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Coherent Incoherence. An Anthropology of Far-right Morality

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Abstract

In this article, I aim to contribute to the vibrant development of the anthropology of morality by examining the ethical-moral upbringing of the members of a far-right movement. In other words, I focus on a community built on ethical and moral convictions that numerous observers are likely to consider unethical and immoral. Drawing on my research with youth activists, I demonstrate what they find appealing about the radical nationalist, illiberal agenda that their movement espouses, and what a particular take on morality and ethics has to do with it. In doing so, I wish to make both a theoretical and a methodological contribution. In using the notion of «coherence», I reflect on production and performance of moral rules in the context of a community, and on the tension between different value systems that the analysis of such settings demonstrates. Further, I use the reflections on moral coherence to reflect on the limits and affordances of studying morality ethnographically.

Keywords: Far right, morality, politics, coherence, antiliberalism

Coerente incoerenza. Un'antropologia della moralità di estrema destra

In questo articolo, cerco di contribuire al prolifico dibattito dell'antropologia della morale esaminando la formazione etico-morale dei membri di un movimento di estrema desra. In altre parole, mi concentro su di una comunità costruita su convinzioni etiche e morali che molti osservatori sono propensi a considerare immorali. Basandomi su di una ricerca condotta su giovani attivisti, mostro cosa trovano attraente dell'agenta radicalmente nazionalista e illiberale che il loro movimento sostiene, e quale sia la rilevanza di una particolare prospettiva su morale ed etica. In questo modo, desidero portare un contributo sia teorico che metodologico. Usando la nozione di «coerenza», rifletto sulla produzione e sulla performance di regole morali nel contesto di una specifica comunità e sulla tensione tra diversi

sistemi di valori che l'analisi di tale contesto evidenzia. Inoltre, utilizzo le riflessioni sulla coerenza morale per indagare i limiti e le possibilità dello studio etnografico della morale.

Parole chiave: estrema destra, morale, politica, coerenza, antiliberalismo

Introduction

«We are simply different» is a statement that I heard in numerous contexts, and different languages, during several years of research on far-right youth activism. While making this statement in a very affirmative manner, my interlocutors – mostly young men – struggled when trying to elaborate what they meant by «different» or how they «differed». It was easier for them to say who was «different» from them – namely, members of mainstream society, and especially its young representatives. They saw the latter as passive, indifferent, uprooted, and damaged by the ideology of liberalism and the effects of globalization. When describing themselves, however, the activists I talked to certainly did not hesitate to portray themselves as an absolute opposite (that is, as active and engaged, as having a sense of belonging and responsibility), but above all as focused on values such as the ability to respect and maintain order, punctuality, keeping quiet (when necessary), and respecting hierarchies. They would say, for example, «We enter a disco… and you can see that we act differently», or, «Members of our groups know when you need to take a broom and do a clean-up».

To the far-right activists I got to know, qualities of this kind constitute a basis of the moral-ethical make-up of a militant. The movements I studied see themselves as educational-cultural, rather than political, and emphasize the importance of inculcating in the young generation of militants a set of rules and values. Drawing inspiration from fascism and kindred radical ideologies, and claiming that they adapt its elements to the new sociopolitical circumstances, they emphasized the importance of building «new men» – carrying out an «anthropological revolution» before embarking on the political one.

Is their focus surprising? On the one hand, when reading the list of the desired qualities that apparently characterize an «ideal militant», one can easily picture rows of fascist militants – marching in order, respecting their leaders, and conveying uniformity. After all, such characteristics do correspond with an image of authoritarian personality that political ideologies such as fascism promoted. On the other hand, whenever the question of the far-right or fascist morality appears in the public discourse, the chief focal point is principles which tend to be seen as a negation of the values

widely accepted in so-called Western societies, which we could label «illiberal» or «antiliberal»: intolerance, limitation of personal freedom, rejection of the principle of equality (presuming, of course, that «far-right morality» is considered at all, and not seen as a contradiction in terms). Undoubtedly, due to the fact that in recent years we have become accustomed to news on the far right's violence against migrants or their homophobic statements, it is hard to consider that their moral-ethical preoccupations include keeping the headquarters clean or a commitment to regular participation in martial-arts training; or that what they learn during preparatory courses are elements of Hinduism and Eastern Orthodox tradition. How, then, to explain the importance of a specific moral-ethical upbringing within far-right movements, without, on the one hand, taking the commitment to such principles at face value and, on the other hand, attempting to take the research participants (in this case far-right activists) seriously?

In this article, I aim to contribute to the vibrant development of the anthropology of morality by examining the ethical-moral upbringing of the members of far-right movements, using as a lens the notion of coherence. In activists' narratives, a person who is coherent consistently articulates and lives by certain values, strives to achieve clear goals, and behaves in a manner consistent with their chosen identity or identities: that of a radical nationalist, a patriot, a Catholic, a Christian. These identities correspond with a certain ethical system, and these different ethical systems may sometimes overlap and sometimes come into conflict. Further, to be coherent does not mean that one never changes one's views; as a matter of fact, such a change may be considered proof of coherence. Coherence is thus often invoked precisely when a person's situation and actions appear contradictory (incoherent) to an outside observer. Drawing on my research with youth activists and on theoretical discussions within the anthropology of morality, I show why the notions of both «coherence» and «coherent incoherence» help us to better understand the ways in which moral norms are inculcated and negotiated.

I proceed in the following manner. First, I briefly refer to the scholarly debates on fascist morality and inquire into the implications of these findings for anthropology. This allows me to move to the anthropology of morality and to offer some reflections on key issues we encounter when linking together the focus on fascism with the theoretical-methodological toolkit developed within this field. I highlight two such issues: the problem of studying morals without moralizing (Fassin 2008) and the question of freedom and reproduction of norms. I then illustrate these issues by presenting

some material from an ethnographic study that I have been conducting since 2016: first, a biographical account of one far-right activist, and then some scenes featuring the movement she belongs to. While my broader project tackles transnational networking and different national movements – Italian, Polish and Hungarian – in this article I focus predominantly on the Polish far-right movement National Radical Camp (*Obóz Narodowo-Radykalny*, ONR), only sparingly making some comparative points to underscore broader trends and co-inspirations between different nationalist movements.

Before moving forward, I would like to clarify the way I understand and use several terms. I describe the movements I studied using – depending on the context – three different terms. The most general term is «far right». I consider this to be the best available umbrella term for identifying those actors that justify a broad range of policy positions for socioeconomic issues on the basis of nationalism and national belonging (see Halikiopoulou 2018; Pirro 2022). Second, I use the term «radical nationalist» to refer to far-right variants that link the nationalist agenda with an anti-communist and anti-capitalist rhetoric, proposing a sort of «third way» socioeconomic order. This is also the emic term that the Polish movement ONR (the main protagonist of this article) adopts most frequently. Third, in some contexts, I employ the term «fascist», which I understand as a form of revolutionary radical nationalism (Mosse 1999). I use the term when talking about the concrete historical manifestations of fascism that contemporary activists draw on. I acknowledge that the definitions of «fascism» and «radical nationalism» can be seen as congruent, yet I distinguish between them to best render the terms used by my research participants (see the section «An ethnography of bad morality» for more details).

Fascists as moral subjects

Unlike anthropologists, who are newcomers to fascist studies, historians and philosophers have long been preoccupied with the problem of fascist morality. Broadly speaking, they have sought to understand what made brutal policies, bloody wars, extermination and genocide possible. The vast majority of works address Nazism, considered to be the most extreme form of fascism. The underlining question of many of these works has been whether it is even possible to talk about «morality» in such a context. A negative answer to this question – the tendency to represent Nazis as deprived of any morality or as espousing a «perverted» morality – persi-

sted for a long time (Kunze 2018: 215-216)[1]. A common feature of such accounts was the view of Nazis as inhuman, bestial monsters. It was only recently that a new wave of studies began to question such approaches. Historians such as Claudia Koonz (2005) emphasized that rather than approaching Nazis/fascists as immoral and inhuman, we need to ask how they redefined and understood the very meanings of «moral» and «human». Further, scholars inquired into the broader context of Nazi/fascist ideas: colonialism, racism, eugenics, and even the complicated heritage of the Enlightenment[2], elements of which Nazis and fascists so strongly opposed.

In so doing, scholars not only asked about what prompted people to be violent, or «why did they kill?», but posed fundamental questions about the inculcation of and compliance with moral norms, the relationship between individual and collective values, competing moral systems, as well as the possibility of (individual and collective) resistance against a moral system one does not accept or wants to break free from. Further, they demonstrated that attempts at presenting Nazis as demonic and abnormal were often meant to underscore the difference between the perpetrators and the rest of the (innocent) society, and ignore the question of complicity and co-responsibility.

Clearly, historians and philosophers have been asking questions that scholars working in the field of anthropology of morality/ethics have also been preoccupied with. Why, then, do relatively few works in this field tackle the problems such as «far-right morality»? The answer to this question relates, at least partly, to the second observation made above: while decades ago a particular representation of Nazis served to exculpate the rest of society and present its members as profoundly different, today's reluctance to engage with far-right actors may be explained by our (anthropologists' but also the broader audience's) unwillingness to recognize some troublesome affinities between far-right actors and the rest of the society. I have discussed this problem elsewhere (Pasieka 2024), arguing that the reluctance to study the far right ethnographically results from the fact that far-right militants and supporters appear at once too distant and too close. Engaging with

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1 Such approaches were quite common, even though in the decades following the Second World War scholars emphasized the ordinariness rather than monstrosity of Nazis (e.g. Mayer 1955). Hannah Arendt, in her *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, described Nazis as "terrifyingly normal" and as resembling clowns rather than monsters.

2 On the heritage of the Enlightenment in the context of fascism, see e.g. Mosse 1999.

the far right thus often means facing the fact that ideas and values deemed «far-right» or «fascist» are embedded in *our* everyday practices, values, and political institutions, as well as realizing that it is much easier to talk about racist movements than to acknowledge to what extent access to education, healthcare, and opportunity continue to attest to racial difference.

This problem is not limited, however, to the kind of politics I am describing here. Anthropology of morality tends to neglect not only the far right but numerous other «non-sympathetic» actors: political and religious extremists of various hues, the military, gang members, people involved in ritualized acts of violence, to name but a few. Doubts over whether it is possible to study people who commonsense suggests should be defined as «immoral» persist, even though numerous anthropologists have argued to the contrary. For example, in engaging with Susan Harding's seminal work on «repugnant others», Webb Keane observes (2014: 444) that «an anthropology that confines its efforts only to understanding those of whom the anthropologist approves, and ignores what Susan Harding (1991) called 'the repugnant other,' is hardly worthy of the name. It will certainly leave out of its purview a large part of the range of actually existing human realities». Similarly, Didier Fassin (2008) argues for an anthropology «beyond good and evil» and the need to takes moralities as an object of study, no matter what kind of morality or whose morality we are talking about. The tendency to focus on «the oppressed rather than the oppressors, the poor rather than the rich, the dominated classes» is strongly criticized by Wiktor Stoczkowski, who states emphatically that «moral anthropology runs the risk of remaining limited to phenomena morally approved by ordinary thought, to the detriment of those that do not automatically benefit from the same status». For «if there is a 'moral economy' in anthropology, it is also one of a preferential investment in the study of topics offering a social recognition return value proportional to the sympathy that is granted to them out of hand» (2008: 349). In this paper, as in my other works (Pasieka 2024), I strive to respond to these calls by examining far-right activists' conceptualizations of morality and ethics and how these renderings relate to their views on politics and society and their goals as movements.

An ethnography of «bad» morality

In discussing the terms I employ, I emphasized that naming and labeling is quite challenging in research on the far right. In the course of my fiel-

dwork, I have engaged in numerous conversations in which my attempts to understand how activists define themselves were met with resistance. When I asked what terms best describe them, I would hear, first, that they were not fascist as fascism is an «outdated» concept, used by their proponents to discredit them, and that drawing inspiration from fascism – as they proudly do – does not mean «copying» it. Further, they would claim that they are not right-wing or at least not completely right-wing, and fear the term «right» due to the connotations with the neoliberal right that they despise, seeing themselves as the aforementioned third-way alternative; hence the preference for radical nationalism. Finally, they would always emphasize that they differ from political parties and that they constitute *communities.*

More precisely, they like to see themselves as *ethical communities*. This is a term I first heard in Italy, but which ONR members gladly accepted as perfectly capturing their self-understanding and their goals: to educate a new generation, in the spirit of a particular ethics and morality, and through cultural upbringing. It is a notion that bears a resemblance to some interwar fascist movements, especially Corneliu Zelea Codreanu's legionary movement, which put a strong emphasis on spirituality and ethical upbringing (see Clark 2015; Haynes 2008). The idea of «ethical communities» presumes ethics to be a broad concept – it can be understood as a way of modeling proper behavior, as an approach to other people, as a «style of life», as a set of binding rules – and, crucially, it implies the community to be a locus of ethics. This fact has important implications for examining the far right's critique of liberalism (especially individualism).

In the ethnographic part of this article, I strive to zoom in on such community moments and on the importance of the community for individual members. When discussing the activists' subjectivities and the system of norms and values they claim to adhere to, I use «morality» interchangeably with «ethics». I made this choice for two reasons. First, although some anthropologists suggest that it is important to establish a distinction between societal convention/constraints (morality) and individual freedom/choice (ethics), such a differentiation does not make much sense in the context of my research. Rather, I find it crucial to emphasize the tension between norms held by a collectivity and individuals' choice to obey them, challenge them or diverge from them. To me, this tension does not indicate a tension between morality and ethics, but rather shows that understandings

of «collective» and «individual», as of «constraint» and «choice», are contextual and entangled (see Miller & Lukes 2022).

Second, my research demonstrates that we need to consider different «moralities» and «ethical systems». Activists may evoke their community's «ethics» in one context, in another stress «Christian ethics», in another still refer to a philosopher or fascist ideologue they esteem, and in another mention «universal rules». If individual/collective norms interact, overlap or clash, the same is true for different moral/ethical systems. Third, I also find problematic the distinction between deliberate and non-deliberate modes of pursuing moral lives. The discussions on morality and ethics carried out by anthropologists frequently picture the former as unconscious following of moral rules, and the latter as conscious reflecting of acts. For instance, James Laidlaw understands (2014: 23) as ethics «the capacity to reflect and criticize, to imagine other and higher standards than those that are prevalent in the surrounding society», while Jarrett Zigon claims (2009: 261) that ethics is what is done when one calls morality into question. Again, this distinction is hard to uphold in the context of my research. Far-right activists persistently criticize certain moral/ethical systems: they attack «liberal morality» or «liberal-left progressivism», while simultaneously emphasizing the superiority of their movements' ethics, an ethics that they *willingly* subscribe to and consider absolutely *binding*. Thus, their choice (or «reflective act») does not entail a rejection of a collective moral system in favor of an individualistic, freely, deliberately crafted one, but rather a substitution of one system of norms for another.

One of the goals of my article is thus a theoretical one: I aim to show how a study of far-right morality contributes to the broader theoretical discussion within anthropology of morality and ethics. In considering the centrality of the discourse of *community*, I demonstrate how a hierarchically organized, tight community affects thinking about and performing moral rules, and, conversely, in what way the performance of rules is constitutive of that community. The second goal is to provoke, rather than to answer, an epistemological question: What are the limits of studying morality and ethics? I mentioned above that it is by the very choice of research subjects that we establish who can engage in moral reasoning and who can «have» a moral universe, and some actors tend to be granted that right more often than others. However, in pondering the limits of ethnography, I also wish to ask what kind of insights into morality we, as ethnographers, can provide beyond examining how ethical/moral choices are discussed,

negotiated, reinforced in a community setting. Can we make some major claims as to what these choices *are* or *were*?

The ethnographic insights that I use to illustrate these issues come from my research with the Polish movement ONR. The ONR dates to the 1930s. Banned under communism, it was reestablished in the early 1990s and has been functioning since then with variable success and energy. Contemporary activists are proud of the movement's roots in the interwar era and emphasize that, while drawing inspiration from fascism, the ONR ideologues of the time were designing their own political program based on radical nationalism[3]. Apart from being the source of symbols and slogans and inspirations for the contemporary ONR, the prewar predecessor constitutes an object of interesting comparisons. First, although now as then these movements exist in the public imaginary primarily as a violent mob marching through the cities, students and well-educated people have constituted their base (Krzywiec 2019: 632). Second, their impact on political life has been marginal as well as overstated. If the ONR can be said to play a role, it is mostly by providing an alibi for other right-wing parties, which also do not refrain from nationalistic rhetoric[4], but use the ONR to differentiate themselves from the «extremists». Third, there is a continuity in terms of the ideological agenda: the ONR strongly emphasizes the attachment to Christian, and more specifically Catholic tradition and the idea of a «Polish Catholic state»; an ethnic conceptualization of national communities[5]; the importance of the discourse on the «normal», «natural» family, and implicitly on traditional gender roles (and hierarchies); a very strong anti-communist and anti-capitalist orientation; illiberalism, broadly understood – at the political, economic and cultural levels. Finally, a key ideological aspect, linking various dimensions, is radical antisemitism. For interwar ONR activists, Jews constituted *the* enemy of the «Polish nation». Exclusionary rhetoric, discrimination and violence against Jews had been carried out on economic, political and racial grounds. Antisemitic tropes were also very common in their critique of the modern (capitalist)

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[3] Historians of the interwar period agree that seeing the ONR only through the prism of fascism is limiting, as it is limiting to see the ONR as *the* Polish fascism, which constitutes a much broader phenomenon (Krzywiec 2019).

[4] This tendency has been visible in recent years especially in the political discourse on migration.

[5] As I explain in my recent monograph, this aspect has slowly begun to be contested by some group leaders, who claim that it is possible to «become» a Pole.

world. Although the present-day ONR claims to have cut ties with that «tradition», the impact of interwar antisemitic slogans and a tendency to use various social, political, and economic phenomena and institutions («Brussels», «capitalists», «Euroatlantic lobby») as code for Jews is widespread and their use during demonstrations has had legal consequences. It ought to be added, however, that the contemporary ONR seems to be more divided when it comes to antisemitism, with an increasing number of members rejecting it as «primitive» and «denigrating» for the movement, and/or distinguishing between antisemitism and criticism of Israel[6].

In terms of the movement's organization, members are usually in their twenties and thirties, and predominantly male. The movement is divided into regional branches (*brygady*), led by regional leaders, and at the national level it is headed by a board composed of three people. It organizes a variety of events: from commemorations for soldiers killed during the Second World War, through martial-arts training, to blood donation drives. The character of events at least in part corresponds with specific regional needs and the demographics that dominate in a given chapter; these might be students in one case, and soccer fans (or «ultras») in another. Generally, the movement's demographics are quite diverse, and during an event one is as likely to sit at a table with a lawyer, a bartender, a forester, a history student, or a well-off entrepreneur. Generally speaking, the kind of activities I have just listed as well as the facts regarding the movement's demographics are not something the movement is known for in Poland. If it features in the media, this is because of the demonstrations and marches it organizes and the court cases in which the ONR had to account for antisemitic and racist slogans which continue to be a part of such demonstrations.

Considering the numerous important ethnographies of the far right (in its various manifestations) and discussions on methodological and ethical challenges such research implies, I do not wish to repeat here the arguments on why such research is both needed and possible; or how difficult it is to establish and maintain rapport and, simultaneously, how surprising that rapport might be at times (e.g., Ezekiel 1995; Pilkington 2016; Riccardi-Swartz 2022; Shoshan 2016; Pasieka 2019; 2024). In presenting my material, I am simply including some comments and reflections which show what I meant to do this research. I emphasize «some», as describing

[6] Similarly to the movements they are friendly with abroad, the ONR has been sympathizing with the Palestinian cause.

in detail what listening to antisemitic comments or homophobic rhetoric has meant to me in the course of this research, and how hard «exercises in understanding» were in such contexts, would transform this piece into a kind of auto-ethnography that I do not wish to write. I shall therefore limit myself here to two observations. First, despite the emotional and psychological costs of this research, I consider that ethnography – understood here as a specific method of knowledge production – provides us with unique insights into far-right worldviews *and* how to challenge them, without falling into the «us/them» trap which dangerously reproduces the far-right rhetoric. Second, my study shows the necessity to move beyond the somewhat worn-out notion of empathy as a prerequisite of ethnographic practice. Following Christian Giordano (1998), I find the Weberian concept «Verstehen» – a combination of «understanding» and «explanation» – to be a better epistemological and analytical tool than attempts to «try to walk in someone's shoes». In other words, the fact I do not wish to walk in the shoes of the far-right activists did not prevent me from walking alongside them in their marches, in an attempt to understand what they do, why they do it and what meaning they give to it.

Becoming an activist

In the fieldnotes from my meeting with Janka, a thirty-year-old ONR member, I find the following passage: «It was one of the most difficult conversations I have had [in the course of this project]. 'Small talk' was out of the question, I felt like I was interrogating her. I kept asking one question after another as her answers were so short». We met in a small café in Krakow, near to a busy intersection, and in the frequent moments of silence she stared at the passers-by and city traffic. A few years after that encounter, I still remember my uneasiness about Janka's shyness. Looking back, I realize that she simply contrasted with the majority of my interlocutors – male activists – who tended to convey confidence and were very keen to share information about their movements, activities and mission. And yet that difficult conversation is one of those I have returned to numerous times, as it has inspired a lot of my thinking about far-right morality.

I met Janka for the first time during a gathering of the Krakow section of ONR, the very first one I attended. The section leader introduced me as a researcher working on a book on the «national question» and emphasized I could be trusted – which likely meant I was not a journalist striving to

discredit them or a secret services informer[7]. The gathering took place in the movement's headquarters – a small garage transformed into a meeting place, filled with chairs, a table, a library of «nationalist thought», and portraits of far-right leaders. The event was divided into two parts. The first featured a lecture on philosophy, discussing the idea of beauty according to Aristotle. The second, shorter one was devoted to organizational matters. One of the issues discussed was a Christmas celebration, and the section leader expressed hope that the two female members would take care of food. Janka and her colleague nodded politely, without saying a word. I approached Janka after the meeting was over, asking if we could meet privately; she just nodded politely.

On the day of our meeting, Janka was waiting for me in front of the café we chose. She differed from the people passing by. On a hot summer day, she was wearing a dark knee-long skirt, a buttoned-up elegant blouse, a leather handbag and pumps. Her image made me think about photos from the interwar period, perhaps an unsurprising reference considering the ideological horizon she and her colleagues find most inspiring.

We began our conversation by discussing what had prompted Janka to join the ONR. Contrary to other activists, who struggled to provide a definite response, talking about the «wish to be active» and by and large making evident the randomness of their choice (see Pasieka 2022), Janka had a ready answer. She described an event that had occurred in 2015 and had turned out to be life-changing for her: Robert Winnicki, the then head of a Polish far-right party, had rejected an invitation to join the president and other politicians to light Hanukkah candles in the presidential palace. He had justified his refusal by saying that he also does not celebrate Ramadan or the Hindu festival Holi, and that being faithful to the first commandment («Thou shalt have no other gods before me») precluded his participation. «He was the only one to get out of line», Janka emphasized, «Every Catholic should have behaved this way». In describing Winnicki's act in terms of «courage», she emphasized that the willingness and necessity to stand for what one believes in was the main motivation behind joining a nationalist movement.

Janka established contacts with the ONR a few months later, and after a year of preparatory courses became a full member. When I asked, «Why

[7] Stories of such experiences – with the people doing research undercover or providing a fake identity – were reported to me by all the groups I studied.

the ONR?», she replied succinctly: «It is less democratic, more hierarchical, and I really like it. Other movements [active in Poland] are in fact national democrats». Talking to Janka, I could see how seriously she took her course and the exam. Today, not only is she truly well-versed in nationalist thought but she regularly expands her knowledge on it and publishes her reflections in the movement's periodical and in the form of blog posts.

Indeed, a good chunk of our talk regarded various nationalist leaders and ideologues, especially from the interwar era, and particularly those that Janka considers to be important moral exemplars. The list of inspiring figures and the commentaries she provided me with are a good example of what I describe elsewhere as «coherent incoherence» (Pasieka 2024).

One such example is the understanding of *uncompromisingness*, which Janka considered the highest possible value and, quoting the episode from the Hanukkah ceremony, described as a quality that she looked for and inspired to when joining a nationalist movement. However, in talking about «moral exemplars» from the past, she mentioned Jan Mosdorf, one of the founders of the interwar ONR. She described him as an intellectually inspiring figure and a leader who knew the *importance of compromise.* In Janka's view, Mosdorf proved this when, after the interwar ONR divided, he refused to take part and did not support any of the factions.

The second example was Bolesław Piasecki, likewise an interwar ONR leader. Unlike Mosdorf, who died at Auschwitz, Piasecki survived the Second World War. A virulent anti-communist, after the war, when Poland became one of the Soviet Union's satellite states, he began cooperating with the new communist authorities, which allowed him to run a Catholic publishing house, to be controlled by the state. In explaining his decision, Janka echoed what many other ONR members would tell me: that is, that Piasecki's approach did not mean betraying his beliefs but rather making sure he could continue to profess them and that his plan was to «win over the winner», to try to attack the enemy from the inside. To emphasize the validity of this approach, she mentioned the interwar ONR militants who joined other (not necessarily nationalist or right-wing) organizations in order to – as she put it – «infect them with their activism».

Coherent incoherence, as exposed by Janka, is far from unique in radical nationalist milieus. I heard similar justifications from numerous activists in Poland, as well as in Italy and Hungary. They would emphasize that to be coherent does not mean that one never changes one's views; as a matter of fact, such a change may be considered proof of coherence.

Coherence is often invoked precisely when a person's situation and actions appear contradictory to an outside observer. For example, among the figures admired by far-right activists is Robert Brasillach, a French writer and a virulent antisemite who denounced Jews and never renounced his ideas. Conversely, Jan Mosdorf, cited by Janka, an ONR leader and likewise a virulent antisemite, was involved in helping Jewish prisoners while he was imprisoned in Auschwitz. Another example is the so-called «cursed soldiers» – members of the Polish underground army who, after the Second World War was over, did not lay down their arms, fighting the Soviet-backed Polish communist authorities. ONR activists praise them because they decided to die fighting rather than «sullying» themselves by cooperating. However, Bolesław Piasecki is praised not only by Janka but also by numerous other activists, and his choice to cooperate with the communist authorities is not judged in terms of «sullying». In short, regardless of whether these individuals' choices represent a continuity or a rupture in their beliefs, activists are likely to describe them in terms of personal or moral coherence.

Janka foregrounds the idea of «coherence» when discussing the relationship between politics and morality. To her – and to many other activists – concrete moral norms ought to permeate all spheres of social and political life. A politician cannot but express his views and act in accordance with his values; hence, for example, she finds the discussions on the abortion law nonsensical (how could a Catholic support a law which would make abortion legal?). Further, she argues that economic programs should be «filled with ethics». She maintains a strongly anti-capitalist, anti-free-market stand. Quoting an ONR ideologue (whose name she had forgotten) from the interwar era, she said, «Capitalism gives too little to live, but too much to die», thereby rending a *good life* impossible. «We need private property, but most branches of the economy should be state-owned and social welfare should be expanded». The conviction that ethics and economy need to be strongly intertwined was further reinforced by the readings in Catholic social thought. Generally, she beliefs that the principle of «national solidarism» should be the guiding one. Within ONR, she helps organize social actions for war combatants, orphans and other people in need. Even if these actions are often on a small scale (for example, in the city where she lives the ONR supports a dozen combatants), she emphasizes the importance of such actions for activists, especially the movement's new members, and for developing a compassionate attitude.

A deeply religious person, Janka supports the Society of Saint Pius X, the antimodernist fraternity of Catholic priests founded in 1970. The Society rejects the reforms of the Second Vatican Council, retaining the Tridentine Mass and use of Latin during sacraments. It emphasizes traditional gender roles, including modest dress code (especially for women). It is active in numerous countries, although its canonical situation remains unresolved. What Janka and other activists find inspiring in it is a critique of modernity, the Society's «uncompromising» attitude and emphasis on going back to the «roots». The emphasis on «roots» and «uncompromising attitude» are defining elements of «radicalness» in the activists' view. As she explained to me, the ONR's views on church-state relations and on hierarchy within the Church are basically identical to those represented by the pre-conciliar Church. Many people are fed up with what she calls «over-sweetened Catholicism» and looking for more discipline and a more demanding way of practicing religion. She also emphasized that the number of chapels run by the Society and the popularity of the traditional rite have been increasing.

«How would you explain this growth?» I asked, hoping she would expand on her critique of contemporary «easy religiosity». «I guess that's a question to God», she responded, smiling.

Forging a movement

After our meeting in Krakow in 2021, I remained «in touch» with Janka by reading the short articles that she regularly contributes to the ONR magazine, titled «Directions» (*Kierunki*). A graduate in history, she writes on a vast array on subjects, from problems with housing in Poland, through women fascists, to movie reviews. I last saw her in 2022, at the celebration of the ONR's anniversary, which is held every April and which tends to include a religious service, a ceremonial march, a series of speeches and a more informal part consisting of musical performances and socializing.

That year, the anniversary was organized in the city of Bydgoszcz, in northern Poland, and began with a Catholic mass. I arrived in Bydgoszcz by car from Warsaw, together with three other activists – one woman and two men. On the day of the event, I met with Ula (a female activist whom I had known for a while) in central Warsaw and we took the metro together to the house of the ONR member who was supposed to be taking us. When we arrived, he and another activist were busy carrying

the boxes from his apartment. They spent a good deal of time loading the car with T-shirts bearing the movement's logo, publications and CDs featuring the music of «friendly» bands, while Ula and I continued catching up. The long time spent on packing as well as a series of mistakes on the road resulted in more than an hour's delay. One of the men, Wojtek, was very stressed about this, wondering if he would be «told off» by the national leaders and pondering on how to explain the delay. The fact that he occupies a relatively high position in the movement as a regional representative made him even more stressed: he is supposed to «set an example».

As always when I am presented to new activists, I was expected to say something about my work. My explanation of ethnographic methods and emphasis on «understanding» led my fellow travelers to tell me a story I had by then heard many times: of a journalist who had joined the movement for three months to gather material for an article and then disappeared. stressed how disappointing her behavior and the fact she lied about her intentions were. Apparently, they had tried to reach out to her to explain what happened. «I think she was afraid we would beat her up or something like that», Wojtek concluded, rolling his eyes when commenting on how absurd such a suspicion was.

During our journey, we talked about a variety of things, including the means of «formation» of new ONR members the leaders are trying to develop, such as lectures on nationalist thought on the YouTube channel organized by Janka. We spent a lot of time arguing about the legacy of fascism and Nazism. Whenever I opposed their claims and asked how we can speak about «honor» and «compassion» in the context of the Second World War crimes, I would hear an explanation that framed the choices and attitudes of the people discussed in terms of «coherence».

In the meantime, Wojtek got a call from the national leader, Miron, who inquired about our delay and shouted at him on the phone.

«How late did you come this morning?» Wojtek asked me and Ula, after finishing the call.

«We were on time», Ula said firmly, making it clear it was unthinkable to blame us for the delay.

«Right…», Wojtek admitted and grimaced.

Noting his distress, Ula changed the tone and said, as if to try to cheer him up: «We were just chatting and missed a turn or two, so we're all at fault».

But Wojtek went on: «I know, but I should've waited for you downstairs with all the packages ready. It's my fault… It's such an important event, once a year».

He kept talking, a bit to himself and a bit to us, wondering whether to risk getting into trouble and tell the truth, or to find an excuse.

We arrived in Bydgoszcz the moment the ceremonial church service ended, but we managed to attend a march with the movement's flags through the city center. The march seemed underprepared and regional leaders struggled to keep order, with a few activists getting lost on the way. A female activist walking next to me exclaimed, «How is it possible to get lost?! In the past people would be beaten up for something like that but the new leaders are so lenient» It was not the first time that I had heard about «de-skinization» of the movement and the fact that, rather than resorting to violence, the new leaders wanted to put an emphasis on education and «inculcation» of norms via teaching and conversations.

In the late afternoon, a few dozen ONR members gathered in a conference room, rented for the celebration of the movement's anniversary. Many of them wore sweatshirts with the date 1934 and green armbands, similar to those the interwar militants used to wear. They managed to cover the bare walls of the room with flags and banners, featuring slogans such as «Not numerous but fanatical» (*Choc nieliczni – fanatyczni*) and «You cannot delegalize the Idea» (*Idei nie zdelegalizujecie*).

The gathering occupied a few rows of chairs and listened in silence to the speeches. Several people took to the floor. An activist from the branch representing Bydgoszcz (where the event was held) spoke at length about the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic: «We realize the degree of social problems… I will never forget the smiles of kids from the orphanages… The importance of joint rosary prayers…» Another male activist talked about the vast networks of cooperators from abroad, listing the Italian and Hungarian movements and welcoming guests from the Spanish Bastion Nazional, with whom the ONR had just established cooperation. One of the board's members, Alina, picked up on this issue and described a new supranational initiative – a web platform where different nationalist movements publish. A literature graduate, she spoke in a very engaged and eloquent way about what the ONR means to her: «It is the people that I meet in this movement that give me such a motivation to act». A few other militants who took to the floor talked about political-economic issues, emphasizing the strength of the national radical alternative as neither left

nor right, the necessity to fight against the liberal order and to counter the «economic domination of the "nation with hooked noses"». Nobody seemed surprised by this reference, as such rhetoric is a long-standing pattern in the movement's discourse, and, as mentioned earlier, tends to be related to financial elites and global institutions. That said, even if it was not the first time I had been exposed to it, I was once again struck by the ease with which activists moved between their account on charity work and hate speech.

Finally, Miron, the ONR leader, took to the floor. He described ten years in the movement as the best time of his life. He emphasized that he sees the ONR's strength in solidarity and camaraderie among the members, but also addressed weaknesses – first and foremost the laziness of many activists. «It is time to move your ass!» he exclaimed.

The event thus featured a bit of everything: references to the past and prewar ONR ideology, contemporary social and political problems, and ideas for a better future. All that was described in a language that blended data-backed economic analyzes with racist tropes, lofty vocabulary with swearwords. Xenophobic reminders about «enemies» dovetailed with expressions of solidarity towards «our own people» and, last but not least, testimonies of genuine friendship among members. The screening of a short film prepared for one of the activists to celebrate his long service illustrated that best. It featured diverse activities the ONR members pursued together – such as martial arts training, hiking trips, charity drives, lectures, joint celebrations of life events – painting a picture of the joy they bring to participants.

The final part of the event consisted of a ceremonial moment: the pledge by new members. I was sitting next to a young man who was supposed to make a pledge. When the master of ceremonies announced that it was time for this part of the program, my neighbor closed his eyes. I could see the veins pulsing on his forehead. He bowed his head and appeared to be praying in silence, waiting to be called on stage. But the ceremony was interrupted. An activist I had never met before (but who, as I heard later, was a prominent leader of one of the most numerous ONR chapters) took the microphone from the master of ceremonies and said, «I want you to think once again if you are *really* ready. I don't want you to call me in two months and say that you have changed your mind». He spoke firmly, yet in a slightly irritated voice. «Please take it to your hearts. Leaving the ONR means a betrayal [I saw my neighbor tightening when hearing the word

'betrayal']. In other words… be careful not to get me riled up», the speaker finished on a less solemn note.

After he had returned the microphone, new members' names were read and they were invited to come to the front. Three ONR board members came close, one of them holding a crucifix in his hand. A dozen new members repeated the words of pledge, promising faithfulness to the ONR and service to the nation. My neighbor closed his eyes when saying «So help me God». The board congratulated everyone profusely, while the master of ceremonies said, «This is not the end, this is just a beginning».

After the vows and speeches were over, the gathering moved to the adjacent room, where musical performances began and hot food was served. I spent the rest of the evening talking to various activists I knew from previous events: some of them garrulous and eager to update me on everything they were doing; some timid, like Janka, who, dressed in an elegant white blouse, sat in the corner and quietly observed what was going on. Towards the end of the event, after the music was over, ONR members gathered in one of the rooms to take a photo. Some of them shirtless and exposing a collection of tattoos, others proudly demonstrating the group logo on their T-shirts, they embraced each other and messed around. One of the branch leaders pushed me inside, stressing that as one of the event's attendees I «had to be» included. We went back and forth, me refusing to have my picture taken with the group, him getting angry and accusing me of being ashamed of being seen with the group, him grabbing my arm and me trying to leave the room. I stood my ground, realizing – not for the first time – that I had reached my limits of «being there»[8].

I was supposed to take a night train from Bydgoszcz and, having said farewell to several activists I knew well, I left the venue to wait for the people who had promised to give me a lift to the station. Outside the venue, I bumped into Miron, who said: «Pity you missed the mass this morning. I heard the reason you guys were late was because your train was delayed?»

Conclusions

Why did Wojtek lie? Was he simply afraid of Miron's anger, or too ashamed by the delay he had caused to tell the truth? Did he think that he had

[8] See Sharma 2024 for an inspiring discussion on what «being there» may mean for an ethnographer.

to «set an example» and thus pretend it wasn't his fault? No matter what the reason was, I wonder if he was able to justify it as «coherent» with the behaviors and values he claimed to adhere to, and which he had professed several hours earlier in the car? And I also wonder: can we know this, even if we asked him directly why he did so? (I didn't).

In leaving this question – that of the limits of ethnographic insights into morality – open, I want to emphasize in what ways a study of such settings and milieus speaks to the issues at the heart of the anthropology of morality. The process of deciding whether to lie or not and the entire dynamics around it brings into the spotlight the question of competing systems of norms. Is it the value of sincerity and truth, the Catholic notion of the lie as a sin, the obligation to perform exemplarity for the sake of the movement, or «just» Wojtek's own ethical conviction at play here? Further, while the *choice* whether to tell the truth is an *individual* one, his reasoning demonstrates that thinking in terms of *constraint* and justifying choices in the name of *collective* values is likewise present, demonstrating all these notions to be contextual and entangled.

I proposed to examine these issues through the notion of coherence. In zooming in on various community moments, I emphasized the expectations of coherence, expressed in hierarchical relations: between leaders and new members/subordinates, or men and women. Performance of coherence is thus a boundary-making and cohesion-building tool, a message for the outside world («we are different») and for the movement itself. The latter point suggests that (the demand of) coherence is also a disciplinary tool. And it is also a deeply gendered one. As we have seen, maintaining coherence is a gender labor, with women such as Janka being responsible for moral education and upholding norms. As we recall, in Janka's account of a politician's decision not to celebrate Hanukkah there is now question of alternatives – she saw it as the only right thing to do – while Ula did not want to allow a lie to be told.

To an outside observer, the claims to coherence expressed by far-right activists may appear nonsensical and hypocritical. Indeed, far-right activists, politicians and supporters are often accused of double standards and cynicism, and their actions and decisions tend to be described in terms of «strategies» or «manipulation». It is hard not to see them this way when considering far-right discourses on, on the one hand, the «protection of all human lives [including the unborn]» and the «left-behind» and, on the other hand, the discriminatory rhetoric targeting refugees and all those

«left-behind» who happen not to have the right passport. In this article, however, I strove to move beyond the moral assessment of such claims – using Fassin's vocabulary, to focus on morals instead of moralizing. I also sought to demonstrate that while ethnographic methodology enables us to observe how certain claims are put into action (or not), we can make sense of those claims – of their «coherent incoherence» – and actions only when referring them to the people's own processes of meaning-making.

The material I presented here suggests that what we external observers may see as contradiction, to the activists appears to be perfectly compatible, if not obvious. In other words, the coexistence of loving and hatred-filled claims is a contradiction to us but makes up a *coherent* narrative in the light of the broader far-right ideological framework. The same can be said about the coexistence of solemn vocabulary and crude jokes, respectful and threatening ways of talking, which, as we saw in the account on the ONR anniversary, nonetheless contribute to an experience of community and comradeship. And the same is true for individuals. Activists ought to be seen as assemblages of various experiences, declarations, and deeds, and their identity as ONR militants often needs to be reconciled with other roles, expectations, or systems of values. Moreover, questioning and querying the radical nationalist doctrine or the movement's norms is not uncommon within these movements; despite the emphasis on hierarchy and uniformity, they leave some space for disagreements and debates. In some cases, this may lead people to abandon the movement. In making such a choice, they may likewise evoke coherence, explaining that it is this the movement that changed the course or that fulfilling one's life duties and inspirations required them to leave the group.

«Coherent incoherence» – a tendency to hold multiple conflicting ethical beliefs and commitments at the same time – is, of course, a commonplace phenomenon, not limited to the milieus I am describing. The material I presented thus brings new insights to the discussion on conflicting value system and moral and ethical demands which has shaped the field (e.g., Robbins 2007; Zigon 2007). Apart from contributing to the anthropology of morality/ethics, a study of far-right «ethical communities», and in particular the focus on (desired, forged) personhood, may help us to better comprehend the popularity of such movements. In her fascinating account of the cult of a young Russian soldier who was killed after refusing to convert to Islam, Victoria Fomina (2018) demonstrates coherence to be the key to understanding his popularity among young

Russians. As Fomina notes, despite the diverse meanings that emerge in and around the soldier's cult, «the notion of moral personhood – a capacity to have values and stand by them until the end – emerges as the central object of ethical problematization». The appeal of such views was particularly pronounced in the postsocialist area, in «a context of a perceived spiritual holocaust, because they hold the promise of a new beginning and a moral revival of society» (Fomina 2018). This is an opinion my research participants would agree with too, talking about their «search for an alternative» and why they believe that they have found that alternative within the ONR.

By search for an alternative, they mean first and foremost an alternative to liberalism. Negligence of community is the strongest argument against liberalism which, as the activists emphasize, is a «suicidal ideology» as it «promotes a freedom from everything»: from common identities, from common responsibilities, from shared norms. In justifying their decision to form movements rather than parties, they emphasize that only a community of activists and a «communitarian spirit» guarantee a moral-ethical upbringing of a new generation («new men»). In promoting a view of community as a community of norms and values, the activists thus challenge the liberal idea of freedom, emphasizing that one is *truly* free in following the rules. This idea is strongly inspired by religion – not only traditional Catholic doctrine but the Eastern Orthodoxy that movements such as Codreanu's Legion of the Michael Archangel represent in their eyes.

In his poignant analysis of Codreanu's legionary movement, Eugen Weber (1966) emphasized that the role of such radical groups is to shake commonsensical notions and to disturb the notion of taken for granted. The success of Codreanu's movement lay not only in the «elan of romantic nationalism», but what was truly *revolutionary* there was the promotion of values such as honesty, punctuality and responsibility. In highlighting the clash of ideals with reality, Weber reversed the question of compromises and inconsistencies, instead taking them as *given*. The historian's approach corresponds here with anthropological knowledge. As Rita Astuti (2017) observed in her oft-quoted article on the value of ethnography, the fact that the things people say and do not necessarily «add up», and there are contradictions and inconsistencies, are also things to be taken seriously and to be examined. And so is, it would seem, *our own* tendency to look for and desire to find coherence in our research participants.

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