**Researcher's focus on far-right extremism centres southern Alberta in latest studies**

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For Claresholm-raised academic, Dr. Amy Mack, southern Alberta is the epi-centre of her ongoing research related to the convergences of the rise in far-right extremism and radicalization.

Mack's current work is, "explicitly focused on rural southern Alberta," and although she is currently based out of Oslo, her research remains focused on the fallout from the Coutts Border Blockade, rallies, and other mobilization efforts in the region, in addition to studying the discourse popping up in virtual spaces. Dr. Amy Mack studies far-right extremism. For her doctoral dissertation, Mack completed digital ethnographic research of white supremacist movements in Canada in online spaces. She holds a Bachelor's of Arts (2013) and Masters of Arts degree (2016) from the University of Lethbridge, and a Doctorate (PhD) (2022) from the University of Alberta.

Dr. Mack is also a founder and co-director of Research at the Canadian Institute for Far-Right Studies (CIFRS), an independent think tank which engages in the critical study of the far-right in Canada. Dr. Mack, was recently named The University of Lethbridge Alumni Association's (ULAA) 2023 Young Alumni of the Year for her impact and accomplishments as an early-career scholar. Dr. Mack has also has taught courses in anthropology at the University of Lethbridge, and in 2023, received a SSHRC Postdoctoral Fellowship, funding which will support Dr. Mack as a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Centre for Research on Extremism at the University of Oslo in Norway. Praised for her impressive CV and community-involvement, Mack has also been awarded over $1 million in funding over the past decade for the various research projects she has worked on.

Mack's dissertation focused on how social media is deployed as a means to build communities and circulate their ideologies.

With respect to the recent and future trials of the "Coutts 4", a term colloquially assigned to the four Canadian men were arrested on allegations that they conspired to kill RCMP officers, and included the charging of all four men with conspiracy to murder and making or possessing an explosive device (Anthony Olienick).

Mack explained why she chose this area of study, noting, "If we want to prevent or counter extremism and radicalization in Canada, we need to understand the socio-political and economic conditions that make these processes more likely, and rural spaces have historically been a big part of this conversation."

Mack said the communities that have popped up around the Coutts 4 have proven to be "effective" for fundraising and community-building, and have shifted political and social life in many southern Alberta small and rural communities. Mack said, "A lot of my work has actually been with these community members working on how to have difficult conversations. I think rural spaces are important to focus on right now."

She clarified that with challenges surrounding affordability, "it's hard to survive in some of these spaces," she said qualifying the legitimacy of grievances in rural communities.

Mack explained that the term extremism is difficult to pin down with a singular definition.

"As soon as you come up with a concrete definition, you find that many things that appear to be extremist in nature are outside of it. Then, when you expand the definition to include those things, you find that the definition is so broad it becomes useless. But if I had to give something that approximates a definition, I would say it's beliefs and actions that significantly stray from the mainstream understanding of social norms."

Mack raises an important note about positionality and how conceptions of what is mainstream also evades a concrete definition. She notes, "Who defines mainstream? What I consider normal and acceptable might be "extremely" different than what my grandmother does, right? Similarly, what is considered a social norm changes over time. Many things that were extreme a century ago-say women voting or gay marriage-are generally considered normal."

One of the nuances of this this, Mack says, is that ideas which may have previously been deemed as "extreme" are trickling into the mainstream: "I see a lot in my work, is the "mainstreaming" of what were extreme right views even a decade ago. So, it works both ways."

Within southern Alberta specifically lies a number of markedly religious communities; and the region as a whole is often referred to as the "Bible Belt." Mack spoke to these "points of convergence" with respect to the correlation between religion and extremism and posited, "a space which has normalized (...) the idea that maybe women shouldn't have reproductive freedoms or that we shouldn't have gay marriage, might be more inclined towards extremist movements that espouse similar messaging. It's about the points of convergence (...) historically, the far-right has upheld conservative interpretations of Christianity to guide their thoughts on women and queer rights," explained Mack.

"We have a few denominations locally who have been quite vocal in their opposition to vaccinations. This absolutely contributed to the protests against the COVID 19 mandates as well as the stories we tell about those who are on trial. Are they ideologically motivated violent extremists, as the crown is arguing, or are they martyrs who stood up to government overreach that contradicts the will of God? Who you trust influences which story you believe, and despite the moves towards secularism, many people in southern Alberta still get their politics from the pulpit," she explains.

Some of Mack's published work, at times, finds belonging in both academia and poetics; as evidenced in her dissertation, Mack approaches her subject matter academically, upholding the tenants and ethics required of trained anthropologists, and yet, the form her work sometimes inhabits, much like her research, two places simultaneously; it upholds the rigorous standards of her discipline and accompanying ethics, while also never denying her personal lineage and positionality as key elements in her work. Mack's dissertation is infused with bleak humor too, not as to diminish the gravity of her findings, but rather, to highlight the gravity and severity of her exchanges with her interlocutors. Given the subject matter of her research, Mack spends a great deal of time outlining the impact of conducting research in a digital field-site. Here, the boundaries blur again.

Mack points out traditional anthropologists, including many of her own mentors, were trained within more rigidly-defined understanding of fieldwork, namely in offline-only spaces/places.

The internet is not a place, per se, but a collection of places, of which users can simultaneously and instantaneously access; Aside from jurisdictions lacking in infrastructure or digital freedom, the internet evades boundaries, or is rather a space in which communities can be built and nurtured unencumbered by the practical or logistical realities of "real" time and space. And all this is the precise reason Mack's approach to ethnography is suitable. There is often, in the everyday sense, no "meeting place" for these communities. Drawing on Canada's history of violent settler colonialism, a fact which Mack argues is evidenced in her interlocutor's own demonstrated claims of ownership and entitlement, (which is), "rooted in their ancestors'founding work and in the creation of the political order that is now Canada by white men."

Mack asserts "One of the key arguments I make in this dissertation is that much of my interlocutors ‘discourse is rooted in the notion of entitlement. This, I argue pertains not only to the bodies of women (...) but to economic prosperity and socio-political power. When pressed on why they feel this way, my interlocutors (sometimes unprompted) argued that their entitlement is derived from the work of their ancestors who came to this wild and untamed land, settled it, and built the nation that we enjoy today. This is their lineage, their genealogy, and their justification."

Mack points out in her chapter, titled Techno-spaces White, Male Supremacy, "The land is not the only kind of space where my interlocutors have put down roots. Social media has, in recent years, become a vibrant space for many kinds of political organizing."

In response to the idea held, for some, that "online" is separate/detached from the "real" world, Mack countered, "I think anyone who feels that way has not been paying attention to politics over the last decade and a half. Trump was elected in part because of the tech savvy and youth oriented 'alt right,'" she told Southern Alberta Newspapers. Mack noted similar movements across North America and Europe, (specifically the 2022 "Freedom" convoy in Ottawa and the Coutts Border Blockade) "would not have been possible without social media for organizing and fundraising. Mis/disinformation is a huge issue facing Canadian society and pretending that the online doesn't matter will only exacerbate the issue."

Mack noted social media has undoubtedly played a role in accelerating and spreading extremist ideologies, conspiracy theories and disinformation. "This is well established by the literature," she explains adding, "I think it's exacerbated by changing social dynamics in small communities where it's harder to find social connections offline (...) people look for connections online, and sometimes they find great spaces! Other times they fall down the far-right pipeline."

"If we are truly committed to preventing and countering radicalization and extremism, we need to keep our eyes on the local and the global, as well as the digital and the analogue. Privileging one to the exclusion of the other will leave us at a disadvantage," She added.

Mack said she is gearing up for several collaborative projects this summer which will focus on rural Canada and developing techniques and tools to counter misinformation which harms women and members of the queer community. She said she will continue to hone in and explore pockets of rage as they reveal themselves. "One of the things about studying the far-right, or even just politics in a way, is staying up to date on what folks are mad about." Mack cited the lingering anger around COVID-19 mandates and the fallout of the Coutts border blockade, and carbon tax, but said people are increasingly zeroing in and mobilizing in opposition to sexual orientation and gender identity curriculum in schools.

"Like I said earlier, folks are struggling and they're angry, and they'll need a new target and outlet for that rage. It's my job to follow that anger (...) I really want my work to do something, you know? What's the point of knowing all about extremism and radicalization if you can't put that knowledge to good use."