

Subjects and Occasions

Articles,

Comment Pieces, and Reviews

on the Far Right and Other Matters. Vol. 1

Essays by

Matthew Feldman

Edited by Karim Mamdani

With an Introduction by Kate Yanduganova

ibidem

Matthew Feldman

Subjects and Occasions

Articles, Comment Pieces, and Reviews on the Far Right
and Other Matters

Vol. 1

Edited by Karim Mamdani

The Best of Scholars and Scholarship in the Humanities

Edited by:

Elliot Y. Neaman, Matthew Feldman, and Karim Mamdani

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Matthew Feldman

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For Dan Stone
Scholar and Mensch

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Introduction

Kate Yanduganova

How did fascism emerge, and why did it gain such popularity? How did the population of European countries allow the Holocaust to happen, and how do we deal with this legacy? Does fascism persist today, and, if so, where and how? Matthew Feldman, a historian of radicalism, has dedicated decades to grappling with these complex questions. While no single answer suffices, this new collection of Feldman's shorter works compiles insights and perspectives that are crucial to enhancing public understanding of different forms of radicalism, especially far-right movements, fascist ideology, and terrorism. It includes pieces from many different outlets, which have been roughly grouped into several sections. Attentive readers will enjoy finding continuities and echoes between the chapters.

This volume features a diverse array of content, including book reviews, interviews, op-eds, academic articles, and reports for monitoring organizations. Its topics span from archival studies and poetry analysis to justifications for legal enforcements, such as the arrest of Pavel Durov in France—a reflection of Feldman's expansive intellectual output. While some selections exhibit continuity with his previous essay collection from 2020, *Politics, Intellectuals, and Faith*, the present volume presents a much more varied spectrum of Feldman's concerns and methodological approaches.

In his work as a literary scholar, Feldman analyzes modernist poetry and fiction, examining how these artists' opinions on public lives shaped their creative works. He is interested in the representation of European worldviews, such as modernist art or fascist politics, particularly during the first

half of the twentieth century. This focus naturally extends to the historical dimensions of Feldman's research: he traces the genesis of extremist movements, exploring the circumstances under which fascism developed and gained popularity in 1930s Germany, its transformations in postwar Europe, and its seeming contemporary resurgence, manifested in individual terrorist acts and echoed in some policies of authoritarian Western governments. Notably, Feldman does not delve deeply into Islamist terrorism. Instead, he posits that the current 'Islamist scare' is largely attributable to the 'othering' of Muslims—in the United States, Western Europe, and Latin America—by an increasingly global far right, including its most radical elements, despite, and later as a reaction to, horrific events like 9/11. Feldman offers insights into the construction of fear and anger on the political right, revealing the radicalization networks that underpin far-right attacks. In many instances of political and xenophobic extremism, Feldman finds it possible to reconstruct the context that allowed these ideologies to capture minds, ultimately culminating in acts of violence. His most forceful assertion is that no terrorist acts in isolation—there is always a propaganda network and an exchange of ideas that inspire and continuously support extremist operations—even if the 'terrorist cycle' might be undertaken alone, as with self-directed terrorism (ignoring the performative aspects of terrorism, later British policy calls this 'self-initiated terrorism'). This perspective explains Feldman's interest in modern media, as he illustrates how extremist ideas are propagated both by traditional media like books and through newer digital channels, including popular forums such as Telegram. Feldman concludes with "a call to civil courage," emphasizing the importance of everyday vigilance and community cohesion. On the latter, key point, while extremism cannot be eradicated

once and for all, individuals can contribute by “keeping their little corner clean.”

By tracing the development of far-right extremism throughout the ‘long twentieth century,’—for him, starting with the First World War, but not yet concluded—Feldman demonstrates how historical patterns shape current events. He also highlights the crucial roles of literature and philosophy in analyzing and reflecting upon these patterns. Consequently, historians often become, by necessity, sociologists and political scholars, collaborating with philologists as they discover networks of meaning that permeate all spheres of public life. Feldman’s interviews reveal that such intellectual networks have structured both his scholarly career and his personal life, as he recounts the impact of conversations with colleagues, friends, and even strangers at a bar on his thinking.

The thematic connections within Feldman’s oeuvre are the central focus of this volume. This organizational principle means that, within a single section, readers may encounter pieces from diverse genres, encompassing both academic and journalistic writing. Feldman is keen to engage with varied audiences, driven by his conviction that every individual can meaningfully contribute to the betterment of the world. He is always open to communication and cooperation. Indeed, many pieces in this volume are not solely the product of Feldman’s individual mind. The collection includes interviews, which explicitly showcase Feldman’s interest in dialogue, as well as co-authored articles and book reviews, underscoring his commitment to fostering connections. In essence, this volume presents not merely Feldman’s individual work, but rather the output of a dynamic, albeit loosely knit, network of researchers striving to comprehend ideologies and formulate enlightened responses to them.

Interestingly, Feldman's analyses of the far right reveal that extremist activists themselves engage in historical studies to enhance their resilience and improve their ability to adapt to the conditions of state and public control. Through this process, violence often receives, for them, a historical justification.

As Thomas Merton, one of personages whose thought Feldman addresses in this volume, claims, this language "of the guerilla warrior" is a parodic continuation of the instances where the official state speech itself was "sick." This new language "mocks the ponderous and self-important utterances of the Establishment." But none of them can offer a place for listening to alternative languages or points of view. What we need instead, according to Merton, is *parrhesia*, truth-seeking dialogue, grounded in love for others.

Inspired by Merton, Feldman argues that the task of the public intellectual is to create a new language that will unfold an alternative, healing understanding of history—one fundamentally rooted in the belief in an intrinsic value underpinning all human lives, even in an era marked by mass atrocities. This distinction is particularly crucial given that universities can also become bastions of intolerance, even violence. In the current age, it is easy to disseminate ideas that can radicalize academia itself—exemplified by Martin Heidegger. In the face of ubiquitous threats to free thought, Feldman urges caution and attentiveness. His gentleness and inherent concern that every voice should be heard stand in opposition to the anti-intellectualism he laments in those who succumb to the far-left or far-right extremism, antisemitism, and Islamophobia.

Radical propaganda inherently inhibits critical thought. Furthermore, among individuals who have not yet subscribed to radical ideas, there is often a prevalent belief that terrorism is a phenomenon exclusive to 'other people'—that

an average, middle-class person leading a stable life could never be radicalized. By ‘othering’ radicalization, individuals dismiss it as outside their purview. They perceive radicalization as a phenomenon beyond the scope of experiences their minds are prepared to analyze, thus failing to engage with it critically. Instead, they prefer to link it to societal ‘others,’ to people who are unlike themselves. This process leads to scapegoating and hate towards ethnic, religious, or social minorities. However, the myth that terrorists are ‘not the people you know’ is increasingly being debunked as more individuals become perpetrators of hate attacks in what Feldman terms a ‘thanatocracy’—at the very least, regarding American gun fetishes—a claim that death (of undesired others, and often one’s own) is a social necessity.

Feldman and his colleagues demonstrate that radicalization, which culminates in extremism and can lead to terrorism, can be sensitively analyzed and explained. In tracing out some of those explanations, the present volume is designed to offer essential tools for understanding radical and extremist ideologies, thereby boosting critical thinking. Hopefully, this collection will inspire in its readers a greater willingness to engage in meaningful dialogue with others—and ‘the other.’

This two-volume book is divided into eight sections, four here and four that will be presented in the second volume. Roughly corresponding to a chronological order, the first section brings together articles on modernist writers. The first article, “Joseph Conrad’s *The Secret Agent*: Herald of Contemporary Terrorism?,” already establishes the connection between modernist writing and contemporary radicalization mechanisms. Drawing on Conrad’s own “Author’s Note” that

precedes the novel, and a body of research literature that hails Conrad as a first “great political novelist” of the terror-ridden long twentieth century, Feldman argues that Conrad hit the goal as he portrayed, on the one hand, the demagoguery of modern extremism and, on the other, the mundane nature of many of the individuals who actually carry out these deeds. Terrorists, says Feldman, can be motivated by feelings of personal unworthiness or humiliation. We should be concerned about them, but there are no grounds for fearing a global far-right terrorist conspiracy.

The gap between the verbose ideologies and the triviality of suffering is further explored in the next two articles, “Thomas Merton: Catholic Modernist” and “From Christian Witness to Christianity: Thomas Merton, Ideology and Religious Violence.” In one condensed and one slightly looser piece, Feldman depicts Merton as an advocate of “justice, liberty and everlasting peace,” whose texts explore the ideologies of fascism and what he dubs “Christianism” in order to combat them, showing how a subject is diminished by violence and death. Merton finds the causes of evil in what Martin Luther King Jr. famously called “the triplets of racism, materialism, and militarism”, but which are “in fact one, hydra-headed monster: domination.” This will to dominate, disregarding the “dignity, fragility or difference” of other human beings, has produced a “degraded humanism,” thus bringing about the major historical catastrophes of the twentieth century. To counter it, Merton proposes an attitude of charitable engagement and a conscious refusal to partake in the one-sided impulse of domination. Feldman carries this idea further, implementing it as an act of resistance to contemporary practices of extremism and violence.

Merton’s path is compared to that of Albert Camus, who tried to find a rational medium between the self-absorbed

bourgeois life and the unheeding whirlwind of revolution. Camus also noticed that both extremes result in the deadening of one's soul. In an article written during Camus's centenary year, Feldman explains that the author finally chose to remain outside of political conflicts because he was dismayed by claims of justified terror from all sides. Instead, Camus maintains the necessity of justice—even though true justice might also lead to suffering—and an ethical attitude to all human life, which might prevent what he calls “our collective suicide.”

In contrast, the articles on Ezra Pound show a poet who becomes consumed by ideology, namely fascism. Feldman describes how Pound's longing for a modernist revolution made him susceptible to fascist propaganda, and highlights the role of mass communication—newspapers and radio programs—in disseminating these ideas. Pound's own poetry became a part of this dissemination, as his ideas were later inherited by new generations of fascists. Despite the Axis powers' defeat in the Second World War, fascism has emerged again amongst a much smaller group of fanatics who present their goal of 'white power' as a revolutionary and messianic ideal. Feldman concludes with a caveat that more recent fascist ideologues try to tame their output so as to attract more followers in the current age.

The last article in this section focuses on Samuel Beckett, examining him as a different kind of radical, who worked to depict the alienation of his age by building a new art, which focused on the minimal essence of the human being. As Feldman explains, comparing Beckett to Victor Frankl, another survivor of the Second World War, Beckett's plays are never-ending quests to find inner meaning of life, in which Beckett reaches out to thinkers and writers from his own time, and from the past.

The topics of influence and reception—not only by other writers, but also by audiences in theaters and at home—are important for Feldman, who aims to sketch a community of thinking minds held together by challenging cultural events. As Feldman notes, Beckett is significant in this respect because his plays were meant to provoke their audience, inviting them to question their own reaction: Why are we applauding? Because this is what is done in the theater? It is no wonder that the BBC recognized the radiophonic power of Beckett's work to shake the listeners, making it central in their attempts to intellectualize broadcast programming. Feldman shows these attempts as a quest to enliven public thought, to deter postwar complacency, and to keep the listeners alert to the complexity and the wonderful irreducibility of the human condition.

The second section in this volume, "A History of Popular Fascism," again looks at the ideologies starting from the 1930s, but this time taking a historical point of view. Here, fascism and specifically Nazism is examined as a social phenomenon. Drawing on archival sources, Feldman looks into reasons why different classes of the German society—farmers, workers, academics—tolerated and even welcomed Hitler's ideology. Essentially, much Nazi propaganda "ran on optimism. [...] Nazi columnists spent less time spitting venom than promising the world to a scared, angry electorate—hate was gift-wrapped with hope."

Drawing on the work of his academic mentor, the renowned Detlef Mühlberger, Feldman explains that choosing Nazism was always a psychological choice, one often linked to personal emotions. And, vitally, sometimes one person who believed that these emotions were wrong was enough to

delay the advent of Nazism in a town or village. However, when we zoom out in terms of time scale, the emotional appeal of Nazism is exactly what has guaranteed its staying power amongst some. Nazism is still very tempting today—to those who feels scared, lost, defeated by the irrationality of the world, or cheated out of a comfortable and prosperous lifestyle. This is why a large part of this section examines how Nazism and the void by which it manifested its inherent cruelty, the Holocaust, can be taught and explained, how primary sources can be saved and transmitted, all in order to ensure that each person can choose to resist as unviable the delusionary beliefs in favor of the Nazis.

The third section includes three general pieces connecting the historical dimension of Feldman's thought with his analyses of the present-day situation. It begins with an interview titled "Beckett to Breivik," which showcases the span of Feldman's academic interests. Starting with a round-up of Feldman's work on Becket and Pound, it sums up Feldman's career as a historian of ideas who has started as a curious and skeptical undergraduate. As Feldman explains, studies of modernist literature have fostered his close reading abilities, which he now uses to analyze social life and politics, inside as well as outside academia. He connects literary research to present-day events, as he argues that scholars learn transferable skills that can be help counter extremism and improve digital literacy in the wider word. In this sense, the first section can be seen as offering a weapon in combating extremism: the well-evidenced articles provide examples of grappling with ideologies, give advice on how to shake off the

yoke of someone else's ideas and make an independent informed choice, while also truthfully reflecting the difficulties of this struggle in a suffering world.

The remaining two articles are more theoretical essays tracing two terms that will be reiterated many times over the course of this book: 'genocide' and 'radicalization.' Following the dictionary definitions of these terms, and the historical contexts in which they were used, Feldman uncovers a simple truth: human society always contains a potential for violence, and the modern world with its technical progress has provided ample means for expressing it. Modernity has been shaped by violent events—and by our reactions to them.

Although Feldman's grim chronicle shows that violence cannot be erased, we can still ensure that it never gains hold, never becomes acceptable. This is the emphasis of the last section in this volume, which focuses entirely on 21st-century subjects. With a historian's strong understanding Feldman gauges the contemporary applications of the word 'fascism.' This word has become an umbrella term to describe politics of violent discrimination, first of all, on national grounds, usually manifesting as antisemitism. There is no shortage of discrimination around us—and still the modern world exists in an uneasy balance between radical revolutionary impulses and establishment inertia. As Feldman warns, there is always danger lurking around the corner. This is why he calls for the general public to stay on guard against violent rhetoric around them. Feldman advocates for careful deliberation to identify the victims and perpetrators of discrimination (hint: please listen to the Jews). For the sake of all victims and survivors, it is important to shake the

system's passivity, ensuring that those who move from rhetoric to action are stopped, tried, and brought to justice. The emphasis on institutionalized justice might seem ironic to those who do not trust the system—and there can be very good reasons for that, admittedly—but, for Feldman, the cooperation between an informed public and the liberal state is a safeguard against them being driven to extremes.

The task of this book is not just to present the work of one academic—even though it is good, insightful analysis of the drive to violence in literature and in societal processes. Rather, it is an attempt to catch something that actively withstands this ubiquitous violence: emotional components of thought that illuminate and enliven scholarly research. This is the reason why this book focuses on non-traditional genres such as interviews, reviews, or memorial pieces, where an academic's own thinking opens up as it is brought into contact with others.

For the most part, the articles featured in this book have never before appeared in book form. It was the editor's conscious choice to put together a collection of ephemera—articles from websites, internet newspapers and journals, or online research centers—offering snapshots of a living, developing story that is enriched by reactions to news reports or to new academic publications. Still curious and skeptical, Feldman stands in conversation with thinkers from before and around him. His work is always an attentive search for knowledgeable interlocutors or a witness who can inspire a reconsideration of the world.

Section 1:

Poetry and Prose

Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent*: Herald of Contemporary Terrorism?

I.

The modernist author Joseph Conrad “can be read,” British philosopher John Gray provocatively argued, “as the first great political novelist of the twenty-first century.” The case set out for this unfashionable view in his 2002 “Joseph Conrad: Our Contemporary” departs from Conrad’s 1907 novel *The Secret Agent*, which is based upon an “actual terrorist attempt on the Royal Observatory in 1894, when a French anarchist accidentally blew himself up in Greenwich Park before reaching his target.” This is given a “darkly ironic vision” by Conrad, “whereby the symbols of trade and new technology have come under terrorist attack.”

Whether or not one agrees with Gray, *The Secret Agent* surely merits revisiting in the twenty-first century. In fact, in the three years following the September 11 attacks and their unparalleled murderousness in non-state sponsored, or asymmetric, terrorism—notes Peter Lancelot Mallios in the revealing collection *Conrad in the 21st Century—The Secret Agent* was “referenced over a hundred times in newspapers, magazines, and online journalistic resources across the world.”

Revolutionary Shams

Collecting an explosive device from a “credulous and self-indulgent” anarchist named The Professor, the “secret agent” in question—a bookshop owner and pornographer named Alfred Verloc—then manipulates his brother-in-law, “the mentally retarded and hypersensitive Stevie.” The latter is then lured into attempting to bomb the Greenwich Observatory, a

failure in which the unbeknownst bomber succeeds only in killing himself. John Gray further, and incisively, holds that “Conrad’s scorn for revolutionaries is comprehensive and unremitting,” portraying them, despite their “utopian imagination,” as “vain, deluded and inherently criminal”—not unlike the “the suicide-warriors of al-Qaeda” who in 9/11 also “carried off a terrifying assault on the spirit of the age.” In this, Gray is perfectly in accord with Conrad’s personal take on the novel; as in a letter to his friend, R. B. Cunningham Graham, on January 14, 1907:

I don’t think that I’ve been satirizing the revolutionary world. All these people are not revolutionaries—they are Shams. And as regards the Professor, I did not intend to make him despicable. He is incorruptible at any rate. In making him say “madness and despair—give me that for a lever and I will move the world” I wanted to give him a note of perfect sincerity. At the worst he is a megalomaniac of an extreme type.

“Joseph Conrad: Our Contemporary” is certainly in keeping with Conrad’s “Author’s Note” preceding the novel, which confesses to fictionalizing the “blood-stained inanity” and “absurd cruelty of the Greenwich Park explosion.” For this was “an outrage [that] could not be laid hold of mentally in any sort of way,” historically undertaken in 1894 by “half an idiot” whose “sister committed suicide afterwards”—a fair, if superficial, two-clause summary of *The Secret Agent*’s plot.

Greenwich Bomb Outrage

In a historicizing essay from 1971, Norman Sherry convincingly established that *The Secret Agent* was based upon contemporaneous texts relating to what was called the Greenwich Bomb Outrage. Or, as Conrad put it in a letter of November 7, 1906, the novel “is based upon the inside knowledge of a certain event in the history of active anar-

chism.” This was based on the putative attack on the Greenwich Observatory by one Martial Bourdin, with a largely accurate “pattern of events and people immediately surrounding the disaster”—one unfolding in “substantially the same form in which Conrad was to present it in his novel”:

The bomb outrage in the novel is instigated by a foreign embassy at the time of an anti-anarchist conference in Milan, with the object of discrediting the anarchists who have taken refuge in England and so persuading the English to take stricter measures against them. The incident thus becomes the work of an *agent provocateur* (Verloc), which take the anarchists and also the police by surprise, arouses some concern among the ruling class, and results in the entirely accidental death of the catspaw, Stevie. It achieves none of its aims and thus has the appearance of a mysterious and absurd cruelty.

Sherry also finds that Conrad was reading several of the twenty-five or so anarchist publications appearing in London at the end of the 19th century—in fact, two of these, *The Gong* and *The Torch*, are mentioned on the opening page of *The Secret Agent*. Although given short shrift in John Gray’s text, the point is that *The Secret Agent* is thus very much emplotted in a late 19th-century act of terrorism that, both historically and in its subsequent fictional treatment by Conrad, may be construed as a strike against a symbolic target.

This would seem to chime with Conrad’s assertion in his prefatory Author’s Note: “I really think that ‘The Secret Agent’ is a perfectly genuine piece of work. Even the purely artistic purpose, that of applying an ironic method to a subject of that kind, was formulated with deliberation and in the earnest belief that ironic treatment alone would enable me to say all I felt I would have to say in scorn as well as in pity.”

From Anarchism to Terrorism

As this suggests, Gray was largely right; for Conrad has many prescient things to say in *The Secret Agent*. But I want

to suggest that these things are, in some measure, different than those advanced in “Joseph Conrad: Our Contemporary.” Many of Conrad’s insights, in fact, feed quite *directly* into a number of debates on terrorism—from motivation to profile to urban targets.

To be sure, Gray touches upon the symbolism of the attackers in *The Secret Agent*—the global meridian at Greenwich Park. Of course, symbolic targets are scarcely new to our “postmodern” age, as shown by the outrages of 9/11, the 1995 bombing of the Alfred Murrah Federal in Oklahoma City that killed 168 people, or further back, the assassination of 11 Israeli athletes 1972 Munich Olympics. Terrorism is a frightening and baleful feature of the modern age.

So too in Conrad’s day—the first era of globalization—when anarchist attacks pulsed across Europe and the United States. In a case championed by John Merriman as one that “arguably ignited the modern age of terrorism,”¹ Émile Henry bombed the Café Terminus adjacent to the Gare Saint-Lazare in France on February 12, 1894, killing one and wounding twenty. At his subsequent trial, the 21-year-old terrorist proclaimed:

In the merciless war that we have declared on the bourgeoisie, we ask no mercy. We mete out death and we must face it. For that reason I await your verdict with indifference. I know that mine will not be the last head you will sever [...] You will add more names to the bloody roll call of our dead.

These anarchist attacks were mainly directed against royal, bourgeois, and economic targets, as with the assassination of King Umberto I of Italy in 1900. Or 20 years later, when at least 33 people died and 200 were injured in the earliest recorded car bombing, symbolically targeting Wall Street in New

1 John Merriman, “Was This Man the First Terrorist of the Modern Age?,” BBC, October 7, 2009, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/magazine/8263858.stm.

York City. Yet Mario Buda, an anarchist widely seen as the most likely suspect, was never caught or tried, nor in fact ever seen again after September 16, 1920. It bears remembering, therefore, that what is now understood as “lone wolf terrorism”—if not in the preparatory steps of what is now understood as the “Terrorist Cycle,”—was an essential feature of anarchist-inspired, urban terrorism at the turn of the twentieth century.

(Parenthetically, the scholar most associated with the ‘waves of terrorism’ theory is David Rapoport, who sees subsequent waves between then and now as ‘anti-colonial’ “second-wave” terrorism, ‘new left’ “third-wave” terrorism, giving way to the present period of “fourth-wave,” religious terrorism. Another scholar, Jeffrey Kaplan, has recently argued that we are now in a fifth wave characterized by “radical localism and rabid xenophobia.”)

Literary Nostradamus

On more interpretative matters, however, John Gray is comparatively silent. For as literary scholars well know, a “symbol” only becomes symbolic when it is represented as such. In this sense, championing Conrad as a kind of “literary Nostradamus” (in Judith Shulevitz’s phrase) became, itself, symbolic as a kind of prophetic modernism after 9/11.

While that is telling in and of itself, Mallios draws attention to the trope of newspapers in the novel. It bears remembering that innovations in communications, printing and distribution, not to mention the rise of general literacy, at the end of the 19th century helped to create the period of so called “yellow journalism,” when sensationalist narratives—or, in Mallios’s view, hegemonic and coercive—dominated the front pages of mass-circulation newspapers.

This transformation was not lost upon Conrad, and it appears throughout *The Secret Agent*. The most significant of these instances occurs in the second chapter of the novel, in an exchange between the terrorist radicalizer working for a foreign government, Mr. Vladimir, and the ‘secret agent’ in his paid employ, Mr. Verloc.

In directing Adolf Verloc to “earn his money” and “do something”—an “outrage” to be “directed against buildings, for instance”—it is notable that Vladimir’s *main* targets are not actually the buildings in themselves, but the terror created by mainstream newspapers via the expected, hysterical reporting of any symbolic strike. Dismissing assassinations of a head of state or bombings against religious or cultural institutions, Mr. Vladimir declares that these are

no longer instructive as an object lesson in revolutionary anarchism. Every newspaper has ready-made phrases to explain such manifestations away [...] A bomb outrage to have any influence on public opinion now must go beyond the intention of vengeance or terrorism. It must be purely destructive.

In giving his instructions to Verloc, Mr. Vladimir simply assumes that the press shapes public opinion. Put another way, in order to make the terrorist attack a symbolic one, it was essential for him that the nascent global media treated it as such. Hence his reason for targeting the “sacrosanct fetish” of the middle-classes, science:

I defy the ingenuity of journalists to persuade their public that any given member of the proletariat can have a personal grievance against astronomy [...] And there are other advantages. The whole civilized world has heard of Greenwich [...] Go for the first meridian.

The imperative to capture the mass media’s attention has only increased with time, and connects the rise of the mass media portrayed in *The Secret Agent* with some of the digital

transformations of our day. A recent example is the Norwegian terrorist Anders Behring Brevik, who unleashed his one-man war against “cultural Marxism” on July 22, 2011. Breivik’s murderous actions were a form of “terrorist PR,” bent on publicizing his online film and 1,500 page-plus manifesto, *2083: A Declaration of European Independence*. Both were released literally hours before his symbolic bombing of Oslo’s government district and shooting spree at the Labor youth camp at the nearby island of Utøya. For who would have taken his rantings seriously before he killed 77 innocents—the vast majority of them children—beyond the fringe of right-wing extremists with whom he already associated? To reformulate this argument, symbolic targets and the publicity they engender were motivating factors for terrorists in *The Secret Agents*; it is also something that may have become even more important for terrorism and its public reception over the intervening century.

II.

Now, turning to other themes in *The Secret Agent*, these seem, equally, downplayed in critical discussion of the novel, yet central to debates about contemporary terrorism. With respect to the latter, three terrorist incidents in London over the last generation will serve as examples: David Copeland’s two week bombing spree during April 1999 targeting ethnic minorities and homosexuals, which killed three people and wounded 139 more; the jihadi Islamist attacks that killed 52 Londoners and wounded more than 750 on July 7, 2005; and, most recently, the Woolwich murder of Drummer Lee Rigby on May 22, 2013, by the recently sentenced Michael Adebolajo and Michael Adebowale. The latter have been described as a “lone wolf pack,” understood by Raffaello Pan-

tucci as “small, isolated groups of individuals involved in terrorism,” whereby “some level of outside communication was apparent (mostly through the Internet), but at no point does it appear clear that the plotters were subject to the direction of outside forces.”²

Lone Wolves

This naturally raises the definitional conundrum of what constitutes a “lone wolf.” For one thing, the reinforcing, mutual incitement with multiple terrorists is much different than the psychological drive of an individual acting wholly alone. Like the understanding of “lone wolf packs” above, some of the broader definitions in this hotly contested area nonetheless imply that multiple people can carry out a “lone wolf” attack.

A quite recent example of this approach to lone-wolf terrorism was offered in a 128-word, mega-definition by the RAND analyst Jeffrey Simon’s 2013 book, *Lone Wolf Terrorism: Understanding the Growing Threat*:

Lone wolf terrorism is the use or threat of violence or nonviolent sabotage, including cyber-attacks, against government, society, business, the military (when the military is not an occupying force or involved in a war, insurgency, or state of hostilities), or any other target, by an individual acting alone or with minimal support from one or two other people (but not including actions during popular uprisings, riots, or violent protests), to further a political, social, religious, financial, or other related goals, or, when not having such an object, nevertheless has the same effect, or potential effect, upon government, society, business, or the military in terms of creating fear and/or disrupting daily life and/or causing government, society,

2 See Raffaello Pantucci, “A Typology of Lone Wolves,” International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (ICSR), 2011, https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/1302002992ICSRPa-per_ATypologyofLoneWolves_Pantucci.pdf

business, or the military to react with heightened security and/or other responses.

Problematically, in the definition offered above, natural disasters could be considered the greatest lone-wolf terrorist of all.

Indeed, in Simon's problematic rendering, the events recounted in *The Secret Agent* would undoubtedly be considered a "lone-wolf attack." Yet the only people *logistically* involved in masterminding the failed bombing of the Greenwich meridian were the mastermind, Mr. Vladimir, his paid agent, Mr. Verloc, and a bomb-maker unaware of the actual target, The Professor, who only knew that "it was going to be a demonstration against a building."

Based on testifying for Britain's Crown Prosecution Service³ against what I have elsewhere called "self-activating terrorists,"⁴ my own approach to so-called "lone wolf terrorism" seeks to be much more narrow:

self-directed political or religious violence undertaken through the 'terrorist attack cycle' by individuals—typically perceived by its adherents to be an act of asymmetrical, propagandistic warfare—which derives from a variable amount of external influence and context (notably now online), rather than external command and control.

This focuses squarely upon *individual* motives and capabilities (not least those powered by the Internet today), rather than *ex post facto* perceptions by governments or others. It would certainly exclude the case of the Woolwich murderers, for instance, who were able to rely upon each other for sup-

3 Simon Israel, "Convictions Point to Rise of Far-Right Extremism," June 24, 2010, Channel 4 News, <https://www.channel4.com/news/convictions-point-to-rise-of-far-right-extremism>.

4 Matthew Feldman, "Comparative Lone Wolf Terrorism: Toward a Heuristic Definition," *Democracy and Security* 9, no. 3 (2013): 270-286.

port and murderous fortitude, even if the traditional, hierarchical structure of a terrorist group like the Red Army Faction or the IRA were absent.

Both trends contrast starkly with the case of David Copeland in 1999, whose actions were individually planned, self-targeted, single-handedly weaponized, and personally undertaken. In short, he went through the aforementioned “terrorist cycle” alone, without direct logistical or moral support from anyone else—an exemplary case of lone-wolf terrorism.

Broadband Terrorism

Nonetheless, scholars agree that, even if he never divulged his plot to them, David Copeland was radicalized by his involvement with the extreme right British National Party (which he joined in 1997, then led by the uncompromising neo-Nazi John Tyndall). He briefly acted as a steward for the BNP, before leaving for the more extreme National Socialist Movement—ostensibly on account of the latter’s willingness to countenance illegal violence and paramilitary action. Much of his bomb making was sourced via the Internet, in one of the first cases of what I have elsewhere called “broadband terrorism”—a phenomenon now ubiquitous for terrorists of all stripes today.⁵

Similarly, it seems the Woolwich killers were radicalized as much by the online *Inspire* magazine put out by the al-Qaeda “franchise” as they were via British foreign policy or religious extremism *strictu sensu*. But the so-called “London Nailbomber” and the “Woolwich butchers” did share one key aspect that is now at the forefront of studies of contemporary terrorism; namely, a *radicalizing fraternity*, or what is some-

5 See vol. 2.

times called in the academic literature a “community of support.” These radicalizing fraternities are emphatically *not* involved in any aspects of the terrorist plot or attack. Instead, they are indirect motivators; ideological facilitators, or, in the web-language of today—where the majority of this terrorist community of support now exists—“keyboard warriors.”

Still overlooked to date, Conrad gives an excellent account of just such a radicalizing fraternity in the third chapter of *The Secret Agent*, through a meeting of indolent and hypocritical anarchists gathering at Mr. Verloc's home. These anarchists, in turn, conformed to specific, well-established types: Alexander Ossipon was the criminal womanizer and charlatan, an “ex-medical student without a degree,” Michaelis, described in multiple passages as the “ticket-of-leave apostle,” and the aged “terrorist” and actor, Karl Yundt—a “moribund veteran of dynamite wars.” The trio was rounded out by the foreign agent and police informer, Adolf Verloc.

Negatively rendering this band of armchair revolutionaries, Conrad repeatedly notes that the former three of the former comprised the “more or less mysterious Red Committee [...] for the work of literary propaganda,” whose works were presumably later sold at Verloc's bourgeois-cum-anarchist bookshop. Simply put, Michaelis, Ossipon and Yundt bravely “talk the talk,” but refuse on various grounds to “walk the walk.” In Conrad's tale, tellingly, Yundt had “never in his life raised personally as much as his little finger against the social edifice.” Then, to ensure the reader grasps this hypocrisy:

“I have always dreamed”, he mouthed, fiercely, “of a band of men absolute in their resolve to discard all scruples in the choice of means, strong enough to give themselves frankly the name of destroyers, and free from the stain of that resigned pessimism which rots the world. No pity for anything on earth, including themselves, and death enlisted for good and all in the service of humanity—that's what I would have liked to see.”

Subjects and Occasions

In *The Secret Agent*, all three were taken by surprise by the explosion at Greenwich. None were in on the fictionalized bomb plot. Importantly, however, this trio of propagandists refusing the deed nevertheless helped to legitimize the murderous path ultimately undertaken by Verloc. For up until that pivotal point, it bears remembering:

The part of Mr. Verloc in revolutionary politics having been to observe, he could not all at once, either in his own home or in larger assemblies, take the initiative of action. He had to be cautious.

In this sense Verloc's radicalizing fraternity have their counterparts a century later in the neo-Nazis of the NSM who fired the racist imagination of its regional organizer, David Copeland.

More recently, one could also look to the so-called counter-jihad movement, acting as Breivik's own "wake-up call."⁶ So too with those London bombers in 2005, who found their communities of support in jihadi Islamist narratives in so-called "al-Qaida gyms" and indoctrination centers around Huddersfield, Dewsbury and Beeston in the Northeast of England.

This would also embrace the al-Qaeda affiliated, online *Inspire* magazine, which gave the gristly low-tech means to the two killers of Drummer Lee Rigby in Woolwich last year. These ideological extremists may not be terrorists themselves but, as Conrad shows, were—and indeed, as scholarly literature on terrorism makes clear, remain—instrumental in normalizing acts of asymmetrical terrorist violence.

6 Matthew Feldman, "Viewpoint: Killer Breivik's Links with Far Right," BBC, August 27, 2012, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-19366000>.

The Most Ardent of Revolutionaries

Yet Conrad's greatest contribution to current controversies on terrorism might well be in terms of terrorist profiling. For it is neither The Professor who sets off the bomb, nor the hopelessly compromised Verloc. And it is certainly not the three anarchist wordsmiths. Instead the bomb-carrier and, symbolically, only victim is Verloc's "obedient" brother-in-law, the "delicately honest" Stevie. Yet some literature and mass media commentary on 21st-century terrorism persists in casting the practitioners of this violent tactic as modern-day Professor Moriarties; that is, as evil geniuses with dystopian imaginations. One study from 2012, *Terrorist's Creed*, takes this academic tendency to the breaking point of essentialism, as highlighted by one revealing passage amongst many others:

all terrorism, even separatist or irredentist struggles with a precise political goal, has a transcendent metapolitical dimension, and that however secular the mission is, it can be sacralized to the point of fanaticism and the suppression of empathy with victims in the name of 'freedom' or 'justice' [...] all terrorist violence is both tactical *and* symbolic in its choice of target, since the destruction it carries out is *by definition* a message or 'demonstration' to a target audience, and that the psycho-dynamic process that enabled it to be carried out always involves an inner process of splitting the world into a Manichean struggle between good and evil.⁷

Were this the case, for example, how then does one explain John Gilbert Graham? Graham was responsible for the first mid-air bombing in 1955, which killed 44 people on board—among them the terrorist's mother, targeted for her life insurance (which was, believe it or not, purchased at the airport). There many similar cases like this amongst the 10,000+ cases of terrorism in the online Global Terrorism

7 Roger Griffin, *Terrorist's Creed: Fanatical Violence and the Human Need for Meaning* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012).

Subjects and Occasions

Database—invariably neglected in such hyper-theorized accounts.

Of course, it is true that some recruiters and radicalizers—like The Professor, son of a preacher in *The Secret Agent*—believe an ideologically driven, symbolic terrorist attack could “open the first crack in the imposing front of the great edifice of legal conceptions sheltering the atrocious injustice of society.” And yet, writes Conrad:

The way of even the most justifiable revolutions is prepared by personal impulse disguised into creeds. The Professor's indignation found in itself a final cause that absolved him from the sin of turning to destruction as the agent of his ambition. To destroy public faith in legality was the imperfect formula of his pedantic fanaticism; but the subconscious conviction that the framework of an established social order cannot be effectively shattered except by some form of collective or individual violence was precise and correct. He was a moral agent—that was settled in his mind. By exercising his agency with ruthless defiance he procured for himself the appearance of power and personal prestige. That was undeniable to his vengeful bitterness. It pacified his unrest; and in their own way the most ardent of revolutionaries are perhaps doing no more but seeking for peace in common with the rest of mankind—the peace of soothed vanity, of satisfied appetites, or perhaps of appeased conscience.

In *The Secret Agent*, this “perfect anarchist” represents the life of the mind. Yet the actual bomber is quite literally embodied by the obedient, vulnerable Stevie. Conrad thus reminds us that many of these terrorists are quite the opposite of a mythic, ideological mastermind.

Correspondingly, recent research has shown that a high proportion of “lone wolves” are in fact “lone nuts.” And this goes not only for self-directed terrorists. In her groundbreaking study, *Terror in the Mind of God*, Jessica Stern argues that a leading motive for terrorists is personal or social humiliation.⁸ Many are psychologically unwell, or, quite simply, full

8 Jessica Stern, *Terror in the Name of God: Why Religious Militants Kill* (New York: Ecco, 2004).

of hate—or indeed some other base motive. Terrorists can come just as often, perhaps even mostly, in the form of Stevie.

At heart, ultimately, even Conrad suggested long ago, we should be concerned, but not over-securitized and paranoid, about the moderate threat of contemporary terrorism. In the end, terrorist motivations can be utopian or banal, and are more likely the stuff of modernist fiction than Hollywood blockbusters. Or, to reformulate this with reference to the one genuine, conflicted, pathetic “terrorist” of the novel, “our contemporary,” *The Secret Agent*: “Mr Verloc’s habits of mind [...] were indolent and secret. They refrained from going to the bottom of facts and motives.”

Thomas Merton: Catholic Modernist?

Men become objects and not persons. Now you complain because there is a war, but war is the proper state for a world in which men are a series of numbered bodies.

Thomas Merton, *My Argument with the Gestapo*, 1941 [1969]

§1

The writer-priest Thomas Merton—who took the name Fr. Louis along with a vow of monastic silence, all while writing some three dozen books—seems at first glance little more than a jumble of contradictions. To be fair, that impression is scarcely dispelled upon second or third glance, which is all this article on Merton’s modernism aims to cover. Even Merton’s most informed critics argue that his life and work were filled with “major ironies.”¹ Let us charitably call these squared circles mere paradoxes for the moment, mentioning only the most salient at the outset: he was French-born and British-raised, before becoming something of an American bohemian in New York during the 1930s. He moved from early dalliance with communism to a leftist anti-Marxism during these years, before joining the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance—portentously, on the same day Nazi Germany declared war on the United States, December 10, 1941. After an intense period of “spiritual wrestling,” he took vows at The Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani in the rural Midwest, which he initially regarded as “the center of America.”² Having written a celebrated autobiography about his

1 Dennis Q. McInerney, *Thomas Merton: The Man and His Work* (Washington, D.C.: Consortium Press, 1974), 9.

2 Paul R. Dekar, *Thomas Merton: Twentieth-Century Wisdom for Twenty-First-Century Living* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011), 17.

Catholic conversion, *The Seven Story Mountain*, which sold tens of thousands of copies upon its 1948 release, many of Merton's most influential writings were circulated privately in his later life—as his celebrated *Cold War Letters* covering the year October 1961 to October 1962 attest—to avoid the attentions of Trappist censors. As his official biographer Michael Mott sets out, this was a long-term battle between obedience and conscience as a monk.³

Despite ongoing conflicts with his longest-serving abbot, Dom James Fox, Merton nevertheless submitted to the Catholic hierarchy, even as he was dubbed “Jack Keruoac’s Monastic Elder Brother” for being a “quintessential American outsider who defined himself in opposition to the world around him and then discovered in the alternative values with which he opposed the world a way back into dialogue with it and compassion for it.”⁴ Alongside his sizeable influence upon the latter, through Merton’s lifelong friendship with the concrete poet, Robert Lax, he also came to influence fellow Beat poets Gary Snyder and Lawrence Ferlinghetti—the latter co-editing perhaps the earliest publication on radical ecology in 1961, *The Journal for the Protection of All Living Beings*. Alongside Albert Camus, Allen Ginsberg and several other iconoclasts appearing in the first volume, Merton contributed the poem “Chant to be Used in a Procession around a Site with Furnaces,” “later read by Lenny Bruce in his nightclub act.”⁵ If Bruce was a comic legendary for his obscenity (leading to several arrests), then Merton was his

3 Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (London: Harcourt Brace, 1983), 272ff.

4 Angus Stuart, “Visions of Tom: Jack Kerouac’s Monastic Elder Brother: A Preliminary Exploration,” *The Merton Journal* 8, no. 1 (2001), www.thomasmertonsociety.org.uk/files/public/journal/8-1_VisionsOfTom.pdf.

5 Robert Inchausti, “Thomas Merton, ‘Honorary Beatnik,’” Shambhala, www.shambhala.com/thomas-merton-honorary-beatnik/.