Meet Dr Roland Clark, a Reader in the Department of History. Here, Roland tells us all about his research into far-right extremism, fascism and how recent events in the UK fit into the wider history of nationalism.Audio file

Researcher in Focus Roland Clark.mp3

Transcript

Dr Roland Clark

And so I'd like people on the street to just get a a renewed sense of how dangerous all this is because not having had a major war for a long time, it feels like Britain in particular in the West is starting to romanticise the Second World War and and to think, oh, maybe it wouldn't be so bad to have another one like that. But no, we should be terrified of that sort of thing. And do everything we can to stop it.

Nick Jones

Welcome everybody to another edition of the research here and Focus podcast from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences here at the University of Liverpool. My name is Nick Jones. I'm part of the research and impact team and today I'm very pleased to be joined by Doctor Roland Clark, Reader in modern European history in the Department of History. And today, Roland will be telling us all about his fascinating research into far right extremism, fascism Religion in inter-war Europe as well as its continuing impact in the modern era. For those of you who might be listening at some point in the future or for those who have somehow managed to avoid the news, we're recording this in August 2024, the past couple of weeks have seen some of the worst racially motivated riots and violence that this country has seen for quite some time and far right sentiment and movements have quite rightly been blamed for being behind a lot of this. So this seems a very opportune time to speak to one of the faculty's leading experts on the origins and motivations of fascism. So Roland, thank you very much for joining us.

RC

Thanks for inviting me. It's great to be here.

NJ

Yeah, it's lovely to meet you. And I suppose our first topic for discussion has to be the recent wave of racist riots that have been playing out across the country over the past couple of weeks. So as someone who studies fascists and their methods, what are your initial thoughts about what we've been seeing?

RC

Yeah. Then my mutual thought is this is really familiar at the moment. My current project is I'm working on a wave. Of. Riots that swept universities in the early 1920s after the end of the First World War and all these universities, they turn into sort of national universities. Instead of the empires of the University of the Empires and. Students start saying, well, only Austrian students should go to my university or only Hungarian students, and we have to kick the Jews out. And so students rioted, and they assaulted Jews on campus. They assaulted professors. They, in many cases, they closed whole university campuses down for six months. At the time, many university campuses were. Were occupied by the military and the various countries right across East Central Europe and. One of the things I've found is it's is it's the students trying to throw their weight around and trying to have their voices heard. But it's also certain professors and politicians and journalists who. They want to control what's happening in the universities. They can't themselves jump up and down about this, but they know they can get the students to do their work for them. And so they're encouraging the students and they're also helping the students when they go to court. Or when they get in trouble from the university administration, you find certain professors standing up for them. Often these are the, the graduates of the student fraternities that are causing the trouble. And the other thing to say that that feels really familiar about a lot of the riots is one of the reasons why fascism becomes popular in in the post World War One era is because for the first time, democracy, sort of the universal suffrage spreads across Europe. So men, women keep have many. Most countries have to keep fighting for the vote for another 10-20 years, but all men get the vote and they're told you're no longer part of an empire. You're part of a nation state and you have a voice. And then they find out that actually the same corrupt politicians who've been running the country for decades. Are still running the country and they are angry. So a lot of the rise of fascism. It's can be the blame can be put on the the ruling political class.

NJ

I mean, that's an interesting point in that, you know, you say one of the the drivers of this was the way that people turned against mainstream politicians who consistently ruled in their their own interests rather than the interests of the many people, it seems, quite ironic that politicians who, you know, perhaps can be seen to be drivers of unrest in maybe the US and here such as Trump and Farage, they seem to be very explicitly acting in their own interests rather than, say, the people of Clacton or, you know, the wider public, but. They still managed to. Get fascism and the the people rising up. How do they manage it, do you think?

RC

Yeah. So the first thing is, as a historian, I don't want to say that what we're seeing now is identical to what we're seeing in the past. I want to say there's resonances and there's things we can learn from the past that's similar. It's difficult post World War Two to stand up and say I'm a fascist because people say, well, what about the Holocaust? Hitler was bad, but you can say many of the same things. Just don't use the word fascist anymore. And use a lot of the same techniques. What's really important about people like Farage and Trump is that even if they're. Very obviously, selfish. And they're obviously well funded. And they're not ordinary people by any any sense of that. They're still outsiders to the political establishment. They're not traditional members of a machine like the the Conservative parties machine or electoral racing or the Labour Party. And also they're tapping into things that a lot of people really deeply believe that they don't think of being properly represented. So if you spend years and years in school telling people that our nation is the best nation in the world, our empire saved the world. Our empire did great things for. For all the all the countries that it conquered, many people gave their lives. They sacrificed their lives in defence of our country. And then you see. Those values being mocked in the mainstream media or those values not being supported by some of our politicians. Then you you get angry and so. A lot of this comes from tapping into things that people are taught in schools or in churches. Or in in media, but in other contexts, and then they're taken to an extreme. So.

Speaker

You.

RC

Fascists, they're not just nationalists, but they're ultra-nationalists. They think this idea that you should love your country and they say, and therefore nothing. Else. Matters, including individuals don't matter. Other countries don't matter. And then you define your country or your nation in a particular way. If US versus them. And so you create outsiders, in this case, mostly East Europeans. Other people being attacked.

NJ

I think that's a really interesting point in terms of, you know, defining the country that they're meant to love so much. It's it's. That they. They take their definition, but they refuse to see that there might be other definitions as well because our country has always been a melting pot, surely.

RC

And yes, but there's there's different ways to be a melting pot and different ways to define your country. So I'm Australian. Which is a very multicultural country, but for decades we had what we called the White Australia policy, where there was a lot of positive assistance for white Europeans to migrate to Australia and making it very difficult for people of colour to migrate. My a lot of my research is focused on Romania and interwar Romania is really interesting because up until the interwar period or up in up until 1860s, at the very latest, at the very earliest remain has always been part of empires and then gradually piece by piece it starts to. Get its own independence as a nation state, but most ethnic Romanians have been peasants. They've been denied access to higher education, denied access to government jobs and civil service jobs, and the people that get those jobs are mostly. We. And have good educations, mostly Germans or Hungarians or Jews or Russians. And so when Romanians get their own nation state, they say we want this state to be run by people who are ethnically Romanian. And so they think the name of the country and they assign it to themselves, and that gives them the right to even to kill people who are of the wrong ethnic minority. There's a lot of these early trials in Romania. You have a group of of six students who went out and tried to assassinate leading Jewish figures, and when they get to court, they say we'll be doing it for our country. And the because we we we believe that these people were a genuine threat to our nation and the the jurors believe them and let. Off. And that strike me as completely ridiculous. Until I started studying it at the same time as I was living in the US and. Trayvon Martin was murdered by George Zimmerman, and this is because of your ethnic group. You have a right to kill people, and then the the law. The law courts agree with you. Often not, not every time, but remarkably often. And it's when governments and. The legal system does. That applies a double standard, or doesn't punish these sorts of activities that they often can get really out of hand.

NJ

And are you seeing parallels in the UK to that kind of thinking that you've seen before?

RC

I was surprised to see how, after all these rights that we've just had the government's been very strongly. We're gonna punish them to the the strongest extent of the law, and yet they gave them right to smaller sentences than they gave to. No, stop oil. And so there is genuinely a double standard there. It seems that people being being convicted for trouble making and for disruption as opposed to actual violence against individuals and against emergency. Because. That that, that seems to be a big thing. But having said that, I'm not a lawyer and I understand that most of the sentences passed down already have been just for people who already pled guilty and we might be seeing bigger sentences in the future. But I think the fact that we've come out of. A decade of conservative rule and. We've we've seen a massive increase in things like. What do you call it in this country Remembrance Day activities like an Australian called Anzac Day, but you know where everyone waves their flags and gets their poppies out. We've seen a lot more than georgio's flags around than I've ever seen in my life in the last few years. And that's encouraged. This this support of nationalism as as seen as a good thing, and therefore when people stand up and they. UM. And they take action against minorities. They expect to be. Praised for it. They they're they're not afraid. They don't see themselves as as saying something that's taboo anymore because people like like Nigel Farage have come out and said it on radio and TV and in the print and tabloids like the Sun. Are frequently talking this sort of language, and therefore rioters and people on the far right, they're like. We're doing nothing that's not already culturally acceptable.

NJ

Yes, the normalisation of the language of hate, if you like, in some ways I suppose.

RC

Precisely.

NJ

And have you seen similar stuff happening that we've seen in the UK happening again over Europe as well, like maybe what in the the areas that you're particularly studying?

RC

So one thing I was very surprised about in the recent European elections is how young the people voting for the far right are. Because. So a recent poll said that. In in the UK, one in six Conservative voters will be dead by the time of the next election because it's it's an ageing demographic of people that vote for for right wing major right wing parties, but not in Europe and not for people who vote for people like Le Pen or a FD in Germany. They're attracting the 18 to 24 age demographic and that says that young people are again feeling very disaffected. They're feeling like their vote doesn't count, their voice doesn't. And the solutions being offered by mainstream political parties are just not speaking to them, and so they're willing to look to radical choices, anti system choices, people that just say let's get rid of everything we've done until now and start again and and that sort of radicalism that creates an environment in which extremists thrive.

NJ

Yes, potentially giving those fascist movements a longer lifespan then if you know if the if the Tories are ageing out, then these new people are kind of ageing in. If you like, they've.

RC

Got a? Yeah. And they're they're much more radical than the people ageing out.

NJ

Yeah. OK, good point. Interestingly, you talk about how they're attracting the youth vote, but one of the things that struck a lot of people of the unrest we saw in the UK recently was lots of these rioters were middle-aged men, you know, in their 50s, sixties, 70s, almost what is behind that, do you think?

RC

Yeah, I've got no idea. Fascism is really interesting in that. It's a youth. Thing, what's driving fascism in the 1920s and 30s is this idea of national rebirth and regeneration. Saying our nation is degenerate, we need. To. Start from scratch and have it been born out of the ashes like a phoenix out. Of the ashes of the war. Out of the ashes of empire and it's young people that are going to do that. And so fascists are obsessed with young people and with the idea of youth. And so even when they themselves are getting older, they're constantly talking about youth and how they are young and young people are the future. What we're seeing in the 21st century is not that. Donald Trump has now decided that he's old. At least he he's young. He's he's older than Camilla Harris and. Hooliganism in in Britain, because I think that's probably a closer word to to a lot of what? We see here. Is is a middle-aged man sort of thing, but the other thing to to mention is a lot of this was organised through social media through X in particular and young people don't use X. If you want to mobilise 18 to 24 demographic, you need different. Social media platforms and as long as it's being organised through social media platforms used by middle-aged men, you're going to get middle-aged. Men on the streets.

NJ

There was a comment somewhere. I said that, you know. We people are almost waiting for the football to come back, to take a lot of these people off the streets because, you know, they're their usual occupation, if not outlet is, you know. Go in the match whereas you know it's summer there, there's no football and lots of people are speculating that well, they've had all some of nothing to do. Maybe this is a? A chance to mobilise again in a way that they might do on the terraces.

RC

And this is this is again another huge contrast with fascism, because so fascism in in in the early 20th century, you've got communists who are working class. They're there for the workers and you've got liberals. They're there for the businessmen and the the university educated people. And fascism says we're there for everyone. We're embracing all social classes, and they did. They genuinely had support from every social class. But the real the class that supported them more than anyone else is the the lower bourgeoisie, the lower middle class, their shopkeepers, their functionaries, their clerks. So they're people. With the decent education but not super high education, they've got a decent income, but they're still precarious and they're worried about dropping back into the working class. And they feel like they are. They are the honourable, respectable representatives of the nation and therefore their voice should be should be heard loudly. They're not hooligans, by and large, and they might behave like hooligans, or they might work together with hooligans like they're the Nazis. Recruited the essay and most of these fascist movements. They recruit a young paramilitary group but first and foremost, that's not them. Where? As. The far right in Britain today it's evolved in really interesting ways and a lot of this comes from the 1970s. You probably remember the rock against racism festivals so. They provoked a reaction within the far right where they started doing their own music festivals and you start getting skinheads listening to punk rock and adopting their own uniform and tanking this far right white supremacist ideology to the streets. But that that created a real rift. Inside, like the National Front. Because most of the people running the National Front with this old generation of, you know, Oswald Mosley's friends, they're these old middle class or even aristocratic men. And then suddenly they're and they're not relevant anymore. They're not getting any sort of traction. But suddenly they've got. Huge numbers of young people wanting to support them, but they don't like those young people. They don't respect them, and then the the skinheads start saying, well, we're the majority of this movement, we should have a voice and start to run it. And that creates a lot of problems, but that hooligan culture has never sort of left the British far right since the 1970s, since it really got involved.

NJ

Yeah. I mean a couple of interesting points there. I mean, on the on the punk rock scene, there was an interesting episode during the recent disruptions where the far right decided they were going to kick off in a town that just happened to be having a punk rock convention. So it was full of old punks and in the majority punks are very anti-fascist. Only you know that's what they do. So they suddenly found themselves facing off against a bunch of equally middle-aged, but you know slightly more leather clad people ready to shut them down and that was very interesting clash of of two groups of thought and and again you mentioned class and you know I was perhaps wrongly maligning football fans, for you know, all being into that, but there was a slight element in the Press of trying to portray all the rioters as being working class, you know the working class are hotbed for fascism, but also the working class is a hot bed for equality and socialism. And you know, taking action to the streets to fight these kind of things. So. So yeah, how the how the portrayed is is interesting as well don't you think.

RC

Yeah. And I don't remember the last time we had riots in Leeds maybe a month ago here. It was Roman immigrants, so there's no no one person has or no one social. Group has a. You know, it's not just them and the same. I remember riots in London years and years ago where it was mostly Oxford and Cambridge students who they just, yeah, they they wanted to. They used the opportunity because some people just really like rioting

NJ

Only imagine.

Yeah, I can. I can imagine. And, one of the projects that you have been working on with some other partners is looking at the similarities of how fascists operate in different countries. Could you tell us about that project and what you found?

RC

Yeah, sure. So my first book was on Romanian fascism, but I started to wanting to teach it and found that there's just no primary sources about fascist movement. That I can give to students and so with a bit of funding, we pulled together some a team of 18 experts from around the world and each of us took one country in Europe and translated a whole bunch of primary sources about what it was like to be in that fascist movement. So, not necessarily the speeches of the leaders, but even like letters from her mum to her kids saying I can't believe you joined this group of thugs, for we had one great. Letter from an essay member as the Stormtrooper in in Nazi Germany in 1926, he wrote to the Nazi Party and he said I'm quitting because in the last time we had a rumble, my pants got ripped and I know I owe you some fees that I haven't paid, but I'm going to not pay them and use the money to fix my pants. Because that's not what I signed up for. The essay is supposed to be gymnastics association, and I thought we were doing gymnastics. And so you find out that. Fascists all around Europe, they were deeply connected to their local contexts, and they're speaking into their local contexts, and they're terrified of the idea they're very vulnerable to the suggestion, too, that they're imitating something that's foreign. Because they don't want to be like I'm fighting for the Romanian nation using a German or Italian model, they want to say this is uniquely Romanian or this is uniquely Hungarian or uniquely French. But at the same time they are talking to each other and. They are imitating each other. And they're very disorganised in many ways and often they can't or don't want to. Come up to the same standards, said the fascist leader in Sweden. He his followers were saying you have to be more charismatic and you have to, like, create a cult of personality the way Hitler does and he's like, but I don't think that's right. I don't want to be a cult of personality and it's like, but if you want to be a. Fascist. You have to do it.

NJ

I want to be a boring fascist.

RC

Exactly. And that's why his movement never really takes off.

NJ

Interesting point there that even amongst the wider movement they are loathe to. Take up the the the methods of different countries, so even fascists don't even like other. Fascists.

RC

No, and that's very important. And often they spent most of the 1920s and 30s denying that they're fascists because or some of them did. Jose de Rivera. Hazel Primo, Theravada in Spain, for example, says I'm not a fascist and then he works together with other fascists, but he he won't take the label because that would make him look like a foreign clone, whereas Oswald Mosley in Britain he calls himself the British Union of Fascists. He loves the the term and he takes money from the Italians. And then he takes money from the Nazis. In order to boost his movement while also saying no, I'm written first.

NJ

Very fascinating. Very fascinating indeed. Now, one of the things that you mentioned, like the current fascist movement or the far right movement, you know, becoming younger. One of the things that you've been doing is taking anti extremist workshops into schools. So could you tell us a little bit about that and what kind of results you might hope to see?

RC

So out of the European fascist movements project, as well as a a source collection, we also did a. A big exhibition at the Vienna Holocaust Library in London that's now a touring exhibition that we lean out to various places. We've created an interactive app which you can download from the App Store. It's called European fascist movements, and we ran an event in 2022 where we got 200 high school students from around the Liverpool area. And we brought them to the university together with a few anti racist activists from around the area and. We talked about the history of fascism, but also how to recognise the far right now, how the far right operates online, and basically equips students to be able to go out and. And work as anti racist organisers in their schools and communities to know. See what the signs are that someone is becoming radicalised and how to deradicalize them. And having done that we're now working. We're just about finished putting together a group of teaching material, a packet of teaching materials to give to schools that includes like an assembly of pre packaged assembly you can run to talk about these race riots in a historical context and put them in historical context of fascism and. How the far rights? Evolved. In Britain, but also various case studies you can use in history classrooms for years 8-9 as well as GCSE students.

NJ

Brilliant. Amazing. That's sounds really, really good and whether receptive to it, do you think?

RC

Very. One of the things that's really interesting is we grounded our there was a 2 day workshop one day with students and the second day with policy makers in the local area is we granted it on the prevent legislation. And prevent very famously has been targeted on Muslim populations and anti-Islamic extremism, but we were able to turn it around and say actually this is a framework that can and should be used to fight the far right. To white, white, white supremacy and many of the students who are the most engaged were Muslim students, and I found it really disturbing to hear their testimonies as well as the testimonies of various Muslims from Manchester and Liverpool who came in to help us run the workshop about the daily. UM. Sort of aggressions microaggressions, but also one of our speakers was adopted from Manchester, who was stabbed in the back of the neck by. By a white supremacist outside his mosque. And he forgave his attacker, and he talked through that whole process but. Yeah, I find it really challenging as a as a white male to hear some of these stories and to realise how our society is not as welcoming as we like to think we.

NJ

Yes, that was a real eye opener, wasn't it, that uh, you know, ostensibly these riots, you know, were supposedly sparked by those terrible events in Southport. But it was obvious from the beginning that that was never what they were really about. And for many, it just seemed like an opportunity to have a go or the Muslim or, you know, Asian members of our community.

NJ

So what's next for you in terms of upcoming research projects or collaborations?

RC

So after doing fascists and more fascists, I really wanted to break. So I read a book on church history in Romania in the 1920s, which I was hoping was going to be less dark but wasn't necessarily. And I'm currently writing a book on a A Shepherd who saw God in 1935 and God looks a lot like cousin it. He's totally covered in hair this long white hair, but he heals people and it becomes like the Lords shrine. These mass pilgrimages of hundreds of thousands of people in this tiny little village. So I'm I'm studying that the book's almost finished and when I finished that. I'm turning back to student riots. And anti-Semitism in right across the whole region in the early 1920s.

NJ

OK, brilliant. Well, I for one could certainly get behind a God who looked like cousin it. I think maybe have a lot to offer now in terms of, you know, all the work that you've done in the reasons that you're doing. What would you like to see as the single most significant change in the world as a result of your work?

RC

I'd like to. For people to see fascism in the far right for. What it is? Which is driven by violence and driven by manipulation and driven by. This. This instrumentalisation of otherwise noble sounding or nice sounding symbols and and rhetoric. A lot of. Fascist studies presents it as an ideology, as an idea, but when you look at look at fascism, fascist movements existed for for years before they came up with what their ideas were, what mattered to them most was let's just have a club and go out and be violent a little bit. And causing trouble and and that's in many ways was what was driving a lot of these people before they sat down and said, OK, what's our economic policy and what's our, what's our metaphysics? And so I'd like. People on the street to just get a a renewed sense of how dangerous all this is because not having had a major war for a long time, it feels like Britain in particular in the West is starting to romanticise the Second World War. And and to think ohh maybe it wouldn't be so bad to have another one like that. But no, we should be terrified of that sort of thing and do everything we can to stop it.

NJ

I don't think you can say further than that as a lesson to take away. Thank you very much, Roland. That's really, really. It's good to talk about these things. Thank you so much. Doctor Roland Clark from the Department of History. Thank you so much for joining us today. That's been a really, really useful talk. I'm so grateful that we've had a chance to do it. And thank everybody for listening as well. And I hope to see you next time. And our next edition of the researcher and Focus podcast from the University of Liverpool. Thank you. Goodbye.