

Europe's Fault Lines

A conversation

Liz Fekete
Ross Bradshaw

Liz Fekete is Director of the Institute of Race Relations, where she has worked for 35 years. Ross Bradshaw is a bookseller, writer, publisher and activist. He runs Five Leaves, Independent Bookshop of the Year, in Nottingham where this conversation took place in July 2018. It revolves around Liz's new book Europe's Fault Lines: Racism and the Rise of the Right (Verso, £14.99).

Ross Bradshaw: Liz's book couldn't be more appropriate given the quarter of a million who marched against Donald Trump, plus the thousands who marched the following day under the banner of the Football Lads Alliance in support of their hero, Tommy Robinson.

Before we come on to the book, I want to ask you about your past because you've been involved with the Institute of Race Relations for 35 years and you were involved with the Campaign Against Racism and Fascism (CARF). What brought you into the movement and what has kept you here?

Liz Fekete: I'd just finished poly and, to be frank, I was a very ignorant young woman. I didn't know much about anything but I could type very fast because my mum had bought a typing book when I was aged about six and we all learned to touch-type. I came to the Institute when they were bringing out some educational pamphlets called *Roots and Patterns of Racism* and I typed them. It started from there. Rolling back, the long story is that my parents were displaced people in the Second World War, they were Hungarians and came to the UK under a resettlement programme. They didn't have a very easy experience when they came as refugees to this country. So somewhere in my background, the refugee experience did inform me – even though I was very ignorant – and I was always a bit of a rebel, to be honest. I didn't do very well at school, and this is something I always say in meetings. I left school at 16 and trained to be a secretary. I think that's really important just because a lot of people think you're only going to write a book if you're

based at a university, or if you've got 25 degrees, but actually anyone can write a book and I was fortunate at the IRR to have people who saw something in me. I'm thinking particularly about Ambalavaner Sivanandan, who passed away in January. He was my teacher, and that's what I saw in him when I came to the IRR. School was dreadful, poly was crap, and I was just longing for an education. When I came to the Institute, my education started there.

Ross Bradshaw: A lot of people may not know much about the IRR. Can you give us a bit of background to it and also the changes that you and Sivanandan must have been involved in?

Liz Fekete: Despite the fact that I go back a long way, I wasn't actually a part of the IRR when they had a revolution amongst the staff. The Institute was formed in 1958 and at that time it was part of Chatham House. It was a really posh organisation based in Mayfair and the history of the Institute is very good for understanding the history of how race relations are conceived in this country. There's a little slideshow on our website of this history if any of you are interested. So in 1958 when the great and the good – people from big companies, from the House of Lords – came to for the IRR, race relations was something that was a problem 'over there'. So it was all about knowing where to make investments in the former British Empire, in countries that were safe for investment. So race relations was about 'the ethnic problem', 'the tribal problem'. The problems 'out there'. There was a struggle amongst the staff to change the Institute, and the struggle came at a time in the 1960s and 1970s when there were the Black Power and Civil Rights movements in the US and where we had the anti-racist and anti-imperialist struggles in the UK. The staff were actually connected to these movements and these 'great and good' people who were on the management committee didn't realise. So the membership started to change from within and they started to battle against the old Institute.

A lot of the battle came over research and arguments about what the research was for. There was a revolution in the organisation – one of the revolutions that actually succeeded – and the staff kicked out all the old management. They didn't like that, so all the money was withdrawn. The Institute then had to move to a very old warehouse, with a leaking basement and – believe it or not – when it rained the sewers came up. It was a hard slog for a long time, but we survived. We were fortunate that Ken Livingstone's Greater London Council came to our rescue, giving us money for a building. The income generated by our journal, *Race and Class*, is another of the reasons we can keep going.

Ross Bradshaw: Can you tell us a bit more about Sivanandan?

Liz Fekete: Siva, as he was known to his friends, was from Sri Lanka – another refugee. He fled Sri Lanka in 1958 after the first conflicts between the Tamil and the Sinhalese populations. He was a bank manager in Sri Lanka but he had a revelation when he went through this conflict. He came to Notting Hill where he walked straight into the 1958 Notting Hill Race Riots. This transformed him. I think he, along with Stuart Hall, were the most important Black – in terms of Black as a ‘political colour’ as it was defined in that period of extreme ferment – were key figures. Sivanandan emerged as the historian of the struggle of Asian and Afro-Caribbean communities in this country. He was a great analyst of imperialism and racism and also a novelist. He wrote an award-winning novel about Sri Lanka, *When Memory Dies*.

Siva’s achievements were many but as a friend of mine who was once on the central committee of a very large left political party in Belgium, someone who’s met political writers from around the world, once said to me: Siva is one of few very famous Marxist intellectuals who actually also built something. He built an institution, so it wasn’t just about the books that he wrote, it’s about the legacy he left: the Institute, the journal and the people he left behind him to continue the struggle. I think that really marks out Sivanandan from a lot of other great writers.

Ross Bradshaw: Sivanandan lived to an old age. He must have left a terrible hole in the Institute.

Liz Fekete: He was 95 when he died. He was quite impossible in life! We all hoped he’d mellow in old age. He was sharp and witty and combative until the end. This is quite difficult to talk about. One thing got me is that I had to go to his home just after he died and one thing that made me sad was looking at his table. He was always very organised and domesticated. People might have an image of Sivanandan as this ‘macho man’, but he was very domesticated. Everything was always neat and tidy. Old age was very painful for him, because his brain never stopped and he fought old age. There was something of the mentality of a soldier in him. He had Parkinson’s Disease towards the end, he was in extreme pain, walking was difficult but every morning he would get up and go to his desk to write. He was there for me right until the end as the person that I could go to for advice.

Ross Bradshaw: Tell us about your current work.

Liz Fekete: Our website has a large number of reports and analysis documenting our work. More recent work includes the report, 'Humanitarianism: the unacceptable face of solidarity'. All our work starts from case studies. We try to build an analysis from the bottom up. It's not about an academic, scholarly discourse or 'grand narrative'. Everything starts with what is actually happening to people. Racism is a lived experience, it isn't a theoretical model. This report is an intervention. We try to intervene. I'm so pleased that *Europe's Fault Lines* has become an intervention.

The 'Humanitarianism' report has examples from 48 individuals across Europe who have been prosecuted under anti-smuggling and anti-immigration laws for doing things like giving a refugee a train ticket, or a lift to the station. It also looks at the prosecution and persecution of NGO search and rescue missions in the Mediterranean for the 'crime' of saving lives.

Ross Bradshaw: Tell us about the other organisation that you're involved in, the International State Crime Initiative. What does it do?

Liz Fekete: The Initiative is a very important organisation run by Dr Penny Green, an expert on state crimes, which offers an alternative to the mainstream criminology framework for understanding crime. If you read Home Office criminology reports you'll find, let us say, hundreds of entries on mugging and drug offences. But you will be pressed to find anything on crimes committed by the state. The Initiative conducts really important research projects in Africa, Asia and all around the world.

The other thing that I'm proud about having a connection to are the Tribunals, like the World Tribunal on Iraq, where I have served as an expert witness. The Basso Foundation inherited the mantle of the Russell Tribunals and every year or two they have a Permanent Peoples' Tribunal on an important issue. This year, the Institute will be a co-convenor of a Tribunal session that will take place in London on asylum and refugee rights, with a particular focus in the UK context on the exploitation and abuse of migrants and refugees in the labour force.

Ross Bradshaw: In your book, you talk about the collusion between the state and the far right, even if the state itself is not far right. What do you mean by the state – even a social democratic or liberal one – colluding with the far right?

Liz Fekete: The normal way of looking at the far right, the way the government wants us to look at the growth of the far right, always leaves the government and capital out of the equation. They will say, 'we have a problem with extremism' and that extremism comes from the far left, far right, Islamists. The state is 'clean' and beyond reproach. What I try to do in the book is to say that the growth of fascism and the extreme right is in direct relationship to the racism of the state or the racism of institutions. So if, for instance, you have a bureaucracy called the Home Office that is following a totalitarian mindset towards migrants and refugees and institutionalises hostile environment policies to drive them out of the country, I would say that they are colluding with the far right.

Also, the book charts many examples of collusion of police forces around Europe, and in some cases the military, with the far right. I take my definition of collusion from the context of the North of Ireland, where there were many path-breaking reports from international judges. They defined collusion in that context in terms of the British state's collusion with Loyalist and Protestant paramilitary forces, to actually do things like turn a blind eye when paramilitaries were bringing weapons and turn a blind eye when they knew that lawyers – like Pat Finucane – were being targeted for assassination. This definition of collusion is a concrete one, which comes from that context. If we look at some of the examples of collusion from the book, the clearest examples come from Greece where there is an ongoing trial of key party parliamentarians of Golden Dawn, a neo-nazi organisation that became one of the strongest parties in the Greek Parliament even though it was extremely violent and was actually organising forces that went into immigrant areas on motorbikes to drive immigrants off the streets. What we saw in Greece was a deep penetration by Golden Dawn of the military, riot police and anti-immigration police. There was direct collusion between the state and the far right. This actually only came to a head, something was only done, when a section of the military were planning to stage a coup against the democratic government. Only then were moves made against Golden Dawn.

Another important example of collusion, again in the context of the North of Ireland, is what Bernadette McAliskey [Devlin] terms 'breakfast table collusion'. If, for example, you have a predominantly white police force, then that police force may well be drawn from the same community as the likes of Tommy Robinson, they may be in the same social and even family networks. You don't have to have a great institutional structure, all you need is the breakfast table in the morning. Of the cases I document in the book, the Hungarian Roma serial killer case is particularly important.

Here you had a really nasty cell of far right activists who went around petrol bombing Roma homes, killing people in their homes.

There was a pattern in the behaviour of the police and intelligence services, with the intelligence services failing to pass on information to the police. In one notorious case, when a father and son were shot dead as they fled a building set on fire with Molotov Cocktails, the police failed to seal off the murder scene on arrival, failed to do a proper examination and you could see that, even if indirectly, they were colluding with the anti-Roma forces in the communities they came from.

One of the big cases that I refer to in the book is the case of the National Socialist Underground (NSU) in Germany. Finally, after a five year trial, there were some convictions. The NSU was a neo-nazi terror cell, supported by a wider network, that operated over the period of a decade or so that went around assassinating mainly German-Turkish men with the same gun. They carried out a number of armed robberies, they financed their activities through these, they carried out various other attacks on communities. They went undetected for ten years. One of the reasons they went undetected is that the police focused on investigating the Turkish community. They interrogated the wives of victims. They asked, 'did your husband belong to the PKK?', 'was your husband involved in drugs?' The media called the murders the 'Doner Kebab Killings'. All these countless leads before the police that indicated that the murders were the work of neo-nazis were missed because of the institutional racism in the police and the media. I would say that institutional racism is also an aspect of collusion. Germany has sixteen different federal police forces and sixteen different intelligence agencies. It turns out that these separate agencies were running informers within the neo-nazi scene. They were paying neo-nazis to give them information and they were not sharing the information between police forces and intelligence services because they wanted to protect their informers. These crimes could have been detected had information been passed on. Not only that, when the government launched a national federal inquiry into the failures of the police and intelligence services, with the power to subpoena any document, they discovered that many documents had been shredded in an 'accident'.

These are examples of significant events taking place at the level of the state and we need to expose and think about them. One reason this often does not happen is that we are being misdirected into a generalised fight against extremism.

Ross Bradshaw: You write about the normalisation of the far right, for example Pegida and the AfD in Germany. It's not just collusion with the

state but with a part of the population which has accepted that their politics constitutes normal behaviour.

Liz Fekete: That's a really important point because it's about the climate that can develop in communities. One of the central points that I hope comes out in the book is that our fight back against fascism and the crimes of the state has to start from below. I'll give you an example that graphically exposes your comment. I work with a group in Germany called NSU Watch. Germany has a good and well-established system of anti-fascist documentation centres which operate throughout the country. That rich tradition meant that during the five years of the NSU trial, someone from that network went to court every single day to listen to the testimony. According to the German government, the NSU was made up of just three people, two of whom are dead and the other has just been sentenced to life imprisonment. The NSU was not just three people. There was a network of over two hundred people who supplied guns, safe houses and who helped finance their operations. One woman came to give evidence at the trial and said Beate Zschäpe, who was on trial, was a 'really lovely woman', 'she was really nice', 'she had cats' and she 'would often invite me round for tea where we'd sit in the lounge under a portrait of Adolf Hitler.' This woman considered someone having such a picture in their home to be perfectly normal. So this is the sort of normalisation and the kind of cultural milieu from which the NSU were drawn.

Ross Bradshaw: One of the things that worried me about what you said in the book is that you've got the state colluding, you've got the normalisation of fascism, but also you have what you termed collusion with the centre-left. You refer to someone who once wrote for *Prospect* and who is an 'accepted' academic commentator on the far-right, but who has now moved to the right.

Liz Fekete: I think that the right are 'sexy' for some academics and commentators. What I mean is that they find people like Tommy Robinson an attractive figure: 'we've got to understand him', 'white grievance needs to be understood' etc... There seems to be a coterie of academics and people in the media who have a fixation with 'white, working class men'. The way I read it is that these white middle class men would love to be able to say the things these white working class men say, so they develop a fixation with them. People in the anti-racist movement are always being told that we're 'politically correct' and that we 'racialise everything'. What is this 'white working class' but a racialisation of the working class? You

would think that you only had white working class people, that there were no black working class people or that there weren't multicultural working class neighbourhoods in this country. This is an absolute distortion of reality, it's ethnicising, it's racialisation, it's a complete fabrication.

Ross Bradshaw: The coming together of the intellectual right and the 'street fighting' right seems to be fairly new, but you put the roots of this in the 80s and 90s following the break-up of the Soviet Union and economic crisis in the Global South which led to people fleeing austerity.

Liz Fekete: There's a chapter in the book about establishing norms. It's about the cultural revolution from the right. This is the chapter that I found the most difficult to write. You look around Europe and there's a whole genre of literature and writing which is all coming out of a very assimilationist perspective. You have books by people like Ayaan Hirsi Ali and former Muslims, which are about denouncing Islam. They all have these covers with veiled women or women with only their eyes showing. These books are all about the 'white saviour', rescuing the 'brown woman' from the 'brown man'. Then you have books like that written by Thilo Sarrazin – a Social Democrat – who wrote *Germany Abolishes Itself*, which is written as a 'daring book'. They think they're writing books that nobody else dares to write but what they're actually doing is bringing back 'scientific' racism under the guise of cultural racism. So because everybody knows you can no longer get away with writing books that claim, for instance, that black people have lower IQs than white people or that Jewish people have a particular gene that makes them devious. They no longer write about a hierarchy of races, but a hierarchy of cultures and civilisations.

A lot of this came out during the War on Terror with writers like Samuel Huntington and his *Clash of Civilisations* thesis. But actually, there's a deeper root to all of this. These people are reinventing the work of some key thinkers from the 1930s, the thinkers who shaped ideas prior to the rise of the Nazis, like Oswald Spengler who wrote *The Decline of the West*. It's all about the idea that the 'West has lost its vigour and civilisation, we're committing suicide'. Michael Gove is very much in that tradition.

The other person who is very important is Carl Schmitt, the Nazi jurist. His work draws a clear distinction between 'friends and enemies' and he claims that the purpose of the law is to differentiate the two. I think we see a lot of this in Trump and his politics.

Ross Bradshaw: May's 'hostile environment' has been able to operate at

the same time as ‘official anti-racism’. How can we live in an officially ‘anti-racist’, ‘non-racist’ or ‘non-prejudicial’ society yet things like the *Windrush* scandal happen?

Liz Fekete: I think that we have got to stop the government and politicians hijacking progressive causes, using progressive language and then criminalising, isolating and shrinking the space within which progressive politics operates. What we see is that the government is very good at talking about hate crimes. It’s a bit like the anti-extremism discourse. The government will say ‘we’re against hate crimes’, ‘we’re against anti-Semitism’ but at the same time they create the conditions for hate. The whole way they talk about hate crimes makes it as though hate crimes are just an issue for dysfunctional working class people who are failed consumers. The fact that the policies, laws and rhetoric of the government create hate is completely taken out of the picture. I don’t think it was an accident that hostile environment policies spilled over to the *Windrush* Generation and other former Commonwealth citizens. I don’t think it was an accident. That’s not to say I think it was a conspiracy. I don’t think you have to have institutional racism and conspiracies. I think that there was a mindset and culture that felt, ‘why not take this opportunity to get rid of a few Jamaicans?’ They simply thought, ‘let’s mop up a few more’. Let’s not forget the massive expansion of the prison population in this country.

The UK imprisons more people than any other European country. We’ve seen an extension of immigration removal centres but now an extension of prisons for foreign national prisoners. We’ve seen David Cameron visit Jamaica and financing prisons in Jamaica.

Ross Bradshaw: You write about the way in which companies benefit from these developments. Companies want more people ‘mopped up’, they want more people in their private prisons, they want more detention centres.

Liz Fekete: Tony Blair first brought in a target-driven deportation policy. He set a target for removals. He wanted the target for failed asylum seekers and immigration ‘offenders’ to be removed monthly to exceed the number of new arrivals. Once you set a target for removals, you have to do things to meet that target. So if you’ve chartered a plane to remove people to Afghanistan, you have to round up a certain amount of Afghan’s to fill the plane to make it profitable. There is a massive chain of companies who are profiting from this deportation machine and actually the chain of companies are the same companies who are profiting from the reception

and care of asylum seekers. So this idea that asylum seekers are a drain on the country, 'we're a small country and we'll sink under the weight of all these asylum seekers' or that our welfare state will collapse under the strain is actually false, because it's an industry and it's making a lot of money, particularly in the international context. And it is an industry that is armour plated against any sort of compassion. Horst Seehofer, the German Interior Minister, announced on his 69th birthday that 69 people had been removed from Germany to Afghanistan. The next day the newspapers reported that one of those deported had committed suicide.

Ross Bradshaw: In the wake of what's been happening in the UK, there is talk of the need for a new anti-fascist movement. You write in your book that anti-fascism has to be central to our work. What should we be doing?

Liz Fekete: I see that the whole point of anti-fascism is not just to repeat the anti-fascism of the past. I take the idea of the slogan 'They Shall Not Pass' as a metaphor. 'They Shall Not Pass' doesn't just mean on the streets, it means in our jobs and professions. It means resisting the development of far right policies that have an impact on our communities and stigmatises them. For example, opposing the Prevent policy, which is so stigmatising of the Muslim community, also has a resonance with the anti-fascist cause.

I don't say in the book that what we're seeing is fascism, I talk about authoritarianism, I talk about the hard right, and neoliberal abandonment of communities. I wouldn't say this is a repeat of the 1930s: it's something different. There are, however, early signs of creeping fascism. So it's very important that we defend standards of human rights and resist violations of human rights. Which is why the resistance of Polish judges to the government is so important. Such resistance is not happening in Hungary, where Viktor Orban is pursuing terrible policies.

Community resilience is key, which is why the new anti-fascist committees are important. The neo-nazis in particular work on the basis of creating anti-foreigner zones. They may just take over a street. In Germany, the neo-nazis have been incredibly successful in rural areas that have been depopulated. They are going into these areas and setting up communes. This goes back to the idea of normalisation: they sit on the committees of local nursery schools, they might be involved in food banks. So you have to build resilience in local communities that says 'They Shall Not Pass', they will not be allowed into our communities and they will not be normalised.