

Beckett to Breivik

An Interview with Matthew Feldman

MATTHEW FELDMAN, JAMES DOWTHWAITE

Matthew Feldman, fittingly for someone who works on the unique, the difficult and the uniquely difficult, has had an unusual career. After completing a PhD on Samuel Beckett's psychological and philosophical sources, he has held roles as a lecturer, reader and professor in modern history at Oxford Brookes, Northampton and Teesside. He remains Emeritus Professor in the History of Ideas, as well as being a Professorial Fellow at the University of York. Feldman was the founder and director of the Centre for Analysis of the Radical Right (CARR). He has published extensively on history, literature and fascism. His monographs include Beckett's Books: A Cultural History of the Interwar Notes (2006), Ezra Pound's Fascist Propaganda, 1935-1945 (2013), and two recent collection of essays, Falsifying Beckett (2015) and Politics, Intellectuals and Faith (2020), as well as numerous articles and edited collections. His third essay collection is due out next year, and his much-anticipated history of fascism will be published by Yale University Press in 2024.

I first met Matthew in 2013, just after the publication of his Pound book, and it was clear then that his careful, and deeply humane, understanding of fascism extended far beyond modernist studies. Since then his foresight and profound understanding of fascist ideology and aesthetics have provided crucial insights into what has been an ongoing political crisis. We met for a beer on Zoom to take stock of his work so far, his thoughts on present crises and to discuss what the humanities have to offer in his area.

James Dowthwaite: So, Matt, the first question is: How do you define your work?

Matt Feldman: Well, we really are jumping in at the deep end! I am first and foremost a cultural historian and I think if I were to characterize my own work—which I am slightly reluctant to do and it may be that I am more comfortable with responsible critics who can do that for me—then I would say that I wish to show that the historian’s tools are of use in literature. My first book, *Beckett’s Books* (2006), was based on an archival analysis of Samuel Beckett and his “interwar notes,” much of which was released as a critical edition by OUP in 2020. My second book, *Ezra Pound’s Fascist Propaganda, 1935-1945*, involved dissecting Pound’s interwar and wartime archives in order to give us a much-neglected picture of Pound. This was not someone who was simply “bad” or “mad” but someone who was a paid-up fascist and very effective fascist propagandist – despite the limitations of Italian Fascist propaganda. This remains, dare I say, very much a minority position. My role in those works was to bring the historian’s tools to literature and now, increasingly, to contemporary events.

JD: As a historian, as a literary historian, what is your primary narrative focus?

MF: I haven’t had the occasion to think reflectively about my work as a whole until the last few years, when I started putting together a couple of collections of my essays. Perhaps the best place to begin would be with my latest collection, *Politics, Intellectuals and Faith* (2020). The editor of that volume, Archie Henderson, a Pound scholar and bibliographer, pointed out that in the collection, the one thing mentioned in each of the two dozen essays is “1945.” 1945 really was the end of one world historical crisis and the glimpse of alternative possibilities, such as the creation of the United Nations and the genuine outlawing of international war. But also, as many people will know, it contained the opening salvos of the Cold War. And so, for me, 1945 really was a kind of inflection point. Of course, we can say it was the end of a global war; it was the end of the most destructive period in recorded human history, and it was a fundamental turning point in many respects. And I really do think that the Second World War, and before that the First World War, really did change how human beings relate to each other—and how we change the world around us. For example, it sounded the death knell for traditional forms of imperialism, even if reality didn’t catch up with colonizing powers for years, and in some cases, decades.

Some say that 9/11 in our lifetime was something of a similar inflection point, but then I really think it is different in many ways insofar as it was a change within one hegemonic power and its closest allies. Obviously, it was the worst and most horrific terrorist attack in history, and led to some quite radical changes in poli-

cies within that hegemonic power and others, with the rest of the world then falling in line or, in the case of two particular countries, Afghanistan and Iraq, being attacked on the basis of that change in policy. So, I do believe that thinking in terms of signal dates is important, although I wouldn't necessarily define my work that way.

JD: How does this relate to current events?

MF: Current events tend to have a historical tail that is traceable today, and I think that's something that is part of the historian's job to reconstruct. Now if you'll forgive me for going off on a slight tangent, we can say that it is a fact that Germany invaded Poland in 1939. We cannot say without caveat, however, that the Second World War lasted from 1939 to 1945, because if you are from Russia, then the great patriotic war started on 22 June 1941, and if you're from the United States then the beginning of World War II is 7 December 1941. Different visions of the war, and of the meaning of 1945, have created different timelines. At the same time, the impossible store of facts requires a historian or critic to order those facts according to their significance so as to create a paradigm for understanding. We find ourselves in a distracted and individualistic age and we need to draw on mutually established facts—facts that we can agree on. In doing so, it is incumbent upon people's literary skills or the evidence that they can bring to bear to make those facts resonant. In the context of what we're talking about today, facts relating to various crises, say the Second World War or the "War on Terror" or January 6, these have a tail that can be reconstructed, factually and empirically. It doesn't mean that these are facts in the way that a scientific experiment demands facts; there is still interpretation invariably freighted into them. This is why I feel strongly the humanities has a key role to play in responding to our present crises, if we grasp a hold of that intersubjectivity and try to make compelling cases based upon the evidence to hand.

JD: Are you framing a paradigm for today? What is the primary paradigm that you are focusing on at the moment?

MF: That's another hard question! I think that my research has turned more squarely towards radical right extremism. That was part and parcel of directing CAAR, which launched in 2018, and grew to be the largest consortium of scholars and practitioners working on right wing extremism today—our aim is to speak to the general public rather than just other specialists. For me, it is a classic example

of this new paradigm. If we go back to the end of the Cold War, there really was a feeling, captured by Francis Fukuyama, that democracy had won. I think that was a strong narrative at the time, and quite popular: it had lots of evidence to support it—as you know, there were more democracies in the 1990s than there were in the 1930s, and obviously many more than there were in the 1830s. And yet, dare I say, a triumphant narrative can also occlude facts—above all, for Fukuyama, “democracies in name only.” Returning to the radical right; or if you like, the post-fascists, they were learning in some respects to trade in their jackboots for suits. They were finding new kinds of language to popularize their message. Umberto Eco famously spoke of “ur-fascism,”¹ but it’s really important to remember that, when he published that very famous essay, Eco was specifically referring to Joerg Haider’s FPÖ in Austria and the Fini’s MSi in Italy. He was alluding to the idea that, in the mid-1990s, these two groups had clearly given up something of the fascist past in order to become mainstream. This helped us to see an alternative paradigm of a contested democracy, of a democracy and its illiberal discontents. What we’re starting to see, I think, particularly in the last five or ten years has been that some of those people who might be considered “not-so-post-fascists” disagree with the political avenue that some of these “post-fascist” parties have taken and turned to political violence and even terrorism. My work has been pretty squarely focused on different forms of neo-Nazi terrorism in recent years, but we could extend that characterization to include radical right terrorism, including someone like Brenton Harrison Tarrant and the awful murders in Christchurch, New Zealand in 2019. He is not a neo-Nazi—a fascist, yes—but those things are not synonymous. My role is to tease out these patterns of extremism, their ugly contours, and try to understand what motivates the people involved.

JD: Is it difficult to get this point across?

MF: Initially and for a long time, I was a voice in the wilderness. In 2009 I coined the term “broadband terrorism,” based on terrorism cases in which I assisted the police. That experience showed me—over a decade ago—that all that a potential radical right terrorist really needed was a computer, a credit card, and a willingness to act as what has sometimes been called a “lone wolf” (or in my preferred term “self-directed” terrorism). For a good decade, notwithstanding obvious horrors like Breivik’s 22 July 2011 bombing and shooting attack in Norway

1. Eco, Umberto. “Ur-Fascism.” *The New York Review*. June 22, 1995.

which killed seventy-seven innocents, this was not an argument people were ready to engage with. The reason for this was that the radical right were supposed to be small, they were supposed to be moving in a kind of defanged political direction—again, this paradigm of suits and euphemism. But there was also, within that culture, a deadly and violent subculture that I warned about for many years.

JD: So what changed?

MF: The attack in Christchurch changed the paradigm for two reasons, and I think it is important to explain these in contrast with Breivik. After his appalling attack, in which most people were killed at close range, and most of them were children, Norway asked the quite understandable question, “How did our society create this monster?” That is a very valid question but it is not something that is particularly applicable to international politics. When the Christchurch attack happened on 15 March 2019, New Zealand did the exact opposite. They asked instead a transnational question: “How did a foreigner come here, acquire weapons, and attack some of our most vulnerable citizens from ethnic and religious minority groups?”

That immediately made it a transnational, even global issue. Not only did they put forward that, in my view, very correct analysis, they went about working, in the first instance, with France at The Global Internet Forum to create something far-sighted called the Christchurch Call, which looks at the way that internet companies have been very lax about their moderation of radical-right extremism. New Zealand also teamed up with the United States at the UN General Assembly in September 2019 to put this on a global footing. This has brought about more change in the last 36 months than we’d seen in understanding and willingness to tackle radical right extremism in the past 36 years. I have played a very small role in this, but I think it is important that intellectuals—which is mostly a derogatory term these days—continue with what Freud called a small but persisting voice, in order to play an important role.

JD: How has this affected your work?

MF: I've moved away—and this is I suppose the short answer to your question from before—from purely academic studies to asking more practitioner- and utilitarian-questions. And although I miss some of the old academic intellectualizing, it's not dead and gone for me; not at all. Instead, it is now part of my attempts to apply these intellectual tools to some ongoing contemporary challenges.

JD: I want to come back to this intellectual and utilitarian distinction in a moment, but first I want to pick up on something. You said that what New Zealand got right is that they treated this as a transnational problem, rather than limiting it to a kind of national debate. I'm guessing the reason for this is that although these individual attacks may be "lone wolves" in terms of their actions, they are networking across nations. In practical terms, how are they doing that?

MF: So, let me come at that in two ways: first, we might return to the intellectual/utilitarian distinction. I feel very strongly about this. My first work on "self-directed" terrorism was a decade ago, and I offered a definition of this growing phenomenon. That was an intellectual endeavor that asked, "What are we looking at?" I think that's really essential, not least of all because article after article, if you google "the myth of lone wolf terrorism," will tell you there is no such thing – since these guys apparently act in concert. Let me explain why this is categorically false, misleading, and intellectually a wrong turn. The person who popularized the phrase "lone wolf" is an American named Ted Kaczynski – who was nicknamed the "Unabomber." Now this person couldn't have been more of a loner: he lived in the wilds of Montana; was in touch with virtually no one and, as many people perhaps know, mailed his bombs to selected targets around the United States. But how was he caught, this most lone of lone wolves? He was apprehended because a family member recognized his handwriting [from his manifesto, printed in the New York Times in 1995]² and turned him in. So even the most alone of solo-actor terrorists has a social network. Human beings are social animals. That's the first point. The second point is that it doesn't actually tell us much of anything that self-radicalizing individuals have some sort of network. Who doesn't have a network? The difference is, for so-called "lone wolf" terrorists, they go through the terrorist cycle logistically alone (this means target surveillance, the purchasing and deployment of weapons,

2. Kaczynski, Theodore. "Industrial Society and Its Future." *The New York Times*. 19 September 1995. (the manifesto was digitized on 26 May 1996).

carrying out the attack, and what is sometimes called “exploitation,” the writing of manifestos, etc.). Conflating these two things is wrong because it suggests that there are simply no “lone wolf” terrorists. I’ve personally seen more than a dozen instances in my own casework. We have to recognize that this is a technique that has become commonplace, and is more prevalent amongst right wing terrorists than any other group.

JD: What are their forums? How are these people in contact with each other?

MF: All of what I’ve just said doesn’t mean that they do not come from what I call a “network of support” of like-minded individuals. Concerning the second part of your question, those individuals have been immensely aided by the internet. That being said, everyone, including everyone reading this interview, has been aided by the internet. Whether for shopping or communication or whatever, it has changed our modern relation to one another. And so it is the same with right wing extremism, but I think arguably even more so as it gave them three things they didn’t have before. If we go back to the 1980s, you couldn’t really stumble across extremist material in the same way. If you wanted, for example, Holocaust denial, you would have to know which newspaper or magazine to subscribe to, or where to find details to order something by mail. The internet changed all that by giving radical right extremists a degree of anonymity, so that they could post online under avatars or “chans” pseudonymously or anonymously. This obviously allows them to conceal who they are, for, instance if they are a family person or come from a “stable” or “mainstream” background. It also provided a degree of permanency. Going back again to the 1980s, most of those magazines would be shut down. Most of those extremist groups would be infiltrated and taken down by the authorities—at least in Europe—so it was very hard to have a degree of permanency from which to look for sources of extremist inspiration. The third and most obvious point is that the internet allowed for global networking. In a pre-internet age, for the most part—and yes, people still wrote letters around the world—but they were mainly organizing in their own town, or region. At this point, by contrast, your best online buddy can be anywhere at all. You are simply on a chat forum or a main social media channel and you can share ideas with someone who may or may not be on your street or they may be on the other side of the world. There is no doubt that through the internet these extremist ideas have expanded.

JD: So does this mean there are actually more extremists than before?

MF: I'm not necessarily convinced that there are *more* extremists than thirty years ago or a hundred years ago, but instead that they are far more visible now. Anybody who has spent any time on social media can testify to that. One of the concerns that analysts like myself and others are trying to highlight is that the more recent profile of these extremists tend to be people who are younger, who are digital natives, and who often first stumble on this material and then go down very dangerous rabbit holes. I think, frankly, that is one of the things that is going to be a persistent challenge for the 21st century. Yes, disinformation, and yes perhaps the way technology is almost becoming a part of us, as it were. But the way that extremist material is out there mere clicks away; is anonymized; and is easy for anyone to get from anywhere around the world—that is new. Your phone today carries more information than Nixon's entire team had at their fingertips when he and his National Security team went to China in 1972.

JD: In this issue, we're focusing on the idea of crisis. And you have addressed this, but I want to divide it into three different questions. The first one is that it strikes me that the notion of the "lone wolf" is not just a political crisis but an individual crisis. In *Politics, Intellectuals and Faith*, you write about a number of individuals, from Pound to Heidegger to the "lone wolf" phenomenon, and—of course—Anders Behring Breivik. To what extent does the crisis of the individual person play a role in your analysis?

MF: I feel that it couldn't be more important. Do we not live in the most individualistic age that has ever existed? It is hard to think of a more narcissistic age. By this I mean even more than the technological issues that we just touched upon; we have the ideas of fame, of celebrity, of the individual who—almost like Nietzsche's *Übermensch*—rises above "the herd" to make their name in the world. Your TikTok or Twitter profile, if you get it right, can blow up and give you individual fame. I think one of the reasons that so-called "lone wolf" terrorism is going to be the challenge of the 21st century, from a counter-terrorism perspective (there are plenty of other potential crises from other perspectives, from environmental crises to the Damoclean sword of nuclear weapons that we'll live under for as long as we are a species),³ is that this crisis of the individual is a crisis of a lack of solidarity. Part of this drive comes from a totally

3. This interview was conducted two months before Vladimir Putin invaded Ukraine, and before Russian posturing on nuclear weapons brought this particular crisis to the forefront of our minds.

upstanding place: it is totally understandable that groups that have been marginalized and underrepresented, and victims of racism, homophobia, and more, that these individuals advocate as groups for greater representation. The downside with some of this, it seems to me, however, is that it is not a robust basis for solidarity, not a basis, needed now as much as ever, for coalition building. And that's one of the problems I see in an individual age: it kind of elbows out solidarity and an understanding of the other. The idea of cancelling someone for a bad statement, rather than, say, a series of bad statements or an intolerant mindset which is fundamentally different—it folds in neatly with this individual age where everything depends on exactly how you phrase something in the moment. This feels to me fundamentally anti-intellectual. This not a defense of extremism; of course—my entire career has been built upon countering extremism and fighting for equality. But I do wonder if the individual age has room for genuine solidarity and reflective understanding. And by this I don't mean the fake, shallow “hashtag solidarity,” which is really just more individual performatively.

JD: To follow up from that: you have this alienation, this individualism, this lack of solidarity, that might create the conditions for radicalization. How does this typically—and obviously I am unfairly asking you to collate a whole series of very specific cases—lead to radicalization?

MF: Well, first of all, for most people it doesn't. Most people reject the various forms of radicalization. Second, we almost always see a moment of psychological crisis, whether from without, such as someone being beaten up or bullied—and I've seen that in a number of cases in which I've assisted the CPS—or it could be a psychological crisis triggered by unwellness. People can be terrorists and psychologically unwell—it is emphatically not an either/or situation. It can also be a psychological inflection point, based on something as trivial as you might read in the newspaper or online. There are any number of pathways to radicalization. Certain intellectual approaches get this the wrong way around. If you take the approach of interviewing every terrorist that ever attempted to undertake acts of political violence, then you will find that every single one of them has a pattern of radicalization; they all go from not being radicals to being radicals. However, if we turn the telescope around the other way, it becomes clear that this a completely wrong-headed picture. Most people, even extremists, do not have a “ladder of radicalization”—a fashionable theory in recent years that suggested there was a “conveyer belt” toward violent extremism.

I think a much better, more instructive metaphor is that of an elevator—people can go up, go down, and many get off at a particular “story” or “floor.” They often do not go all the way to the very bottom. Radicalization is uneven; even the patterns of radicalization are uneven. It is only when people reach the end point of radicalization that you can look back and identify when they move into a space of political violence. For most people, by contrast, that isn’t the typical narrative. Often they dabble in extremist ideas, accepting some, rejecting others, then step away—perhaps something in their life changes, maybe they get a new partner or a job. All sorts of banal things can turn them away from extremism. This invariably leads to the conclusion that profiling can result in issues with political analysis. For example, what we do see is an obvious correlation of people engaged in terrorism who have mental health problems; say autism or ADHD, if we take the example of the people overrepresented. But if we were to seek to profile them, we would find that an estimated 1 in 20 million people with mental health issues turn to terrorism. We really shouldn’t profile groups; it is not helpful and sometimes even counterproductive. We need to understand this as nothing but another potential accelerator—especially for historically marginalized communities—when we should be thinking more seriously about pastoral care. To return to an earlier point in our discussion, our individualistic age is good at tearing things down rather than building sustainably. We are not good at proposing workable solutions.

JD: The third question I have relating to your analysis is how you see this on the societal level.

MF: I hesitate to use the word “pattern” but there are definite clues as to how radicalization might develop. There is one obvious way—disinformation. Thirty years ago, when I was something of a Chomskian firebrand, I was very against the idea of gatekeepers like producers and editors on news shows, part of whose job it is to keep debate within certain parameters. This criticism may be valid to a large extent, but I never really thought about what happens when we get rid of them. We can look at social media, which often resembles a bear pit. Take the case of Stewart Rhodes, leader of the Oath Keepers who were at the Capitol insurrection on 6 January 2021, who has recently been charged with seditious conspiracy, which is very rare in the United States. His is a classic case of disinformation—amplified by Trump via Twitter in the run-up to that democratic catastrophe—claiming that the election was “stolen.” This poses the question of who we can trust, where we get our information from, and about the difference

between disinformation and reliable information. It is going to be a continuing challenge to master digital literacy—until we return to what has been taught in the humanities from the year dot, which is sifting information—sorting out what is good from what sounds good. There is also a related issue of the lack of political trust. This is an orphan with many fathers but disinformation clearly has played a role here as well.

JD: I think the question that most readers will have is: how does your work relate to the events on January 6, 2021?

MF: What was interesting about January 6 for me—I was the director of CAAR at the time—is that we as an organization sent out only one letter of alarm, and that was in October 2020 ahead of the US presidential election. The warning signs were there and were already blinking red. How did we divine that? We had the letter printed and covered in the press on October 31, 2020, and we addressed certain trends, two of which in particular I found alarming. For the first time in political history, a sitting president ran on no platform. The platform of the Republican Party was: whatever Trump says, we go with. The second was the diverse strands of the radical right enthusiastically pledging fealty to Trump, as reflected in his famous remark during the presidential debate with Biden: “Proud Boys, stand back and stand by.” When we look at January 6 we see the outcome of the disinformation was a number of people turning up at the Ellipse for speeches trailed by Trump et. al. It was not just Trump repudiating the election.

JD: Can we then define what happened as terrorism?

MF: Here again, binaries are unhelpful: was it terrorism or not? We need to further deconstruct this. I’m not sure all were extremists—though they certainly engaged in an extremist act—even if all were fed lies and disinformation. No doubt many storming the Capitol were potentially conspiracy theorists, or ignorant, or whatever we want to call them; but within the context of the event, there were a number of organized radical right groups present. Alongside the Proud Boys, most notorious are the Oath Keepers but also the III Percenters. They were on the margins of the event, worked in teams, and seemed to be egging people on during the day, radicalizing others. But even within that group of right-wing extremists, there was a smaller group who breached the Capitol and obstructed the running of Congress’ democratic duty. Still more, within that group there was a tiny group—or perhaps a “lone wolf,” who has not been identified—laying pipe bombs

around Washington (which, by the grace of God, did not go off). So what we see are extremist groups within the mass of protestors, at least one of whom was attempting an act of terrorism. This is just one example of how we can disaggregate things and think carefully about the sum of the parts in relation to the whole. However, it is no overstatement to say democracy was on the line that day and it is an ongoing crisis that has not yet entirely abated.

JD: So, thinking from a literary perspective: What are their texts?

MF: I'm not at all convinced these are deep readers. Instead, they are getting cues from right-wing populists such as Glenn Beck, Alex Jones and Tucker Carlson. The basic narrative is an idealized, nostalgic past, when the United States was supposedly white, heteronormative and without crises. This imagined past conceals as much as it reveals. There is also a fascist, neo-Nazi canon and this does percolate into populism, but most often radical right extremists are reading what we are all reading: the daily news and social media feeds. For me, the problem too rarely acknowledged is that radical right extremism abuts the mainstream in a way that Islamism in "the west" never could achieve. Now, it can be hard to break this down and identify who is a radical and who is on the fringes of the mainstream. These do not lend themselves to clear factual answers, but demand a holistic humanities approach, drawing upon evidence and judicious interpretation.

JD: It is not your role to develop policies, but I wonder if you might have some ideas about what approach policymakers should take. How should they be thinking about this?

MF: The American experience of counter-extremism has been to take a sledgehammer approach—this kind of thinking leads to Guantanamo Bay. We can, however, look to members of these at-risk communities. It may well be that even celebrity might help—we may need to look to so-called "influencers" attractive to certain groups, not the ones who are attractive to the state—too much leading by the state can rightly appear like top-down propaganda. If we want a more civil debate, and to potentially change minds, we cannot simply call people racist idiots either and dismiss them—this can't and won't work. We need a subtler approach. Radical right extremism is one of the great crises faced by American democracy today. In response, we need to provide groups that are potential targets for radicalization with trusted information from trusted figures. That might

be firefighters or policeman or celebrities—I'm actually thinking of NASCAR drivers or wrestlers who could be enjoined to suggest that equality is a prized American value today. Simply put, we need influence without propaganda. The individualistic poisons that got us into this mess ironically may also be one way out of it.

JD: To ask a more myopic question: how should literary scholars think about this?

MF: You and I spoke before the interview about literariness and close reading. In many posts and texts by radical right extremists, one finds recurrences, and we need to be attentive to wider patterns, structures, symbols, codes. Alec March, another scholar of Pound and much else besides, refers to "Aesopian language" in Pound's work [this is a symbolic language or code which obscures meaning from censors]. We need scholars who can trace and analyze symbols, metaphors and allegories, not least because radical right communication is often clothed in euphemized language. Closer and better reading can aid us in this work, and show us the pitfalls of conspiratorial mindsets.

JD: To conclude, then, I have another question from a literary perspective. Let us say that a literary student is reading this interview, and is interested in what advice you would have for them, considering your career path. What would you tell them?

MF: Going from a PhD on Samuel Beckett to counter terrorism is, admittedly, not a usual pattern. Speaking more generally though, there is something that academia does not do nearly enough: it should remind scholars that they have transferable skills. It's precisely the message we give to students but too rarely apply to ourselves. When I was in academia full-time, I felt there was a narrow limit of skills I could apply to the non-academic world. Now I'm in a position to say that those skills are precisely what we need to counter radical right extremism—whether it is writing for a general audience or looking at the genealogy of texts and the intellectual histories of these movements; these are the tools we need to fully understand our overlapping crises, and we need people going back to both trace and parse the ideologies of extremism. The future feels less closed for me because the everyday skills we get in an academic setting are widely applicable. There is a wide world hungry for people who value reflection, who have textual and digital literacy, who can sort out fact from falsehood—and the world more needs them. Our beleaguered polities around the world are crying out for just that.

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