

Review – From Righteousness to Far Right

Written by Alvina Hoffmann

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ALVINA HOFFMANN, AUG 29 2019

From Righteousness to Far Right: An Anthropological Rethinking of Critical Security

By Emma Mc Cluskey

McGill-Queen's University Press, 2019

Emma Mc Cluskey's *From Righteousness to Far Right* focuses on a small village in Southern Sweden in which over 100 Syrian refugees were resettled between 2013 and 2014. During 19 months of ethnographic fieldwork Mc Cluskey worked for a grassroots NGO as a translator, which allowed her to witness the initial hospitality and welcoming encounters between the villagers and the refugees. Over time, this was gradually transformed into the embrace of far-right discourses, unease and hostility towards the resettled refugees on the part of the villagers, who themselves had volunteered their time to welcome the new residents. Through a compelling analysis, Mc Cluskey demonstrates how central the day-to-day practices of everyday people are to understanding the emergence of big phenomena like the global rise of the far right, moving away from a focus on ideology or high politics.

Seeing the Global in the Local: Political Anthropology & Critical Security Studies

Proposing an anthropological rethinking of Critical Security Studies (CSS), Mc Cluskey shows what scholarship within CSS tends to miss through its focus on high politics, official documents and public discourses in which the everyday appears as a passive audience where pre-defined security dynamics 'play out'. To the contrary, micro-practices in the everyday are crucial for the emergence, proliferation and 'stickiness' of security logics. Political anthropology can offer fresh insights, methods and epistemological tools to access what remains hidden when merely analysing discourses which are openly accessible, carefully crafted and presented as coherent and harmonious by public officials. Thus, the book shows how immensely productive a long-overdue encounter between CSS and anthropology is to tackle familiar questions such as the securitisation of migration and the proliferation of (in)securitisation practices. Taking seriously this transdisciplinary encounter allows Mc Cluskey to abandon the 'straitjacket' of International Relations and instead focus on the multiplicity of encounters in the field, placing "ontological primacy on these micropractices of the everyday", and allowing her to make innovative statements about the 'international' (p. 5).

It is hard not to read Emma Mc Cluskey's monograph in light of the various global manifestations of xenophobic, racist and hostile discourses against migrants since she conducted her fieldwork in 2013 and 2014. Whether it is the migrant detention camps along the US-Mexico border, countless drowned migrants in the Mediterranean or the criminalisation of humanitarian rescue missions, these humanitarian catastrophes continue to unfold before our eyes on a daily basis. Scholars have long written about migration, migrants' struggles and borders, the military and humanitarian logics governing migrant movements, the ever-growing securitisation of migration, or the depoliticising role of grief, empathy and hospitality in pro-refugee activism in Europe. Mc Cluskey's anthropological analysis of how Syrian refugees gradually came to be seen as a threat to a Swedish village offers both empirically rich and theoretically illuminating material to make practical sense of how the appeal of the far right plays out in the lives of villagers. Just how precisely did 'everyday' people come to embrace narratives once deemed taboo? The book seeks "to illuminate the conditions of possibility of a particular type of exclusionary and securitarian politics, one that is on the rise" (p. 5).

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In another important theoretical move, the book challenges the narratives of three ‘securitisation schools’ – Copenhagen, Aberystwyth and Paris – and invokes the entwined genealogies and productive debates and conversations before the sanitising moves towards separate schools. Closely related to this commitment, Mc Cluskey and Bigo (2018) proposed to de-essentialise the notion of a ‘Paris school of security studies’ and instead invoke the acronym PARIS – political anthropological research for international sociology. Instead of succumbing to the notions of schools as “a form of essentialism and culturalism”, a PARIS approach takes seriously “the moments in which the individuals in their practices feel they are (in)secure because of the relations and processes they are immersed in” (Bigo and Mc Cluskey, 2018: 120, 127). Thus, Mc Cluskey’s book contributes to a tradition of sociological and anthropological approaches to the study of (in)security and pushes these commitments further by demonstrating how the sociology of power as a relation plays out at the level of micropractices.

Ethnographic Research as Complete Openness to the Field

In addition to addressing questions of political urgency and making agenda-setting contributions to CSS, Mc Cluskey’s book offers a rich account of conducting ethnographic fieldwork, in particular the unexpected turns a research topic can take and her own positionality in the field, by placing central importance on reflexivity. As she explains at the outset of her book, she chose Sweden as a central site as it publicly articulated a humanitarian reason for its asylum policy, based on solidarity and its status as a moral superpower. Being embedded in the everyday practices of a small village, located at the conjuncture of the national and transnational (following de Genova, 2005), allowed her to see and analyse seemingly contradictory practices such as welcoming and rejecting, integration and violence, solidarity and security not as a contradiction but a relation (p. 7-8). However, as she reflects in the introduction, she did not expect that the far right or nationalism would take such a centre-stage in her research, initially setting out to study “refugee resettlement in one of the most humanitarian nations in the Western world” (p. 3).

As Mc Cluskey states, “this anthropological account of life in [the village of] Öreby is not an attempt to build some sort of meta-narrative. Instead, my interpretation of the goings-on in the village simply build traces, with the manner in which I made connections between these traces also written into the story” (p. 15). In building these traces she mobilises an array of theoretical tools: James Scott’s notion of the hidden transcript and the notion of *metis*, “a type of practical knowledge that involves adapting quickly and well to unpredictable events” (p. 17), and Michel Foucault’s governmentality and a ‘caring biopolitics’ in order to theorise the relation between a public and hidden transcript, initially theorised by Scott as the unnoticed politics of resistance. This allows her to identify what she calls a ‘governmentality of righteousness’ as a “snapshot of a type of governmentality that is in some ways transversal, though particularly pronounced in the Swedish story, with its national myth of moral exceptionalism and humanitarian superpowerfulness” (p. 20). Righteousness to her refers to the “production of a certain notion of oneself as completely just in one’s actions” (p. 74). This became evident to her in the various encounters with villagers performing the public transcript of righteousness and moral goodness in encounters with refugees and Mc Cluskey herself.

Her fluency in Arabic and having spent three years in Damascus herself allowed Mc Cluskey to develop personal relationships with the newly settled refugees. One example are the interactions between the couple Nivine and Omar and the villagers:

The couple’s perceived ostentatious display of not simply their wealth but also their personhood, self-esteem, and sense of fun went very much against the grain of what the volunteers perceived a good refugee to be. Nivine and Omar were not obviously needy or vulnerable. At the same time, this was received as a sort of lack of gratitude toward the generous Swedish people (p. 87).

These small gestures and practices of scepticism could be seen as testing the waters, “the hatching of a new discourse of scepticism and hostility toward the Syrians that, at this point, was still only snatched bits of conversation and ambiguous, fleeting statements” (p. 103). As time went by, the unease of the community grew and became expressed in the form of concerns about gender equality and the upbringing of children ‘the Swedish way’. This further engrained a move “toward an ‘us and them’ position” (p. 120). The suspicion towards Syrians increased further due to rumours spreading of them playing the Swedish system. Many such examples demonstrate how

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through the governmentality of righteousness security comes to be expressed through humanitarianism, generosity and solidarity. What can be almost read as a 'culmination', over 20% of the villagers ended up voting for the Sweden Democrats in 2014, a far-right anti-immigration party which managed to double its support in the general election.

In her conclusion Mc Cluskey reflects on the political situation in different EU countries since 2015 and closes off with an important statement: "What I have hoped to show with this book is that relying on people's sense of goodwill – through hospitality, humanitarianism, or the abnormalization of solidarity – is an extremely slippery situation in which to ground refugee and asylum policy" (p. 183). What, then, could provide a more suitable grounding? This question has no easy answers and remains of central importance today. While this review could not do justice to the rich ethnographic material and theoretical resources Mc Cluskey mobilised in her book in this review, I want to conclude by highly recommending it to both scholars and students interested in the study of migration, sociological and anthropological understandings of the rise of the far right and new approaches in critical security studies.

About the author:

Alvina Hoffmann is a PhD Candidate in International Relations in the Department of War Studies, King's College London. Her research looks at transversal rights claims practices of dissenting minorities in Crimea, the Saami people and Internet users as a form of resistance to territorial state logics. She is the Review Article Editor and Social Media Officer of *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* and co-convenor of the research group Doing IPS.