain groups. This can become dangerous – it pigeonholes people by making the point that they can only ever think one way and cannot change, but more importantly it allows us to feel better about avoiding having that conversation. If our differences are inevitable and unchangeable, what is the point of dialogue?

In other words, the more we represent political differences as inherently rooted in differences between people rather than positions that can be taken up (and dropped), the less likely we are to see the value of dialogue. How we talk and represent the views of those with whom we disagree to likeminded others is important because it has implications for how we engage with those 'other' people in both political and non-political spaces'. As we shall discover, the space in which political discourse occurs has a remarkable impact on the outcomes.

### Discursive spaces and political disputes

Imagine a café which, beneath its colourful and welcoming veneer, actively attempts to create a polarising atmosphere for everyone in the space. Notes are shared to customers which contain half-truths or wilful misrepresentations of all the customers' views to create disputes and division. Whilst likely such a place would attract some custom (if only for the novelty!), it could hardly be considered a space in which human relations are valued, and sincere discourse is observed. Take this café online and what do you have? Social media spaces, be that Twitter/X, Facebook, Reddit or Telegram.

These platforms offer a context for communication which does not enable what we would consider important for genuine dialogue – listening, empathy, or consideration for how the other person will receive our opinion. Moreover, it is not merely unconducive to good faith communication, but actively encourages dialogue which is inherently polarising.

To offer some balance here, it is important to acknowledge that social media has been instrumental in raising awareness to instigate positive political changes, be it the Black Lives Matter or the Me-Too movement (Ince et al., 2017; Peters & Besley, 2019). Furthermore, simply encouraging everyone to disengage from social media entirely reduces news consumption and risks creating a politically uninformed public (Alcott et al., 2020). That said, the current model of operation for social media platforms is to increase user engagement by incentivising discourse which is inherently polarising. Field studies show that extreme partisan information creates higher levels of engagement on polarising political issues (Weismueller et al., 2023).

On Twitter/X, social bots are deployed to replicate human behaviour to expose users to inflammatory oppositional views (Ferrara et al., 2016). Recent research (Sabadini et al., 2021) highlights how online discursive spaces tend to heighten polarisation when compared with real-world environments. Another equally troublesome feature is allowing users to filter out any views which contrast with their own (Nasim et al., 2022). We can create news feeds in which any contrasting view, no matter how well-considered or genuinely thought-provoking, will be hidden from us.

It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that longitudinal studies (e.g. Fridman et al., 2021) show an increase in online polarising political discourse when compared with real-world spaces. But does how we talk about those with whom we disagree in real-world spaces impact our online interactions? In this regard, Marková's (2000) assertion that 'every individual lives in the world of others' words' seems especially insightful. If we discuss those we disagree with as entirely without merit in real-world discussions with a receptive audience, online interactions with perceived 'political opponents' are likely to be fraught with negative assumptions.

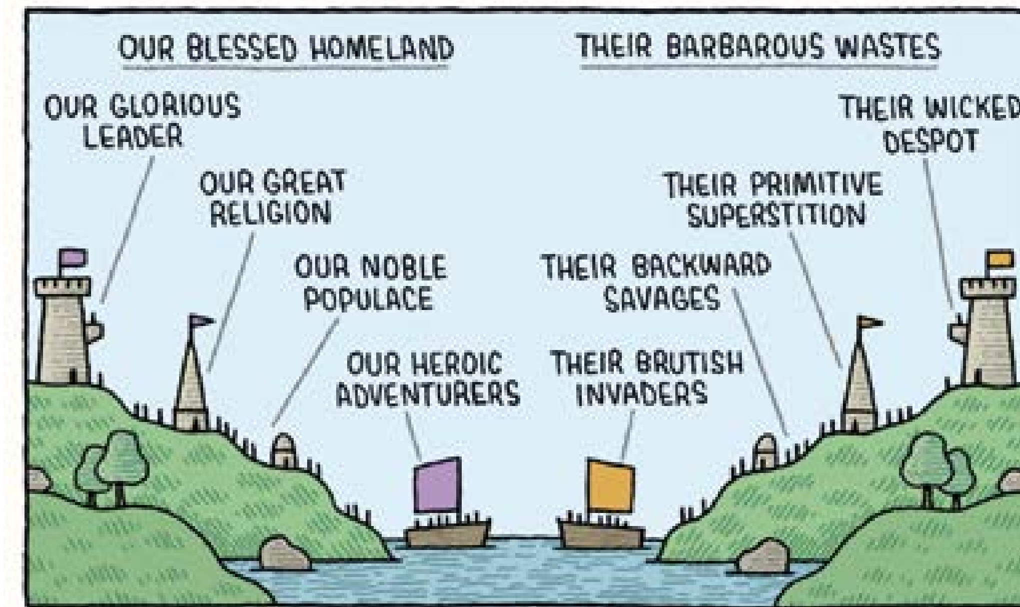
So, given the ubiquity of social media and the polarising climate – what can we do to affect change and create spaces for good faith dialogue on political issues?

### Communication and divisions: Where next?

It is likely you talk about politics either with like-minded others, or in safe spaces, and we suggest you start there. Begin to challenge the misconception that differences are large, irreconcilable and at the core, natural. Build up your levels of comfort with disagreement. Learn how to approach a disagreement as an opportunity to learn, rather than a stepping-stone to a fight. Adopt a 'understanding mindset' rather than a 'winning mindset' (Goldsworthy et al., 2021). Approaching a disagreement with a level of curiosity, rather than defensiveness, can also limit the bias we bring (Kahan et al., 2017).

Secondly, think slow, rather than fast, about your own political opinions. You can practice this by thinking through your beliefs in a mechanistic way; are you able to explain your beliefs or positioning on a policy issue (say immigration) in a step-by-step manner? Research has shown that, when asked to explain how different policies might lead to specific outcomes, people don't do very well (Fernbach et al., 2013). Knowing that there is an 'illusion of understanding may help you become less certain and perhaps more open-minded to exploring your own assumptions.

Thirdly, recognise that a level of disagreement in your political discussions is a 'feature not a bug'. In a recent innovative study (English, 2022; English & Mahendran, 2021), individuals were paired together to engage in direct conversation based on shared core political positions. The dialogue was interrupted by a researcher-led 'polarising rupture', to explore how this impacted on discourse. The subsequent dialogue showed that that a manageable level of disagreement can be a positive force. Indications of disagreement allowed strangers to feel they could engage in meaningful political conversation with one another, as both were invested in discussing the contentious issue. Alongside this influencing factor, the core political positions that both re-adopted when in dialogue with one another seemed to, in some cases, create a context for the pairs to sustain dialogue on controversial issues, as opposed to changing topic or leaving the space (though it's important to acknowledge that this was during one-to-one direct dialogue within a controlled online environment with a moderator present).




*'Our Blessed Homeland', reproduced with permission from cartoonist, Tom Gauld.*

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Full list available in online/app version.

Alongside embracing the ability to disagree agreeably, the language we use when talking about those with whom we might disagree is also important. Could it be that you are falling into the trap of anchoring a specific political position to a personality or a social identity, creating a potential barrier to dialogue at both the interpersonal and inter-group level? Whilst you need not go as a far as 'hate the sin, love the sinner', vocalising to others why someone with opposing views has legitimate motivations is to recognise their equality as a political actor. Such an act has been shown to reduce hostility to the out-group (Eschert & Simon, 2019). It is also a recognition that, on a fundamental level, we are all in this together. In our collective attempts to imagine a changed political landscape, our dialogue with one another is key to offering a window for understanding each other. In doing so, dialogue moves from conversation to 'help people understand different views within the context of the values and experiences from which they arise' (Israel, 2020).

Finally, in an attempt to achieve dialogue at a broader societal stage, we also need to consider how we talk about 'political talk'. How are identity categories, personality traits or other more social, cultural and individual dimensions drawn on in discussion of politics by our leaders? How do they create oppositional binaries through their rhetoric that positions people against each other?

As academics and stakeholders we can develop dialogue-orientated toolkits that avoid falling into these traps of essentialising differences, which can then be used by policymakers. To this end, the Horizon-Europe/Innovate UK funded OppAttune project – which we and several other contributors to this special Issue are involved in – is developing an Attunement model with partner organisations from across Europe. This model will offer a range of toolkits to empower citizens to develop a democratic capacity for engaging in public dialogue with those whom they disagree. This then offers the potential for policy-makers, media-influencers and engaged activists to create spaces that will enable dialogue which recognises that political differences and disagreement are not inherently dysfunctional or to be avoided. It's a small step towards a time when those 'awkward moments of disagreement' can become a starting point for meaningful dialogue that fosters understanding.

We'll end with our recommendations:

- For conflict avoiders: Try to become comfortable with disagreement – consensus is not always possible.
- For conflict-seekers: Approach an anticipated dispute as an opportunity to learn as well as inform.
- For us all: Think slow, not fast about your own political opinions – why do you believe what you do?
- For researchers/practitioners and policy-makers: There is an imperative to develop public-facing toolkits that limit the anchoring of the political in the personal.



# Voting for who we want to be

Gordon Sammut with a social psychological perspective on why and how we vote

Love it or hate it, election season is around the corner, and we can do little but accept the fact that elections have an effect on everyone. There will be tweets and retweets, mailshots, emails, billboards, and more. We will come across politicians making proposals about what they think is broken and what's needed to fix it, hoping we will agree with them and vote them in to 'get the job done'.

Many voters, however, will argue that this is all for nothing and that their votes will make no difference. At times, this might well be true. When things are relatively fine, the systems proceed routinely as normal and most people find there is no need to bother (Runciman, 2018). Crises, however, generate engagement… and over the past two decades we've had no shortage of these. We had the financial crisis in the US sub-prime mortgage market in 2008, the refugee crisis, the Covid-19 pandemic, war and conflict – and, throughout all this, Brexit.

Brexit tested Britain's democratic system to the core and split the British population midway. Whether the real effects of Brexit have matched expectations is contestable. One certain outcome is that immigration remains as salient an issue as ever (Andreouli & Nicholson, 2018). But have you ever wondered why migration ranks right up there with other staple issues in every election? And why not even Brexit has succeeded in addressing the problem?

## The politics of immigration

The reason why migration is a persistently important political issue is that it has to do with the national economic cycle (Sammut et al., 2022). Crucially, migration helps fill job positions by importing workers who demand less wages. This helps keep operational costs down, so helps drive industry, which generates revenue and taxes. Block the supply of workers and labour costs rise to the point where locals would be happy to take on these otherwise low-income jobs. This in turn might be a deal breaker for industry to be financially viable, which makes it all worse off in the end – no jobs and no industry. What we need, therefore, is a balance between allowing too many migrants in to avoid threatening the cultural fabric, and allowing too little to avoid threatening the economic subsystem. On the migration issue, our politicians (as well as us) are divided over which of these two sides to err on.

Obviously, good as well as bad examples abound. It all depends on where one chooses to look. London is a thriving multicultural success that sees hundreds of nationalities co-exist unproblematically on a daily basis. London is also a tragic example of the failures of multiculturalism where different nationalities have segregated to protect their own interests against poverty, and where flare-ups of racial tensions take place from time to time. For this reason, integration remains contested (Berry et al., 2022). Migrants typically favour integration whilst locals typically favour assimilation. The former policy promotes liberties for practising immigrants' native culture, whilst the latter policy puts a stronger emphasis on promoting inclusive local practices and events. Again, the question arises as to which side to err on, and where to look for evidence.

## Democratic Populism

The selective focus people tend to take on migration is rooted in their personal experiences that serve to stereotype different others. It is these stereotypes and our inclinations towards them that determine which side we effectively lean on (Buhagiar, Sammut, Rochira & Salvatore, 2018).

In recent years, many countries around Europe as well as the UK have seen a rise in populist politics fuelled by right-wing sentiments. The rallying cry across the Western world is a clear voice against migration. In the US it is aimed at Hispanic migrants from Latin America; in the EU it is aimed at extra-European migrants like Arab refugees who, being mostly Muslim, bring with them altogether different cultural and religious practices; in pre-Brexit UK it was aimed at Eastern European migrants from newly joined EU member states like Poland and Romania.

In the current climate, border control seems to be a predominant concern everywhere, and it has propelled some unorthodox parties and their leaders to power. How did this happen?

The answer is that it happened democratically. People who felt disaffected withdrew their support

from traditional parties and promised it to others who voiced their concerns. In other words, they chose different representatives to deliver politically incorrect sentiments in politically correct ways. Politicians who have managed to do so successfully have done pretty well at the polls most anywhere. They have succeeded in bringing together populist coalitions driven not by a vision of the future but by a niggling issue in the present, coalitions of antipathy relative to foreigners who have 'come here to take what is ours'. Some are concerned about losing their job; some are concerned that their wages will decrease due to competition; some fear losing their culture or their spiritual traditions; some are worried about the burden on public services. Populism isn't driven by what we will get when we succeed; it is concerned with what we stand to lose if we fail. It is a coalition of worries about what will happen if we relate more openly with different others (Veltri et al., 2019).

Gordon Sammut *is Professor of Social Psychology at the University of Malta, where he directs the Centre for the Study & Practice of Conflict Resolution. He is interested in how political projects serve in establishing coalitions for competitive aims.*

### Which side to err on?

There's a lesson that lurks in coalition building that can be traced back to army officer T.E. Lawrence, or as he is more popularly known, Lawrence of Arabia (Schmidle, 2013). Lawrence was a British intelligence officer who got involved in the Arab Revolt against the Ottomans that took place in 1916. He is credited with enlisting the support of unlikely allies, that is, Faisal's Northern Arab Army and Abdullah's Eastern Arab Army. Whilst neither had the capability to mount full-frontal attacks directly, together they had enough to weaken the enemy through disruption and, at a critical point, deliver a winning blow. It is a classical case of two weaker specimens outdoing a single stronger one – strength in numbers, on which our democracy is based. The migration debate is similarly coalitional in bringing together differently inclined individuals under a common concern.

Some see promise for the future. Some see Brexit regret. Some see a broader range of practices, a broader range of labour skills, a broader range of tradeable goods, which make for the essential ingredients in industry. Others see a disastrous future. Cheap labour that erodes wages and quality of life, impoverished public services and an over-abundance of different ways of life that make everyone uncomfortable with everyone else. Both standpoints can be argued, defended and supported with legitimate evidence. Both can advance their claims by appeal to others with different ambitions and different concerns. Some may agree on the basis of developing industry and trade, maximising economic benefits and creating more jobs for locals and foreigners alike. Others will disagree on the basis of rescuing dwindling industries, restricting competition from cheap labour or eroding local customs.

Either way, supporting or resisting migration involves a coalition of worldviews that might agree on the cause but disagree on the detail. This is the nature of politics.

The question to ponder, in this and coming elections, is which side to err on? Whilst political messages are often presented in black and white, issues in real life are rarely so, and more commonly involve an extensive range of shades of grey. In voting we essentially make an ethical choice in one direction or another that is not so much based on who we are but more on who we want to be. In expressing our perspective through casting a vote, we exercise our ability to choose a future for us that leans one way more than it does another.

This is the crucial point. Which way things go is beyond most anyone's control. Politicians are experts in the art of trying, not necessarily succeeding. Is what they are proposing worth a try? More so than the opposing side's prospects? We all agree that what we have falls somewhat short of what we wish we had, one way or another. So, we want to vote, so that we can help pull things one way or push them in another. Through voting, we lend a helping hand that can succeed or fail in tipping the balance. We will always find reasons that fit our aspirations and so will our political opponents. Who we genuinely end up becoming depends on the little choices we make that express, through our vote, who we wish ourselves to be. This is how politics matters.

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# On memes and mugs: Everyday extremism in the (digital) mainstream


Tina Askanius and Jullietta Stoencheva, Media and Communications scholars at Malmö University, with examples from Sweden which some readers may find offensive


Printed onto t-shirts, hoodies, aprons and tote bags, extremist slogans adorn a wide selection of merchandise sold across a range of Swedish and international websites. Short promotional texts provide potential customers with the broader context:

> 'Are you tired of people talking shit about Sweden? Or of tradition after tradition being eliminated because it doesn't fit into the new and "exciting" Sweden? Show your resistance against our country's destruction in the hands of liberals and socialists by buying this t-shirt'.

Customers can choose from 'Don't touch my country', 'Sweden for the Swedes', 'See you in Valhalla' and many more items. The 'Swedish Lives Matter' t-shirt is marketed with the following sales pitch:

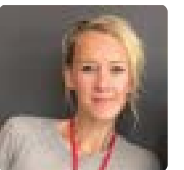
> 'Swedish lives matter is a slogan in remembrance of all the victims of imported multicultural violence. Show them that we will not forget those who have paid for the megalomania of the politicians with their life or health – and that we Swedes will no longer tolerate this!'

These anti-immigration narratives and related conspiracy theories have, over a relatively short period of time, mushroomed and mainstreamed in dramatic ways in Sweden – a country which, alongside Germany, took in large numbers of migrants and refugees during the so-called European refugee crisis of 2015-16. In the years since, far-right actors in and beyond parliament have preyed on widespread concerns over immigration and integration, merging anti-immigration rhetoric with a hodgepodge of extremist ideas and ideology in ways that have propelled divisive, nationalist and often xenophobic discourse across the public realm.

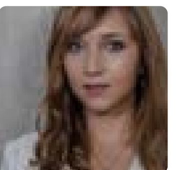
Today, views, messages and symbols anchored in ideologies and belief systems that only a few years ago were considered 'extreme', are no longer something you have to actively seek out or sign up for, say by subscription or membership. You do not have to visit fringe platforms or go into the deepest corners of the dark web to find hate, bigotry or people committed to and calling for acts of violence against minorities, or against democracy, its institutions and representatives. In other words, extremism is no longer a destination which needs to be intentionally sought out (Miller-Idriss, 2020).

Instead, extremist narratives come and find you wherever you are hanging out, making exposure to and engagements with extremist ideas more fluid and frequent. In this 'new normal' (Krzyzanowski et al., 2023), extremism circulates openly and relatively unhindered. It enters people's daily feeds, via TikTok, YouTube or Instagram. It's masked in satiric memes or promoted by online influencers mixing political propaganda techniques and conventional marketing. You will find it on mugs, t-shirts, caps and keychains, and it pops up on banners, posters and stickers around the city, or in the schoolyard.

Digital technology has dramatically changed the push and pull dynamics of how and where people come into contact with political extremism of various kinds. Seemingly unremarkable consumer goods imbued with political messaging, these mundane artefacts and ephemera, have come to epitomise the moment of political division and upheaval in Sweden. This ushers in new forms of everyday extremism in mainstream spaces and places: a phenomenon for psychologists to be aware of and seek to understand.



Tina Askanius



Jullietta Stoencheva

### A turn to 'the ordinary' and 'the everyday'

Dovetailing with the larger OppAttune project – an Open University initiative to track the evolution of oppositional extreme ideologies and protectionist decision-making – the notion of everyday extremism offers a way of reflecting on the increasing presence of extremist messages and symbols in people's everyday lives, as manifested in the upsurge of various cultural artefacts and visual ephemera laced with extremist

ideology that travel between offline and online spaces (Berger et al., 2020). We can understand the term everyday extremism to have two overlapping implications.

Firstly, it signals a shift in our focus from an overwhelming preoccupation with explicitly anti-democratic actors and organisations, often located in the margins of society and politics – and the kinds of media discourse they produce – to a focus on the more pervasive everyday forms of extremist narratives that ordinary citizens are increasingly confronted with as part of day to day lives and media consumption. Secondly, the notion implies moving beyond a strict focus on messages of physical violence (against people or property) to instead spotlight symbolic and cultural violence as key dimensions of extremism. Even if repackaged and 'silent', this has a clear and concrete impact on violence and polarisation in society. When focusing on everyday extremism we thus foreground the discursive-narrative aspects of violence that create the conditions for structural and direct violence to prevail.

Looking beyond the fringes, or the extremes of extremism, the notion of everyday extremism captures the potential, gradual development of extremist narratives, sentiments and attitudes in the general public. This involves raising questions of the many ways in which the extreme is rendered normal, and by extension violence, is presented as banal or benign. A central mechanism in this process, and what is essentially a normalisation of extremist beliefs, is the increasing penetration of exclusionary, stigmatising and violent discourse into 'the digital mainstream' (Åkerlund, 2022).

Extremism finds an expression e.g., in conspiracy theories, hate speech and disinformation, and often makes its way into public discourse and mainstream online spaces by travelling masked the guise of irony, 'edgy' inside jokes or otherwise coded language and visuals. Longstanding conspiracy theories (be it of white genocide, the great replacement, or a Jewish-led world order, etc.) are narrated in 'sanitised' versions in which violence is toned down or masked in language and imagery.

Taking an everyday approach thus requires us to understand extremism as a site of cultural consumption and engagement and as a producer of not only ideological and explicitly political propaganda, but also more subtle (pop)cultural expressions, symbolism, and material artefacts (Miller-Idriss, 2018, 2020). This involves looking into new, unconventional spaces and places like e-commerce platforms or online cooking shows, fitness clubs and alternative wellness cultures, to understand where, when and how people come into everyday contact with extremist narratives tailored around anything from anti-Semitism and Islamophobia to homophobia and misogyny.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*Normalisation of extremist beliefs… the increasing penetration of exclusionary, stigmatising and violent discourse into 'the digital mainstream'*

### Hybrid artefacts

Existing in a hybrid space, artefacts celebrate historical fascism, peddle conspiracy theories, and call for violence in both explicit and ambiguous ways. They travel in loops across online and offline spaces. A racist or antisemitic flyer might be propagated online, then printed by activists and distributed offline. Photographs of these flyers, glued on, say, a lamppost or street sign, are then posted online to further amplify the messages and inspire further drop (see Berger et al., 2020). In a similar intertextual fashion, popular memes find their way into slogans printed on t-shirts. Here, we consider a few examples of such hybrid artefacts of everyday extremism.

One of the most recent additions to the repertoire of far-right products on sale in Sweden include t-shirts with the slogan 'Helg Seger' – a 'Swedified' reappropriation of the Nazi salute 'Sieg Heil'. While this has long been used by neo-Nazi groups in their propaganda, banners and merchandise, its popularity grew when the slogan was exclaimed by a candidate for the Sweden Democrats in an interview with the far-right news site Samnytt on the night of the 2022 national elections. Her outburst – which she later withdrew, corrected, and then claimed had been misinterpreted – was widely interpreted as a 'dog whistle' and celebrated by actors across the far right in the country as a coded nod to far-right alliance meant to only be 'heard' by those familiar with the meaning and use of the term (Åkerlund, 2022).

> " One of the most recent additions to the repertoire of far-right products on sale in Sweden include t-shirts with the slogan 'Helg Seger' – a 'Swedified' reappropriation of the Nazi salute 'Sieg Heil'"

Today, variants of 'Helg Seger' garments are for sale in a variety of places online, including a large and well-established Swedish retailer and one of the biggest providers of fascist fashion items and other merchandise that promotes neo-Nazi ideology and white supremacy.

Another series of merchandise gaining some traction and popularity in Sweden contains implicit and explicit references to 'Finspång' – a longstanding campaign of what are essentially death threats propelled by neo-Nazis and other actors across the far-right in the country, which playfully engage with a fantasy of executing politicians, journalists, researchers and other members of the perceived Swedish 'elite' in the small industrial Swedish town of Finspång. This revenge fantasy, reproduced in memes, texts, and artefacts, recounts a fictional/future tribunal to take place after a fascist take-over, in which 'traitors of the people' (i.e. politicians, journalists, researchers, feminists and women in relationships with non-white men etc.) will be held accountable for their betrayal against the nation and hanged from lampposts and cranes across the town. Once 'justice has been served', Finspång will be turned into a 'white sanctuary' to protect the population's 'biological exceptionalism' from the dangers of the alleged ongoing Muslim invasion and the collapse of society under the burdens of multiculturalism more generally (see Askanius & Keller 2021).

Today, this far-right memetic fantasy lives on in merchandise sold on social commerce sites such as Spreadshop, Teespring and Redbubble, in which a hangman's noose is casually jutted onto various attires and accessories including baby clothes and bibs.

The 'No. Out.' slogan first appeared in a series of visual ephemera that can be traced back to the now defunct ethnonationalist group 'Nordic Alt-Right' in the immediate aftermath of the 2015 border crisis. Two simple words tell a narrative of 'protecting Sweden from multiculturalism' and 'keeping Sweden clean'. The slogan has spread onto wearables, but is also disseminated as stickers in public spaces, e.g. put onto election posters of the liberal party in cities across the country.

This continuous two-way flow of narratives, symbols and actions epitomise the intertwined nature of online spaces and local places in how extremist narratives are produced and reproduced.

### Under the radar

These artefacts are all designed to carry a certain playful ambiguity around the multiplicity of potential interpretations. There is a gameplaying aspect, skirting the lines of what is socially acceptable, on the border of legality of hate speech or what is, or has been, classified as 'extremist'. Designs, expressions and symbols generally do not make explicit references to violence, allowing them to go under the radar.

This development goes hand in hand with a larger shift in how extremist messages are increasingly cloaked in entertainment-oriented, humorous and ironic modes of communicating and creating in-group community online. Tapping explicitly into the rich pool of coded langue and symbolism of the global far right, stickers and other merch draw on well-known analogy to 'being pilled' (whitepilled, redpilled, blackpilled etc.), Pepe the Frog, the 'free helicopter ride' meme, and various other symbols, styles and aesthetics which have come to be associated with far-right extremism internationally. They are explicitly marketed to those in the know; those in on the joke and thus part of the community. Only rarely do these include an official logo or name, making it obvious who is selling the product.

As such, these hybrid artefacts of everyday extremism dovetail with contemporary forms of online extremism more generally, which tend to disguise intent and 'authorship', to avoid overtly violent discourse or hate speech and instead draw on popular culture, irony and innuendo to cloak extremism and carry harmful ideas and images into the digital mainstream.