

Interview – Cas Mudde

Written by E-International Relations

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Cas Mudde is the Stanley Wade Shelton UGAF Professor of International Affairs and a Distinguished Research Professor at the University of Georgia (USA) as well as a Professor II at the Center for Research on Extremism (C-REX) at the University of Oslo (Norway). He is a world-renowned scholar of both the far-right and populism, focusing specifically, but not exclusively, on political developments in Europe and North America. He is a member of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW). His book *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe* (Cambridge University Press, 2007) won the Stein Rokkan Prize for Comparative Social Science Research in 2008. His recent books include (with Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser) *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2017), which has so far been translated into almost 20 languages, *The Far Right Today* (Polity, 2019), which has almost 10 translations, and (with Sivan Hirsch-Hoefler) *The Israeli Settler Movement: Assessing and Explaining Social Movement Success* (Cambridge University Press, 2021). Dr. Mudde is also a prominent voice in the public debate, being consulted by various non-state and state actors and interviewed by media around the world. He is a columnist for Guardian US, a regular contributor to VoxEurope, and host of the podcast RADIKAL, which focuses on the radical aspects of music, politics, and sports. He tweets at @casmudde.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

This depends a bit on which field. In terms of European (party) politics, which I consider my main field of study, there is finally some work emerging on the transformation of European party politics, such as the book by Sarah Hobolt and Catherine de Vries on “challenger parties”, articles by people like Tarik Abou-chadi and Simon Hix on the electoral support of social democratic parties, and more and more work on affective polarization and negative voting, inspired by US studies. In terms of the far right, the field is finally taking gender, race/racism, and sexuality more seriously, while there is also more research on far-right social movements. Finally, in terms of populism, a field I follow much less, I think there is some good work on populism at the mass level, through surveys, and at the elite level, focusing on discourse. However, at the same time, there are far too many publications with the term “populism” in the title that are either not about populism at all or only about a specific form of populism, i.e. the populist radical right, for which populism is at best a secondary issue.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) has prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

I was trained as a qualitative scholar in a positivist tradition, which means that, while I was taught to study politics in depth, and holistically, I was also taught to be “neutral” and that there was a “truth”. Along the way, I have become more (consciously) constructivist, accepting that different “truths” exist for different people, that “facts” are *created*, and that true neutrality is neither possible nor desirable. It is impossible to pinpoint who influenced me on what. I have had the privilege to be mentored by, and work with, phenomenal scholars and thinkers, including my late supervisor Peter Mair, my former department chair Stefano Guzzini, and many professors at Leiden University like Joop van Holsteyn, Margo Trappenburg, and the late Koen Koch. I have learned a lot from the works of great scholars like Hans-Georg Betz, Margaret Canovan, Nonna Mayer, Giovanni Sartori, Ruth Wodak. And finally, I have learned from my hundreds of students, in particular my graduate students Jakub Wondreys, Jan Jagers, Lien Warmenbol, Sarah de Lange, and Sivan Hirsch-Hoefler.

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More broadly, over the years, but particularly since moving to the US almost fifteen years ago, I have come to understand that liberal democracies were always incomplete and thinly supported among populations, even in Western Europe and North America, and that we have been complacent and even negligent in the way we have used the term (liberal) “democracy” for states that exclude large groups of the population (e.g. women until early 20th century), discriminate minorities (e.g. Muslims or Roma), or ban certain political ideas and groups (like communism or fascism). And I now see that I, as well as most of the discipline of political science, have seen politics primarily from the perspective of a straight, white man, ignoring or minimizing institutional homophobia, racism and sexism in liberal democratic systems. Many general statements about politics come from this perspective and exclude the experiences and perspectives from large groups of the population, who are, in fact, often a majority. This doesn't make these statements necessarily wrong, but it does make their scope (much) more limited. I aim to be more aware of this as I read, speak, think and write. And I have my wife, a fellow political scientist who works on gender and politics, to remind and educate me whenever I fail.

In your book *The Far Right Today*, you provide an in-depth look at current shifts in the global political landscape. What defines ‘the far right’, and what accounts for its rise into mainstream politics?

I define the right as that group of ideologies that sees societal inequalities as natural and outside of the purview of the state (in line with the Italian philosopher Norberto Bobbio). The far right consists of two subgroups, the *extreme* right, which is anti-democratic, i.e. against popular sovereignty and majority rule, and the *radical* right, which is pro-democratic but anti-*liberal* democratic, i.e. against minority rights, rule of law, separation of powers, etc. In my book, I centralize nativism, i.e. xenophobic nationalism, in the sense that I focus specifically on those far-right actors and ideas in which nativism is central. This is not without problems, particularly outside of the so-called “western” context. For instance, in Latin America, far-right actors like Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil or Jose Antonio Kast in Chile do not center nativism, although it is part of their agenda and ideology. Similarly, Recep Erdogan in Turkey and Vladimir Putin in Russia could be classified as “far right” in the general sense, but I exclude them from my book because nativism is not central to their ideologies. In my defense, I can say, no concept is perfect.

With regard to explanations for the rise of the far right, it is impossible to provide one single explanation — except for vague and trivial explanations like “globalization” or “modernization”. The rise of the far right, in general, is due to a combination of cultural and economic anxieties, skillfully combined by reasonably competent far-right parties and politicians, within a political context of growing or widespread dissatisfaction. But every individual election is unique, and can only be explained by adding specific, often idiosyncratic, explanations to this or a general combination of factors. That's why, to understand how Donald Trump won the US presidency in 2016, or why Marine Le Pen came second in the 2017 and 2022 French presidential elections, you need to combine these broad, global theories of the far right with specific and in-depth knowledge of US or French politics.

Is the rise of the far right more likely to be a temporary phenomenon as a result of political dissatisfaction, or a viable alternative in long-term politics?

There are two ways to approach this question. I assume the question refers to far-right *actors*, like political parties. In that case, I don't foresee far-right parties becoming irrelevant within particularly European politics in the foreseeable future. Leaving aside that issues like immigration and integration will remain on the agenda for a while, and xenophobia will remain widespread in most societies, most far-right parties have been quick to adapt to other issues, from climate change to COVID-19 to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Although these issues are not their bread and butter, as they cannot easily be connected to nativism, the far-right has been able to profit from becoming the populist voice of the minority opposition against a broad establishment consensus.

At the same time, you can also approach the question from the perspective of far-right *ideas*. As I argue in *The Far Right Today*, far-right ideas have become mainstream in the 21st century and no longer rely on the original far-right parties to be influential. Mainstream parties, from the Danish Social Democrats to the Dutch Liberals (VVD), are now propagating ideas and policies that were exclusive to far-right parties in the 1990s. That genie will not go back in the bottle, but I do think that the far-right has, or will soon, achieve its peak in terms of intellectual power. In the last two decades the far-right has punched above its electoral weight. Although gaining on average just some 15 percent of

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the vote across Europe, far-right issues and frames have dominated the political agenda for most of the time. And this applies to various countries outside of Europe too — think about Brazil, India, Israel, and the US. I do believe socio-economic issues will become more dominant again, while populations are becoming more inclusive on a range of socio-cultural issues.

Two years on from the Trump Presidency, is America still experiencing the consequences of its brief entanglement with the far right?

The entanglement with the far right didn't start with Trump, wasn't brief, and definitely isn't over yet. Leaving aside that the US was founded on racism, and institutional racism was the law of the land until the second part of the 20th century in at least the South, the rise of the Tea Party in the wake of the Great Recession saw a clear embrace of far-right ideals and actors by parts of the Republican Party. With Trump, the far right took leadership of the party, even if Trump had to compromise with more traditional Republicans like Senate majority leader Mitch McConnell, and mostly lost on the more authoritarian and nativist policy proposals. But after the Insurrection of January 6, 2021, and the GOP's embrace of Trump's "stolen election" lie, the Republican Party has moved even sharper to the right. The party is currently being overrun by extreme right outsiders, who often beat the few remaining establishment Republicans in primaries, and openly attack US democracy with conspiracy theories and voter suppression laws.

Is the impact of a rising far right different in a union of states as in Europe, as opposed to its impact in individual countries like Brazil and India?

Roughly 15 years ago, I would have said yes. At that time, most scholars, including myself, thought that the European Union (EU) would not allow a far-right government to undermine its own liberal democratic system. But now, with Hungary relegated to at best an illiberal democracy, while remaining one of the most subsidized EU states per capita, we know this is clearly not the case. That said, I do think, or perhaps hope, that there are still some limits to what far-right governments can do within the EU. Openly threatening military dictatorship, as Bolsonaro does in Brazil, would probably not be accepted — though I am also not so sure anymore whether it would actually be sanctioned. And the level of communal violence we see in India against Muslims in particular, which is fueled, condoned, and supported by the broader Hindutva movement of which prime minister Narendra Modi's BJP party is a part, would probably be unacceptable for the EU. Still, I say "probably", as I don't even know anymore whether this is really the case. So far, the EU has done almost nothing to stand in the way of illiberalism in Hungary, and fairly little in Poland.

Your latest book *The Israeli Settler Movement*, claims to be the first empirical study of its kind on this movement. What is the Israeli settler movement, and what is its importance in Israel's political history?

To be clear, there are other empirical studies of the Israeli settler movement, but they focus primarily on the history or ideology/theology of the movement. My book with Sivan Hirsch-Hoefler is the first study to apply a social movement lens to assess and explain the political success of the Israeli settler movement. The movement itself is, like all social movements, not so easy to define, let alone delineate. Not all settlers are part of the movement and not only settlers are part of the movement. We consider the Israeli settler movement as the totality of individuals and group that favor the settlement of *Eretz Yisrael* or Greater Israel. The movement includes settlers in the West Bank, nationalist activists in Israel proper, state-sponsored institutions like the Yesha Council, etcetera. While the settler population is highly diverse, and the majority of settlers are so-called "quality-of-life settlers" who moved there because life is much cheaper in the occupied territories than in Israel proper, the leadership of the settler movement is in the hands of the national-religious camp, which believes that God gave the whole, biblical "Land of Israel" to the Jews. The political importance of the settler movement is manifold. More than anything, it has prevented the return of the West Bank by the state of Israel. And, because of its *pattern* of settlement, the settler movement has made a viable Palestinian state impossible without the (traumatic) removal of Jewish settlements. It has also played a role in the right-wing turn in Israeli politics and society. At the same time, it is not all-powerful, as some opponents tend to claim. It could not prevent the return of Gaza, and earlier the Sinai. And it has not been able to motivate enough Jews to move to the West Bank and create or live in settlements.

How comparable is the Israeli settler movement to radical right social movements in other parts of the

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world, and has it gained popular support?

The Israeli settler movement is exceptional, perhaps even unique, in that it is a social movement that has existed as a relevant political actor for more than half of a century now. Even the successful left-wing new social movements of the 1970s, which tended to be more numerous and powerful, were mostly relatively short-lived, lasting a few decades at best. This is in part because the Israeli settler movement operates in a unique situation, as a colony, controlled by Israel, but not officially part of Israel. Hence, while the movement is not just an extension of the state, it does get massive state resources. Should the settler movement have operated in a territory that was officially claimed by the state of Israel, it would probably have had less power and resources, as the state would do many of the things the settler movement is doing now itself. It is also exceptionally well-connected to a very broad range of domestic and foreign (particularly US) actors, which has kept them relevant even under ideologically less sympathetic governments. This has changed more recently, however. With the dominance of the (far) right in Israel, the settler movement has become largely detached from the left, notably the Labor Party, where it used to enjoy serious support. Still, given that the Israeli left is politically irrelevant, and the settler movement has spread its support across the Israeli (far) right, this doesn't hurt it much for now.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

You do you! Be yourself, study what *you* are interested in, and do it in a way that *you* believe in. Do engage with the mainstream literature, and always read broadly, but don't just jump on the latest bandwagon, because (1) by the time you have mastered it, there is a fair change a new fad has come along; and (2) if you are successful, this is probably what you will do for the rest of your life! So, stay true to yourself and your own interests.